



# HAAL

Historia Agraria de América Latina

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Luis Fernando Granados, *En el espejo haitiano. Los indios del Bajío y el colapso del orden colonial en América Latina*, Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2016. 300 pp. ISBN 978-607-445-429-1.

In 1985, Tulio Halperín Donghi described the histories of Haiti and the Spanish Americas as being closely interwoven, even “unintelligible” without each other. The slave insurrection that eventually liberated the former was not only a “spectre” that roamed the latter throughout the nineteenth century; the Haitian Revolution was also, as Halperín put it, “a political-social model that the continental Americas found broadly relevant to their own circumstances.” Over the past decade and a half, many Latin American historians have worked to undo the long marginalization and neglect of Haiti by integrating it into their research and their teaching. In *En el espejo haitiano*, Mexican historian Luis Fernando Granados takes this a step further by reversing the perspective, asking readers to look again at a supposedly familiar object—the turmoil that led to Mexican independence—through the lens of events in Haiti.

Currently based at the Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa, Granados is predominantly a historian of late colonial and early independence-era Mexico. The author of a 2003 book on the September 1847 popular revolt in Mexico City, in 2008 he completed his doctorate at Georgetown with a thesis on tribute in Bourbon New Spain. He studied under John Tutino, whose influence is clear. Tutino is best known for his work on the social and economic history of the late colonial era—especially his 1986 book on the “social bases of agrarian violence” in the *longue durée*, and two more recent tomes on the emergence of capitalism in Mexico’s Bajío region. Granados shares his mentor’s deep interest in the social texture of economic life as viewed “from below,” carefully disentangling a wealth of archival sources in order to foreground the complex roles and motivations of popular actors.

*En el espejo haitiano* consists of a preface, four interlinked chapters, and a brief coda. The first chapter, “The ‘People’ and Their Wars of Independence”, is by the far the most substantial in the book, accounting for almost half its length. It offers a pan-

continental picture of who exactly “the people” consisted of in Latin America at the moment of independence, looking beyond the mythologies of earlier waves of nationalist historiography and providing a comprehensive and careful synthesis of current scholarship. Granados succinctly describes the diverse socio-economic arrangements and political forms of rule under which the region’s heterogeneous array of indigenous, Black, mestizo, European and many other groups lived. This internal variety makes it impossible to speak of a singular “people,” summoned to arms by the heroes of independence; rather, Granados sees a dynamic interaction between the *criollo* leadership and a largely autonomous popular mobilization that was driven by a range of factors.

Granados’s main innovation in this chapter, however, is to place the Haitian Revolution at the center of the analysis, using it as an “archetype of popular revolution” against which to then measure events in the rest of the Americas. One crucial element here is that the Haitian Revolution was not only a revolt against slavery as a dehumanizing condition of unfreedom; it was also an insurrection against the slave system of production. Drawing on a wealth of existing scholarship, Granados points out the centrality of the agrarian question to events in Haiti. It was at least in part a drive for peasant autonomy that underpinned the uprisings of slaves against plantation owners in the 1790s; it also fueled resistance to Toussaint Louverture’s attempts to reimpose plantation labor in 1800–1801, and compelled Alexandre Pétion to institute a sweeping land reform in 1814. (According to Granados’s calculations [p. 106], the share of arable land redistributed exceeded that doled out by the Mexican Revolution between 1921–1940, making the Haitian land reform not only the first but also one of the largest in the Americas.)

The Haitian Revolution ultimately killed off the plantation system, smashing the socio-economic mechanism linking Saint-Domingue to the world economy and producing a lasting “peasantization” (*campesinización*) of the population. As Granados puts it, for Haitian former slaves, decolonization took the form of “cultivating yucca where sugar cane used to grow... only working as much as was necessary, resting as long as possible, letting moss grow on boilers and letting the mills break, and even letting the weeds grow over the ruins of the seignorial houses.” (p. 101) In material terms, something similar would take place in Mexico after 1810, as massive popular revolts severed the connection between the silver mines of the Bajío and the wider world, and at the same time broke the chains binding the rural population to an arduous life of production for the market.

