Review/Reseña

James A. Wood. *The Society of Equality: Popular Republicanism and Democracy in Santiago de Chile, 1818-1851*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011.

Teasing Out Popular Voices in Chilean Political History

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Over the last two decades, we have been treated to a number of compelling studies about popular republicanism in nineteenth-century Spanish America: amongst others, Iñigo García-Bryce, *Crafting the Republic: Lima's Artisans and Nation-Building in Peru, 1821-1879* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); Peter Guardino, *Peasants, Politics and the Formation of Mexico's National State: Guerrero, 1800-1857* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Hilda Sábato, *The Many and the Few: Political Participation in Republican Buenos Aires* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Ricardo Salvatore, *Wandering Paysanos: State Order and Subaltern Experience in Buenos Aires during the Rosas Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); James Sanders, *Contentious*

Republicans: Popular Politics, Race and Class in Ninteenth-Century Colombia (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Richard Warren, *Vagrants and Citizens: Politics and the Masses in Mexico City from Colony to Republic* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001). All of these works impress upon us the fact that, despite numerous attempts to exclude them, subaltern groups were important participants in the formation of the continent's early republics, particularly in the urban public sphere. *The Society of Equality*: *Popular Republicanism and Democracy in Santiago de Chile, 1818-1851*, by James Wood, is a welcome addition to this burgeoning field of scholarly enquiry, not least because it shows that Chile is not as "exceptional" a case in the Spanish American political trajectory as many Chilean and non-Chilean historians have liked to assert, and because it draws our attention to the plurality of republicanisms that competed for support during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The Society of Equality (*Sociedad de la Igualdad*) was a voluntary, cross-class association founded in Santiago in March 1850. Its most vocal intellectual leaders, Francisco Bilbao and Santiago Arcos, who had spent time in France during 1848, promoted a more democratic and egalitarian vision of the republic than the dominant forces of order—the Bulnes/Montt administration and the Catholic Church—were prepared to entertain (perhaps unsurprisingly, given French influences, the society's motto was "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity") and made persistent calls for profound social reform, particularly in the area of education. The Society of Equality was also known for its innovative principles of (decentralized and participatory) organization: it set up local committees in most neighborhoods across the capital city, each with its own elected leadership and statutory powers, and, in contrast to all previous Chilean initiatives in cross-class association, allowed artisan leaders to hold positions of influence and power. These leaders voiced their concerns and opinions at the society's committee meetings; they also spread their views through the emerging "plebeian print community" (241).

The vast array of local newspapers drawn on here is one of the most commendable aspects of Wood's book, for they provide a fascinating insight into the lives and political agency of Santiago's artisans, many of whom joined the National or Civic Guard (so we are

often reading specifically about the city's artisan-guardsmen). Quoting from more than 50 papers, some of which only consisted of one page and lasted no more than a month or two, the author is able to explore in great depth the language(s) of republicanism and political citizenship, as articulated by this subaltern group as well as other sectors of society against whom they were struggling or with whom they were collaborating.

At its peak, the Society of Equality comprised more than 3000 members (in a city of approximately 90,000 inhabitants), but its crusade against the conservative establishment did not last for long. After a failed insurrection in April 1851, a state of siege was imposed on Santiago, one rebel was executed, many others were imprisoned, and Bilbao and Arcos went into exile in Peru. As commented by historians Simon Collier and William Sater, this "unusual enterprise" then "faded away with barely a murmur of protest."[1]

Wood develops two fundamental arguments about the significance of Chile's Society of Equality. First, that—despite being oft-remembered for its cultural radicalism—there was no one agenda or set of objectives that united all its constituents. In the author's own words, "it meant different things to its different members" (221). It was made up of (lower-class) urban artisans, (middle-class) *afrancesado* intellectuals and, as time went on, an increasing number of the (upper-class) "traditional, mostly oligarchical, faction of the political opposition" (222). The *afrancesados*—namely Bilbao and Santiago— dominated the first phase of the society's brief existence, with their demands for deep social reform. In the second phase, the political oligarchy became more prominent and the focus of action became electoral victory and the attainment of state power. What of the artisans? As noted above, some held leadership positions, but—to broader urban society—the society often pledged to speak *for* this constituency as opposed to speaking *with* it or letting it speak for itself. As Wood comments, even the first newspaper of the society (produced in the social phase) was titled *El Amigo del Pueblo* rather than *El Pueblo*. This helps to explain why the insurrection of April 1850 was a failure; it was never a popular insurrection. The society may have had

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[1] Simon Collier and William Sater, *A History of Chile, 1808-1994* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 107.

