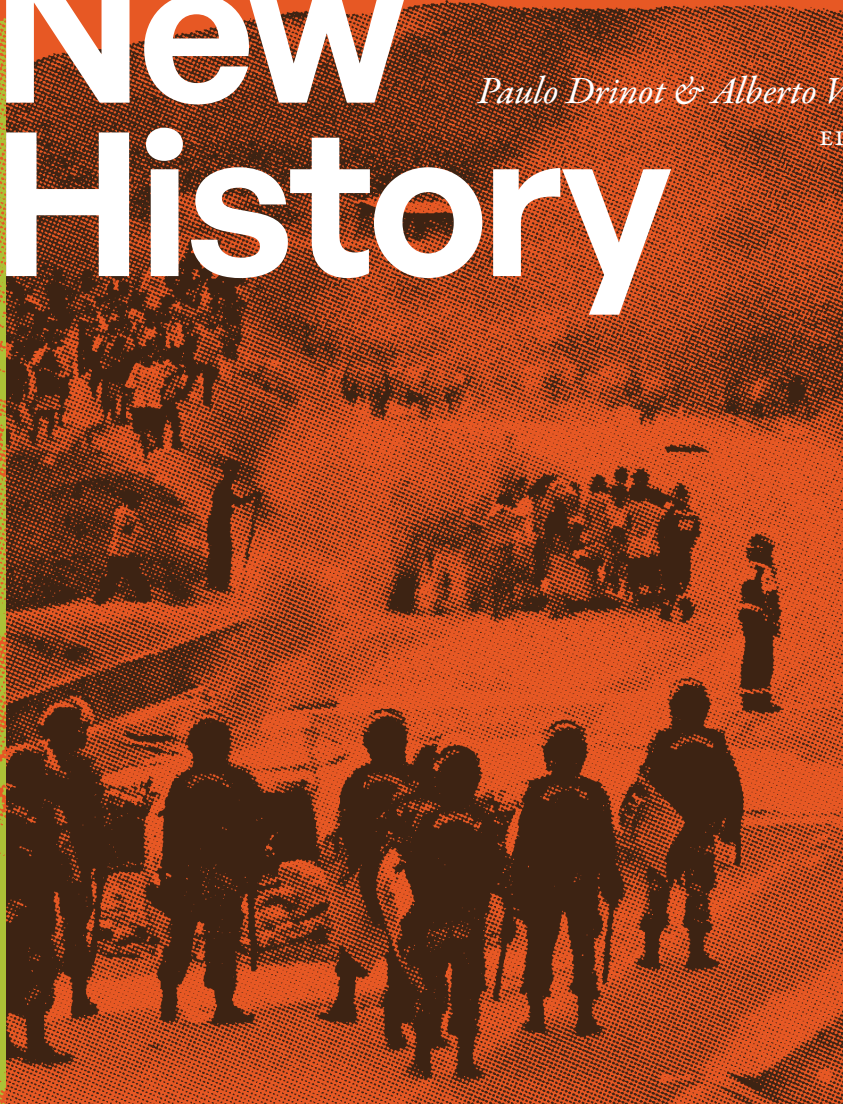


A Modern New Peru History

Paulo Drinot & Alberto Vergara

EDITORS



Modern Peru

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Paulo Drinot & Alberto Vergara, editors

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The Curse of Freedom?

The French have an expression: “Ce n’est pas le Pérou!” (It’s not Peru). Said of something unexceptional, mundane, the saying recalls a time when Peru was synonymous with unlimited riches thanks to silver flowing from Potosí. In Spanish, the phrase “¡Vale un Perú!” (It’s worth a Peru) conveys much the same image. Today, for most, Peru evokes not unimaginable wealth but rather Machu Picchu, the Incas, or a plate of ceviche. Peruvian governments of late have welcomed this largely positive global image. It has fitted nicely into their promotion of the country as a destination for tourism and, increasingly, gastro-tourism. Not surprisingly, this simple image hides not only a far more complex contemporary reality but also a compelling, if not always palatable, history. This book, written in the run-up to Peru’s bicentenary of independence in 2021, provides an up-to-date overview of Peru’s history since the late colonial period that can help readers gain a better understanding of the country, past and present.

Peru shares some features with other Latin American countries but is also something of an outlier. Like Mexicans with the Aztecs, Peruvians can claim a past of civilizational greatness with the Incas and earlier pre-Inca cultures. Peru was one of the centers of Spanish rule in the Americas—a viceroyalty, no less. But the country also bucks regional trends: it became independent later than almost all its neighbors; it entered the export age early, when it became a global exporter of guano in the 1840s; it fought one of the major interstate wars in modern Latin America, the War of the Pacific (1879–83), which it lost to Chile, and saw its capital occupied by the enemy forces (something that only Mexico and Paraguay experienced); it developed a broad-based export sector in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when most countries in the region focused

on a single export such as sugar, coffee, or bananas; when neighboring economies turned toward import-substitution strategies after the Great Depression, Peru stuck with *laissez-faire*; when those same countries fell to right-wing dictatorships, it was saddled with a peculiar left-wing one under Juan Velasco Alvarado; and when the region started to overcome the Cold War and democratize, it faced the violence of the Shining Path and a new authoritarianism under Alberto Fujimori.

