



Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall 2012, 662-670
www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Rosenthal, Joshua M. *Salt and the Colombian State: Local Society and Regional Monopoly in Boyacá, 1821-1900*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.

Vibrant Anachronism: Colombia's Nineteenth-Century Salt Monopoly

Meri Clark

Western New England University

In Joshua Rosenthal's vivid portrayal of a nineteenth-century salt works in Colombia, readers learn the history of a globally important commodity in a fascinating local context. *Salt and the Colombian State* offers a unique view of the halting growth of the Colombian state. His lucid analysis rewards readers with a more nuanced view of Colombia's state-building efforts, one that deals shrewdly with some of its murkier economic practices. As a commodity essential to daily life, salt earns a nod of

inevitability at the historical table, yet it is easily overlooked today in countries where salt is readily and cheaply available. This was not so in nineteenth-century Colombia, even for those who lived right next to the salt springs. In this context, salt's very necessity makes it a predictable political commodity, one that sparked dramatic scenes of confrontation and strife. Rosenthal's wonderfully textured description shows how salt "dictated the rhythms of local life" (88), from market days to gathering firewood, as well as how salt workers and traders participated with state agents to create a complicated web of market forces that shaped the contours of society, politics, and the economy of La Salina and the region.

In *Salt and the Colombian State*, Rosenthal strips the whitewash of "failed state" from the walls of Colombian government. Instead, he paints a more complex portrait of "Colombia as a place where state action and state weakness dramatically shaped history" (7). This is not a pretty picture of institution-building and national cohesion. Instead, Rosenthal shows how individuals—and a family dynasty—used the state to their own ends, at once undermining state goals and modeling institutional norms that the state was hard-pressed to budge. Rosenthal argues that the Colombian state (shouting all the while) tended to accommodate local practices and institutional norms in La Salina. In part, that flexibility stemmed from the fact that salt provided the state direct revenue to pay, among other things, military salaries.

Rosenthal's insight is that state weakness does not mean it was inconsequential. An active but stumbling state might be just as decisive historically as an effective, aggressive one. Rosenthal explains why by detailing the unintended consequences of fiscal policies and institutionalization on the salt economy and local society. State efforts may have been incomplete or ineffectual at points but, when read in light of regional responses, the result was a clear pattern of state development. Nonetheless, the character of that state was always in debate. Centralizers wanted to preserve the state's salt monopoly to promote social change while federalists refused that to buy that line. Still others, once hopeful, grew chary after the state's repeated failures to deliver on promised reforms. All this meant that the salt monopoly became a "template for conflict" over

national fiscal policy (6). Rosenthal's work may be situated among several excellent nineteenth-century Colombian studies that examine regional actors in relationship to the state and its political rhetoric or commodities; for example, Marco Palacios on coffee, James Sanders on citizenship rights, Marixa Lasso on black political participation and the myth of racial equality, David Sowell on artisans, and Jane Rausch on the llanos. Economic and political analyses are more common for the country's twentieth- and twenty-first-century commodities: cocaine, bananas, coal, gold, emeralds, cut flowers and textiles.

In Rosenthal's narrative, the salt operation itself appears as an autonomous, if wobbly, entity. La Salina made salt for 100,000 to 300,000 consumers, including cattle ranchers of the llanos (71). Demand for salt usually outstripped supply (76). This led to the practice of reselling the salt sold from the state-controlled *almacén*, or distributing it from within the *fábrica* itself by throwing the salt over the wall (76-77). Rosenthal repeatedly notes the irony that the state decried this reselling process as a "monopoly," when it in fact held the legal monopoly. Monopoly caused so much popular ire in the early national period that state officials used the term to deride a market they did not condone or like, even though it was entirely inaccurate. The "monopolists" the state lamented were actually speculators who profited by reselling this valuable and scarce commodity.

Rosenthal details how La Salina locals put off the state's demands through obstruction, sabotage, or neglect. A typical characterization is that "...neither the Finance Ministry in Bogotá nor the near-sovereign state government in Tunja had the inclination or ability to exercise much authority" over La Salina (118). Officials judged this recalcitrance to be a product of moral deficiency or willful exploitation of the state's distance from the works, but Rosenthal argues that the real market in La Salina *did* work, just not according to the rules or rhetoric of the state.

We also learn that the exploitation of salt might have enriched the region's people and yet, seemingly inexorably, it did little to expand wealth distribution in Boyacá. One of Rosenthal's goals is to explain the continued existence of a state monopoly on salt and the increased economic inequality around it. Did the nineteenth-century Colombian state mirror the Spanish

colonial era with these practices, or did it present a new, and even more ugly, face of economic development? Rosenthal begins his explanation by describing Colombia's geographic diversity, clarifying its complicated political history, and outlining how Boyacá's political geography and social patterns fit into both (Chapter One, "The Salt Monopoly, the State and Boyacá"). He indicates the political importance of the Spanish Crown's monopoly on salt (more theoretical than real) and the intellectual precedence of Enlightenment claims about the underutilized bounty of Colombia's terrain. He intends to weave together three stories: 1) state fiscal policy and life in La Salina de Chita; 2) regional responses to the state's monopoly; and 3) a chronological account of national politics in La Salina and Boyacá (7). While he does a good job of discussing these threads in subsequent chapters, they do not always blend into a single narrative.