3000 members, some of whom were artisans, but most artisans and laborers decided *not* to join its ranks. Thus, while Wood's book centers on this sector's experience of and engagement with the Society of Equality, it ultimately reinforces the persistent elitism within the association and therefore its limitations, and reflects the elitism of the Chilean political sphere more generally. The approach is distinctive, then, from that of much of the existing scholarship on Chile, but the broader conclusions of the study are not.

Second, the author asserts that the brief attempt to cross class-boundaries marked the "culmination of a popular republican movement that had been building in Santiago since the 1820s" (187). The Society of Equality emerged from the disgruntled ranks of the Reform Society (1849), the roots of which can in turn be traced back to associations of the early 1840s, such as the Patriotic Society (1840), and indeed to its counterparts of the 1820s, such as the Society of Artisans (1827) and the Constitutional Society (1829). The *Sociedad de la Igualdad* faced the same dilemmas and tensions as these earlier societies, namely whether to prioritize electoral politics or social reform, and disintegrated as a result of its inability to resolve them. In other words, its short performance on the urban public stage marked the end of a form of political mobilization as opposed to the beginning of something new, and it is this argument which sets Wood's work apart from that of other scholars who have written on the subject, such as Cristián Gazmuri.[2] Wood insightfully explains, however, that while the Society of Equality did not in itself constitute something entirely new, its failure to galvanize popular support and its repression (and consequent disappearance from the metropolis) did lead to new forms of political organizing:

> Something basic changed in Santiago after the year-long episode involving the Society of Equality. The alignment between urban artisans and the liberal reformist faction of the elite, which had formed the basis of the republican movement for three decades, had been shattered. Two separate movements developed in its place: a liberal movement and a workers' movement. (229)

As a result of Wood's focus on its precursors and the build up to its creation in 1850, the first five chapters of this seven-chapter book,

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[2] Cristián Gazmuri, *El "48" Chileno: Igualitarios, reformistas, masons y bomberos* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1992).

entitled *The Society of Equality,* are not about the Society of Equality at all. In a sense, this is one of its strengths, for what Wood narrates is an impressively detailed political history of the first three decades of post-independence Chile. We learn about the early liberal governments, the onset of the Portalian regime, resistance against this regime, the growth and development of the National or Civil Guard, the rise and fall of a variety of electoral societies, the (often fraudulent) practice of elections, and constitutional reforms. The minutiae is fascinating, especially with regard to electoral practice and changes to constitutional law. For example, we read that the new Constitution of 1828 granted voting rights to many more people than had the previous constitution, including artisans and national guardsmen, and that this then led to the latter's political mobilization during the electoral contest of 1829. Political citizenship seemed to be expanding. And yet, as Wood helpfully emphasizes, there was a great disjuncture between theory and practice during this period, mainly as a result of systematic electoral abuses. "Over and over," he tells us, "Santiago's artisan-guardsmen expressed their contempt for a political system in which they were granted the legal right of active citizenship, only to have that right violated in practice" (69). Such discontent and more widespread calls for the nullification of the elections of 1829 (due to allegations of fraud) led to full-scale civil war in Chile between October 1829 and April 1830, and this in turn led to the rise to power of the Portalian regime (its campaign to establish law and order self-justified on the basis of the "anarchical" tendencies that were destroying the fledgling republic) which was then institutionalized by the Constitution of 1833. Famously, this constitution remained effective until 1925, and hence Chile's reputation as one of the most stable republics in Spanish America. Other scholars have already written on these subjects, so the historical narrative relayed here is by no means original, but Wood does a masterful job of bringing together the detail of three decades in a succinct, lively and accessible account that will no doubt appeal to both specialists in and newcomers to Chilean history.

There is also a down side to such organization and structure, however, or at least as developed by Wood. Much of book adopts a very traditional narrative approach, meaning that few analytical angles are pursued in much depth. For instance, we are told in the introduction

that gender is a "major dimension of identity examined in this book" (9)—potentially a very exciting contribution given that, as Wood states, few studies of the social construction of gender identities in Chile have discussed the early national period.[3] We learn that "the political societies that formed in Santiago during the 1829 elections shared a common idiom of militarized, masculinised and popularized republicanism" (49) and that many of the news sheets produced at this time "consistently made the connection between the artisans' service as civic soldiers, their ideas about political citizenship, and their understanding of manliness and honour" (58-59), by pointing to their roles as heads of household, and hence the correlation between defense of the republic and defense of the family. And slightly later in the book, when Wood discusses the mobilization of armed men in the late 1830s (during the war against the Peruvian-Bolivian Confederation), we find out that "Letters and other forms of public communication did come forward […] that identified the guardsmen as the virtuous defenders of the republic, and they did so within the militarized, masculinised idiom of citizenship that we saw in 1829" (105). In short, Wood reveals that rights of citizenship in Chile were intimately bound up with the civic virtues of honor, glory, and duty, and required people to prove themselves on the battlefield. Calls for equality—from the first cross-class associations through to the Society of Equality—then were calls for equality only among men, and honorable men at that. Interesting, but not surprising. The lack of surprise is not a problem. The problem is that a few exceptions apart—for example, the discussion of the newspapers *El Miliciano* and *El Hombre del Pueblo* in chapter 4—this analytical framework is not developed much further than to repeat the same basic hypothesis.