In the second chapter, “Independence without Insurgents”—written on the occasion of the bicentenary of Mexican independence—Granados offers a skillful survey of the historiography on the subject. He identifies a persistent impulse to overlook the role of popular actors, whether because of a culturalist bent that leads scholars to focus on discourse, or because of a tendency to look more at elite-level politics, on the assumption that it was these that “produced” independence more than any popular upsurges.

Granados offers a nuanced and well-grounded counter to such views in his third chapter, “The Road to Guanajuato”, which focuses on the critical early phase of the 1810 insurrection. The central enigma here has long been how and why the rebel army grew so astoundingly rapidly in size—from a mere handful who listened to the firebrand priest Miguel Hidalgo’s famous “Grito de Dolores” on 16 September 1810, to the tens of thousands who sacked the mining capital of Guanajuato less than a fortnight later. Against both those who dismiss the rebel army as an elemental rabble and those who mythologize it as a readymade agent of patriotic liberation, Granados argues for a more fine-grained appreciation of the ground-level politics and sociology of the rebellion. The quest for the abolition of tribute is central to his argument here: it was predominantly *laboríos*—indigenous agricultural workers who lacked the minimal protections afforded by the colonial *república de indios* and yet were still obliged to pay tribute—who joined the insurgent army. He tracks the route it took across what is now the state of Guanajuato in September 1810 and argues that this was shaped precisely by an impulse to recruit more and more *laboríos* to the cause. In effect, Hidalgo’s uprising was remade from below into an agrarian insurgency against tribute—an example of precisely the convergence of *criollo* projects from above and popular mobilizations from below that Granados sees as key to understanding Mexican independence.

The fourth chapter, “Unity and Diversity of the Revolution in New Spain”, zooms out once more to consider the broader historiographical challenges presented by the turbulent period between 1808 and 1825. Against older revisionist accounts that stressed elite continuities and downplayed the idea of independence as a rupture with the colonial order, Granados insists on the revolutionary character of the struggles in the period—that is, the assault from below on the socio-economic mechanisms of colonial domination, which intersected but were not prompted by the elite drive for independence itself. Following E.P. Thompson’s emphasis on the making of class, Granados suggests historians of the period be more attentive to processes, and to the undeniably contingent aspects of events that are nonetheless shaped by wider structural determinants.

Throughout the book, Haiti features mostly as a specter, an analogy or an analytical instrument. But in the “Coda” we are given a tantalizing glimpse of a potentially direct connection between events in Haiti and Mexico, through the stories of two men. One is Manuel Santa María, the Spanish governor of Nuevo León, who had previously served in a royal expeditionary force in Saint-Domingue in 1794, and who was shot by a firing squad in Chihuahua in 1811 for joining the rebellion. The other man is an *affranchi* named Candy, who was one of Santa María’s opponents on the battlefield at Fort Dauphin in 1794, and who was captured and sent to work in the mines of New Spain for three years. Is it implausible, Granados asks, to imagine that Candy may have shared some of his experiences of revolutionary Saint-Domingue with his fellow laborers in the Bajío? (p. 264)

*En el espejo haitiano* is both a skilful work of synthesis and a thought-provoking intervention, pulling together a remarkable range of scholarship in order to offer a new perspective on Mexican independence specifically, but also more broadly on the turbulent processes that accompanied the collapse of Spanish rule in the Americas. Engaging and informative, it also raises important questions about popular agency and agrarian revolt in this period. Viewing events in Mexico in the Haitian mirror, as Granados suggests we do, prompts far-reaching questions about how we understand peasant insurrections. Placing Haiti within the lineage of agrarian revolts also raises the possibility of bringing recent works on post-independence Haiti such as Johnhenry González's *Maroon Nation* (2019) into productive dialogue with the histories of agrarian revolts in Mexico, Cuba, Bolivia and elsewhere. The common thread linking them would be what Granados calls *campesinización*, a process of increasing autonomy from exploitation which might, for those pursuing it, simply have gone by the name of freedom.

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