In this book we set out to approach the history of Peru in the last 250 years in a broad way in order to account for, and explain, this historical trajectory. We set the chapter authors three objectives: First, to write novel and synthetic accounts of state-society relations in a designated period. In other words, not only to tell a story but also to put forward an argument. Second, to base that argument on the most recent scholarship. And third, to write chapters that could be read and enjoyed by a general audience, not only by academics. Thus, from the outset, we resisted imposing a theoretical framework on the authors, trusting, rather, that their experience would allow them to come up with the most effective strategy for narrating and explaining their periods of analysis. This is a volume, then, that can be read as an introduction to independent Peru but also as an introduction to the most recent scholarship on independent Peru.

This does not imply, however, that we are proposing a comprehensive, new national history, let alone an “official” history. Presidents Augusto B. Leguía and Juan Velasco Alvarado took advantage of the centenary of independence in 1921 and the sesquicentenary in 1971 to try to establish new narratives about the national past and, thus, about the country they sought to build. But today there is no comprehensive national project in Peru. In 2021, state efforts in relation to the bicentenary were modest and offered little by way of a grand reading of the past. The bicentenary arrived while, on the one hand, Peru was ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic and, on the other, the country was in a deep political crisis (where it today remains). In other words, the bicentenary found a disoriented country and a state with little capacity for action in the cultural field.

In the last decade, Peru went from experiencing a period of national optimism, with a buoyant economy, to the current moment of pessimism, marked by a political, economic, and public health debacle—as chapter 6 shows, Peru’s experience of the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the worst in the world and coincided with one of the deepest political crises the country has experienced since the turn of the twentieth century: Between 2016 and 2023 Peru had six presidents. In these circumstances, the temp-

tation to explain the present crisis based on the presence or absence of certain isolated historical or sociological factors (the colonial legacy, the lack of a modernizing bourgeoisie, structural dualism, etc.) is understandable but not very useful. History cannot be reduced to a menu from which one chooses the factor that explains the present. At the same time, history undeniably contains elements that help to understand the present.

As the chapters show, these two hundred years of independence have been marked by the country's inability to flourish fully. Each new period generates new challenges that are added to earlier ones, making the country a puzzle of infinite dimensions that appears impossible to solve. Peru is a country in which the most stable feature seems to be instability. Each chapter in the country's history unintentionally ends up punctuated by recurring processes of construction and reconstruction, by feelings of expectation and disenchantment. It is a history marked by an endless back-and-forth between political, economic, and social options. Politically, the country has shifted between democracy and dictatorship dozens of times; in economic terms, it has oscillated between free trade and protectionism in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; structurally, it has been subject to centralizing and decentralizing efforts at various times.

The national projects that have shaped this history and which the different chapters explore in detail—the republican project of the early independence period, the guano state and the *pax castillista* of the mid-nineteenth century, *civilismo* from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the *indigenismo* of the 1920s, the *aprimo* of the 1930s, the *acciopopulismo* of the early 1960s, Velasco's military reformism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, neoliberalism in the 1990s and onward—all evoke the famous myth of Sisyphus. The country seems condemned to carry the rock of each national project to the top of a mountain only to let it roll back down, and then to pick it up once more. Like Sisyphus, Peru seems cursed by freedom, with independence seemingly unleashing an endless repetition of national projects condemned to failure.

Because of this repetition of national projects that seem destined to fail, the mood of the citizenry fluctuates between affection for and rejection of the country. However, the Sisyphus metaphor serves not only to designate something that resembles a punishment as divine as it is inescapable; it also provides room for optimism and action. This is the other side of the curse of freedom. In Albert Camus's essay on the myth, Sisyphus becomes a rich and human character when he descends the mountain to pick up the rock. That moment of rest is the moment of consciousness. Sisyphus

becomes a tragic character—and not just a puppet of destiny—when he recognizes the absurd condition in which he finds himself: “Crushing truths perish from being acknowledged” and then “He knows himself to be the master of his days.”¹

How Peru has dealt with the curse of freedom—that is, the extent to which it has been able to address the many challenges that its independent or postcolonial history has produced—is the subject of the seven chapters of this book. In the first chapter, Charles Walker covers the long transition from colony to republic between 1780 and 1840: from the Túpac Amaru rebellion and subsequent independence to the total defeat of the Peru-Bolivia Confederation. Although Peru was “born conservative,” Walker argues, important movements challenged this system by defying social structures, slavery, and the status quo. Seeking alternatives, these heterogeneous projects contested continuities and extended into the nineteenth century (and into the present).