In Chapter Two, "Change and Community in La Salina," Rosenthal depicts briefly the origins of salt production among the Lache, the indigenous society of the region. The Spanish colonial government removed the Lache from their homes in La Salina de Chita, but they returned to settle on the outskirts of the town, gleaned a meager income, it seems, from the production of ceramics for the now non-indigenous salt workers. Racism draws an inky line across this brackish scene, but understandably Rosenthal does not linger here. His primary narrative about national administration and rival salt markets depends on his thorough investigation of archival records that do not categorize by race. This leads Rosenthal himself to wonder at a later point about the socioracial origins of the workers who streamed into La Salina, an important regional economic pole (57). The archives hem him in, offering little information about the origins or subsequent journeys of these workers. Nonetheless, Rosenthal's story of salt and the state will be useful to other scholars delving into race relations to understand the regional political context.

After a few stuttering attempts to rent the works, La Salina came under direct state administration in 1836. Rosenthal argues that the community would have then noticed the presence of the national state in town. The state began to rent and build salt warehouses, forges, and

salesroom, organized a security force to prevent smuggling, and building a wall around the salt springs (26-28). Residents hated the guards, resented the wall, and complained bitterly about the strain that the salt works imposed on the land. Firewood cultivation pushed out subsistence farming. Miserably paid workers were not allowed to cultivate subsistence crops or collect firewood for personal use, since all arable land was directed to produce wood for the salt works. Complaints abounded and hostility grew. Cutting into this scar tissue, Rosenthal reveals durable layers of state formation through the people's complaints about that very process. His argument brings to mind James Scott's neat metaphor of the "coral reef" of collective action that might sink the ship of state. But no Great Barrier Reef ever grew in La Salina. Instead, Rosenthal shows us the daily interactions there that steadily irritated the national government, forcing it to share space with the local forces.

Rosenthal argues the same economic formula held true in Zapaquirá (the country's largest salt producer): economic decline resulted from dividing communal land and incorporating it into state administration (35-37). This section and the following section offer fascinating reading about women's roles in local politics and work in the markets and fields. Many interesting persons and detailed events live in the footnotes, as do a few theoretical comments that might have aided the reader in furnishing the context for some of this discussion. For example, in one, Rosenthal notes, "La Salina was an example of what James Sanders calls popular smallholder republicanism" (fn 124, 162). Given the significance of local rights (and women's roles in articulating them) in the context of state building, one wishes for a better integration of this conversation about sociopolitical history into this and later chapters.

Rosenthal delves into production and distribution in Chapter Three, "Making Salt in the Ministry Works." Students of commodity history will find this section necessary reading, as he details the resources required for production (ceramics, timber, land and labor) and thus outlines the main sources of tensions in the region (e.g. materials, wages, food). The state sought uniformity of control, homogeneity of production, and efficiency of distribution. On all of these points, Rosenthal notes vainglorious ambitions

and repeated disappointments (60-61). Investors, local (and the occasional fascinating foreign) elite, technical advisors, and government ministers collectively fantasized about an economic modernity still decades off, if Colombian salt production was any measure. A bit contrarily, Rosenthal concludes that the state did extend its presence in the region (through buildings and property acquisition) and La Salina eked out steady, if not stellar, salt sales (61).

Overall, Rosenthal does well in adding to our knowledge of society, trade, and politics in this part of Boyacá. He sorts through confusing local politics, uncovering alternative views in Finance Ministry reports, local and national newspapers, and memoirs of nationally significant politicians with local connections. In the government documents, Rosenthal observes many complaints involved the threat or use of violence. He finds compelling reasons to discuss coercive power here. Entrepreneurs (particularly the Espinosa family) found ways to work with, or around, the state to profit from contracts, ancillary work, and (sometimes) work stoppage. State contractors were supposed to make salt, plug springs, build roads, run the mail, and many more operational and communications tasks at the salt works. Few contractors appeared to deliver fully (if at all) on their promises, but for many reasons (Rosenthal suggests ruthlessness was a crucial factor), the Espinosa family “usually succeeded [in making salt]. In this they were, in a sense, their own institution” (30). Rosenthal takes up the Espinosas again in Chapter Four, “The Ministry Monopoly and the Market Monopoly,” but he does not entirely sustain them as a rival institution to the state since they did not influence the broader salt market (86). He hesitates to say that any pattern of rule by the state or Espinosas emerged here: “Instead, life in La Salina revolved around conflicts between ever-shifting factions and commercial networks” (84). Unfortunately, this hedge neither fully explains the nature of state authority in La Salina, nor does it offer an entirely persuasive portrait of the Espinosa dynasty as a rival institution. Perhaps if Rosenthal had discussed his idea of rival dynastic power in relationship to the national politics in Chapters Five and Six, he might have better bolstered his argument about state institutionalization and its limits.