Another line of analysis, as presented in the introduction, explores postcolonial Chile's connections to the Atlantic world (and how we can see such connections develop through the political shifts and

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[3] The most notable studies concentrate on the twentieth century: for example, Thomas Miller Klubock, *Contested Communities: Gender and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904-1951* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Karin Rosemblatt, *Gendered Compromises: Political Cultures and the State in Chile, 1920-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Heidi Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950-1973* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

social changes that occurred in Santiago between 1818 and 1851). For the main part, this point is reiterated in mini snippets throughout the book. For instance, Wood writes that the consolidation of independence by 1818 "also represented the consolidation of an external linkage to the growing Atlantic commercial system in which mass-produced consumer goods from Great Britain, Europe and the United States were forced into local markets in competition with native production" (53), and leaves it there. Much more detailed is the discussion (in chapter 5) of cultural exchange between France and Chile, which focuses on the Generation of 1842 and the ways in which they and their contributions to debates about political citizenship and republicanism were influenced by France's writers and painters (when these or their works came to Chile), and/or by the time they spent in France, especially in the case of Francisco Bilbao and Santiago Arcos who found themselves in the country during the Revolution of 1848. This is my favorite chapter of the book, but we don't necessarily learn anything we did not already know before, and it is effectively the only chapter where "trends in the wider Atlantic World" (17) and their impact on and integration of Chile are dealt with in any detail.

To my mind, both the strengths and the weaknesses of the book are reinforced in chapter 7, which doubles-up as a conclusion. The clear, engaging narrative style continues from the first page of *The Society of Equality* to the last. In chapter 7, Wood underscores the limits of equality, as illustrated in the divisions within the association, its failure to inspire popular rebellion in 1851, and the consequent devastation of the popular republican movement in Santiago. He also shows us where such failure and devastation led, most notably in terms of the emergence of a workers' movement in late nineteenth century Chile. Wood's two fundamental arguments are clarified and reiterated for the reader, bringing together some of the main stories from preceding chapters. However, we also become more aware of the shortfalls of the book, in that some of the most compelling analysis appears here and yet—because it is the last and the shortest chapter—it is not developed in sufficient depth. The reader, or at least this reader, is therefore left feeling rather frustrated and short-changed. Wood offers us, for example, a "few thoughts on the comparative dimension of [his] research," pointing to "the collective picture" of post-independence

Spanish America, where citizens of every country faced the question "how should a republic be organized?" (233). We are treated to seven pages of fascinating insights into how the experience of Santiago de Chile (and its debates about popular republicanism) compared and contrasted with that of other capitals in Spanish America, in regard to 1) the question of race and ethnicity, 2) the issue of protectionism and free-trade, 3) the relationship between the National Guard or militia and the practice of popular politics, and 4) the question of gender. I would have liked to see such comparisons pursued throughout the book; indeed, my frequent comments in the margins to the tune of "and what about other countries in Spanish America? Did the same thing happen elsewhere?" would then have been null and void. In this last chapter, Wood also returns to the theme of the Atlantic World, insisting that "the popular republican movement of Santiago can thus be seen as a part of the wave of revolutionary activity that spread throughout the Atlantic World in the first half of the nineteenth century" (242-243). For me, these lines reinforced not so much Wood's contribution as what was left unsaid in the book—I wanted to know so much about the connections (and divergences) between Chile and the Atlantic World than Wood had discussed; apart from France 1848, what other aspects or incidents of revolutionary activity in the Atlantic World had an impact on or were impacted by developments in Chile?

Despite such shortfalls, *The Society of Equality* is an important addition to the historiography of popular republicanism in the urban centers of Spanish America, reasserting just how contested this concept was and how significant subordinate sectors of society (in this case the artisans, and sometimes specifically the artisan-guardsmen of Santiago), were in debates about its practice (or lack of practice). Furthermore, Wood provides a wealth of information about the social and political fabric of Chilean society in the first half of the nineteenth century. Especially welcome are his plentiful references to Santiago's postcolonial newspaper press, which give voice to a considerable diversity of protagonists and greatly enliven the narrative. Students and scholars of Chilean history will enjoy the book immensely.