In the next chapter, Natalia Sobrevilla Perea explores the guano era (1840–80), which generated a prosperity that, rather than being illusory, as historian Jorge Basadre argued, was unequal. The enrichment of the state through guano exports made it possible to overcome some of the legacies of the colonial period and led to the construction of a new political system. Although the injection of money caused the economy to expand exponentially—making possible a certain “modernization” of society—this process was accompanied by immense corruption and clientelism that became the main characteristic of the guano system, which led to the country’s bankruptcy and defeat by Chile.

José Luis Rénique, meanwhile, concentrates on the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the period that began with the War of the Pacific and the decades of reconstruction that followed (1883–1919). This was a “hinge” period, as Rénique calls it, in which economic recovery allowed for the challenge of building a viable political system in tune with the requirements of export growth and the country’s emerging social and political complexity. Between oligarchy and democracy, equipped with a contradictory vision of “traditional modernization,” the civilian elite took on the organization and direction of the state, which it did not succeed in maintaining.²

In chapter 4, Paulo Drinot focuses on the beginning of the Leguía dictatorship to the military regime of Velasco (1919–68), a period marked by the transformation of a mainly agrarian and sparsely populated country into an increasingly urban one that experienced significant demographic

expansion. The chapter emphasizes how the emergence of mass politics and attempts to “integrate” the Indigenous population were embedded in processes of global change, such as the emergence of the United States as a global hegemon, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the emergence of the “Third World” as a geopolitical category, and the Cold War.

Eduardo Dargent’s chapter studies the period 1968 to 1994, beginning with the military government of Juan Velasco Alvarado, passing through the economic crisis and political violence of the 1980s, and concluding in the early years of Alberto Fujimori’s rule, when the crisis waned. He proposes that in those years there was a significant increase in political participation and organization until the 1980s, but at the same time a series of processes (agrarian reform, political violence, economic crisis, and neoliberal reform), as well as the delegitimization of politics produced by the crisis, demobilized and dismantled these organizations, giving rise to a country with a very different political physiognomy.

In the sixth chapter, Alberto Vergara analyzes how political life gave priority to the imperative of governing over that of representing in contemporary Peru (1992–2021), in contrast to twentieth-century Peru, when representation was an objective in itself—and often at odds with the capacity to govern. The chapter also addresses another cycle of expectation and disenchantment, a trajectory that travels through the optimism of economic modernization to the demoralization of Peru during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drawing on these chapters and drawing comparisons between Peru and other Latin American countries, Cynthia McClintock highlights in the last chapter of the book the exceptional scale of the challenges to inclusion, democracy, and development in Peru. However, she also highlights the progress that has been made in the twenty-first century, before the pandemic struck the country. In so doing, she assesses the extent to which classical theories of democracy help explain Peru’s trajectory.

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While we began working on this book in 2017, the bulk of the writing was done in 2020 and 2021. The authors organized several workshops to discuss the chapters, and the editors are very grateful to Chuck Walker, Natalia Sobrevilla Perea, José Luis Rénique, Eduardo Dargent, and Cynthia McClintock for their willingness to participate. We would also like to thank Viviana Baraybar and Adrián Lerner, who participated in the meetings



Figure 1.1 Rigobert Bonne, *Carte du Pérou avec une partie des pays qui en sont à l'est* (map of Peru with some countries to the east), ca. 1780.

and were going to write a chapter with statistics, maps, and documents from independent Peru, an effort that, unfortunately, the pandemic thwarted. Likewise, a work of interpretative synthesis such as this would not be possible without the scholarship on which each of the chapters is based. The bibliographical notes at the end of each chapter give an account of the valuable contribution of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, journalists, economists, political scientists, and other specialists, both Peruvian and foreign, to our knowledge of the country. We would also like to thank Malena Romero at the Fondo Editorial of the Universidad del Pacífico and María Fernanda Castillo of Planeta for believing in this project, and Alessandra Miyagi, who displayed great care and attention to detail in editing the Spanish version of the book. We are particularly grateful to Gisela Fosado and her team at Duke University Press for agreeing to publish the English version of the book. Thanks too to Katia Villalobos for her work on the index. Finally, we want to acknowledge the institutions that gave us permission to reproduce various images: the newspapers *La República* and *El Comercio*, the Lima Museum of Art (MALI), and the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.

Notes

- 1 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 122, 123.
- 2 See Fernando de Trazegnies, *La idea del derecho en el Perú republicano del siglo XIX*. Lima: Fondo editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1992.

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