Chapter Four focuses on dissecting the confusing rhetoric of monopoly, because it provoked such popular political ire among the ready audience of a “democratic tendency” who hated any restriction on individual liberty (66). Complaints peaked in the 1850s about the high price of this “primary necessity” that “especially strained “the poor classes,” even leading one official to worry about the “degeneration of the races” (66-67). Popular resentment posed a political problem, but not an insurmountable one for the state. The salt tax generated consistent, if not fantastic, revenue, so for sixty years, the government did little besides introducing a few reforms to make the tax more palatable. Rosenthal drily observes the “remarkable philosophical flexibility that justified the ministry’s substantial institutional inertia” (70). The Finance Ministry officially despised the illegal salt marketers as an “immoral, degenerate and criminal group that profited at the expense of the public” (71). But the state did little to stop them, showing to Rosenthal that, “the discourse of state primacy was itself a failed attempt at state construction.” Other factors hindered salt production and distribution, including a terrible transportation network and the 1854 artisan’s rebellions in Bogotá (80). Resentment ticked ever upwards and the Finance Ministry decided to close the salt works in 1857 in order to preserve its monopoly (81). La Salina residents took over the works and started cooking salt for themselves. With that brisk reaction, the state walked back. Official dismay about La Salina’s daily “scandals” (expressed with particular poignancy in one letter, 84) indicates the level of administrative chaos, but it also shows the workable fluidity of a real marketplace of determined and lively local actors.

Chapter Five, “La Salina and Colombian History to 1857,” fits La Salina into a wider political history, up to a critical year of local rebellion and occupation of the salt works. This chapter offers a good explanation of Colombia’s repeated civil wars, the intersection of political and economic influence in La Salina, the role of state pardon for military crimes like rebellion, and the persistent concern about lost or stolen salt revenues. Some readers might have wanted this context earlier in the book, but Rosenthal’s main interest is La Salina’s salt economy. The national landscape is important, but his story does not always affect it, and La

Salina's fate is not determined by it. Understandably, La Salina's local history appears first in Rosenthal's book.

Rosenthal challenges the stereotype of Boyacá as a quiescent, uneducated, loyal, and conservative region in Chapter Six, "La Salina, Boyacá, and Colombia after 1857." That truth is unsurprising by this point in the book, but still worth noting: Boyacá was both politically and socially diverse and extraordinarily unsettled on occasion. He discusses several examples of that restive spirit, notably during the civil wars of the 1850s and 1860s and the Rebellion of 1871 (116-124). Ultimately, Liberal and Conservative officials did little to affect how La Salina had operated since the 1830s, despite modernizing dreams of efficient labor and good railroads (124-126). Unfortunately, we do not know more about La Salina's fate during the 1880s Regeneration because the clamor of coffee and war interrupted salt talk (136-137). Rosenthal's interest in the "frenetic stasis" (142) of the salt monopoly stems from his fascination with a perceived failure (141) that endured anyway (118). He reads La Salina as a site of fierce negotiation and not trivial accomplishment. Yet, beyond making Bogotá play hot potato and mirroring national politics, did La Salina decisively change Colombia's state building process? Rosenthal suggests that La Salina's wild politics and rivalries traveled on a parallel but separate path from the nation, pulling it into a sphere of official neglect by the 1930s.

Overall, Rosenthal's study improves our understanding of a misunderstood corner of Colombia at a time of extraordinary state development and dramatic political change. His study shows that La Salina and Boyacá were integrally tied to national authority, however autonomously they may have operated. The book aptly illustrates the intersecting concerns of a growing bureaucracy, local and national elites, and residents with shifting agendas of their own. A few questions remain for others explore. Rosenthal observes that, globally, salt fits into the growth and centralization of a bureaucratic state (5). Might such patterns be seen with other commodities? It would be useful to set the salt monopoly into the context of other national and hemispheric commodities (tobacco and leather come to mind). Also, if salt has been so significant to

state centralization, then why did most other nineteenth-century Spanish American states end their salt monopolies while Colombia did not?

Salt and the Colombian State will be best discussed at the graduate level, and will be of great interest to historians of Colombia and commodities, and scholars of comparative state formation. Advanced undergraduates might tackle this whole; others might read select chapters of this book in a commodities course. My own undergraduate students sometimes struggle to understand why certain goods become political hot buttons ("Cochineal, really?"). Salt will not be one of those. Rosenthal's analysis will help my students appreciate even more the extraordinary significance of this ordinary commodity. The Wild West violence and vigilantism of the salt economy in La Salina will engage some of them, too. Unfortunately, that aspect of the narrative will lead at least some of my students to file it in a catalogue of derogatory stereotypes about Latin Americans as chaotic, corrupt, violent, law-breakers who will never modernize. Rosenthal's analysis intends to undermine that gloomy and intolerant gloss, but it may not persuade everyone.

On the whole, *Salt and the Colombian State* is a finely researched, careful analysis of a complicated society and economy and well worth reading.