

RIOT AND REBELLION IN COLONIAL SPANISH AMERICA

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THE PEOPLE AND THE KING: THE COMUNERO REVOLUTION IN COLOMBIA, 1781. By JOHN LEDDY PHELAN. (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978. Pp. 309. \$25.00.)

DRINKING, HOMICIDE AND REBELLION IN COLONIAL MEXICAN VILLAGES. By WILLIAM B. TAYLOR. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1979. Pp. 250. \$16.50.)

SUBLEVACIONES INDÍGENAS EN LA AUDIENCIA DE QUITO, DESDE COMIENZOS DEL SIGLO XVIII HASTA FINALES DE LA COLONIA. By SEGUNDO MORENO YÁNEZ. (University of Bonn, Bonner Amerikanistische Studien, 1976.)

Commenting on the relationship between the development of writing and the characteristic features of civilization, Claude Lévi-Strauss has observed that: "The only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant is the creation of cities and empires, that is the integration of large numbers of individuals into a political system, and their grading into castes and classes."¹ His conclusion, that "the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery,"² has important implications for the historian. Insofar as the reconstruction of the past of any literate society depends on analysis of the written documentation generated by the organs of government, historians are primarily presented with the perspectives and preoccupations of the rulers, rather than the ruled.

The dangers inherent in reliance on information transmitted through institutional filters are particularly acute for historians of colonial Spanish America. Not only do government sources project the concerns of the state, and the political entanglements of dominant groups within it, but the linguistic and cultural gulfs between the Hispanic urban elites and subject native peoples increase the difficulties involved in reconstructing the experience of common people who were the objects rather than the practitioners of social and political control.³ Like their counterparts in other preindustrial societies, common people in Spanish America have rarely left direct accounts of their lives, their

ideas or their values. As the largely illiterate objects of governmental restraints and private exploitation in agrarian settings, they were caught up in the eternal routines of agricultural labor, where the activities of government cast only a faint and shadowy light. Occasionally the activities of tax gatherers and census takers illuminate the lower levels of society, but their transformation into statistical categories contributes little to our knowledge of their attitudes towards the society of which they formed such an essential part.

Nevertheless, there are moments when such people engage in actions which, because of their impact on government, bring them to the historian's attention. The most obvious manifestation of popular action took the form of rebellions that threatened existing structures of power and authority, and thereby provoked a reaction from the administrative and military apparatus of the state. The principal instances of such action occurred in the late colonial period, in the Comuneros rebellion in New Granada and in the uprisings of Túpac Amaru in Peru and Hidalgo in Mexico. The large scale of popular mobilization involved in these rebellions, and the concomitant seriousness with which they were treated by colonial governments, have ensured considerable historiographical interest. However, interpretation of their nature and significance has been formed within narrow perspectives. Some historians have fixed them within a nationalistic political frame, portraying them as proto-independence movements. Others have seen them as abortive social revolutions, in which peasants and laborers, made desperate by oppressive economic and social conditions, struck back in spontaneous and spasmodic outbursts of violence. Within the range of interpretations that lies between these two extremes, the attitudes and ideas of the participants themselves are seldom explored. In the least subtle accounts they have been stereotyped as the "people," playing an emblematic role in a political struggle against Spanish oppression. More sensitive analyses have shed clearer light on the causes of popular rebellion by examining the social and economic circumstances in which they occurred, variously stressing the role of famine, land-hunger, and excessive labor levies. However, while reference to the economic and social conditions in which rebellions occurred is a necessary condition for understanding their nature, it is not always sufficient. For, as E. P. Thompson has explained in relation to another historical context, it can lead to "a crass economic reductionism which ignores the complexities of motives, behavior and function" by portraying popular uprisings as simply disorganized and ill-disciplined outbursts of people imprisoned within economic circumstances which they neither controlled nor comprehended.⁴ To come closer to an understanding of colonial rebellions, we must not only examine what happened and who was involved, but also

seek out the ideas and aims that informed popular action, going beyond mechanistic accounts of particular “causes” into an exploration of the mental world of rioters and rebels.

The books under review all make important contributions in this area of research. Together they represent a significant advance in Latin American historiography because, first and foremost, they provide accounts of popular riots and rebellions that hitherto have either been misunderstood or completely ignored. Second, they focus on the behavior and motives of common people engaged in resistance and seek, with different degrees of success, to illuminate their social and intellectual worlds. Third, because they take distinctive approaches to the phenomenon of rebellion, these monographs indicate both the strengths and weaknesses of different analytical perspectives, and thereby suggest some promising lines for further inquiry.

Of the three books, the late John Phelan’s *The People and the King* seems to be cast within the most conventional mold. Its subject is one of these great rebellions of the late colonial period—the Comuneros revolt—and its aim is to explain why the long-established system of colonial administration, designed to conciliate conflicting interests, faced a crisis of armed rebellion in 1781. But Phelan is not concerned simply with the actions and attitudes of government in generating and responding to violent opposition. He is also interested in the rebels’ motives, their perception of protest, and in the ideas that justified their attack on the agents of royal authority. Indeed, within the context of an extended narrative of the rebellion, Phelan offers a substantial revision of earlier interpretations by focusing on the nature and role of the ideology that informed the Comuneros’ actions.

In a preliminary examination of the conditions that contributed to the outbreak of rebellion, the book recounts the repercussions of changes in Bourbon fiscal and administrative policy in New Granada, and the resentments which they provoked among different sectors of society. The characteristics of social structure and economic life in the Socorro region, the center of the rebellion, are also invoked to explain the location and timing of the Comuneros’ protest, correlating the outbreak of lower-class rioting with the short-term economic grievances of peasants and artisans who saw their material welfare threatened by new fiscal impositions. Spontaneous riots of the poor were then transformed into organized and sustained regional insurrection with the entry of a leadership drawn from the urban patriciate of Socorro, patronized by allies in the capital. Then, in a novel analysis of the family linkages between rich and poor in Socorro, Phelan shows how it was possible to build a coalition that crossed class lines, joining the protesting mobs to a leadership that was capable of transcending spasmodic crowd protests and forging a coherent, disciplined movement with clearly articulated political aims.

However, his principal contribution to our understanding of the Comuneros rebellion is not simply to identify the motives of the groups which composed it, and to show the social linkages that bound them together. The outstanding feature of his account is that it goes beyond oversimplified correlation of the "causes" of rebellion with the economic grievances and political resentments of participating groups, and shifts attention towards the ideas and beliefs through which the rebels understood and justified their actions. His central hypothesis is that the Comunero movement was united by generally accepted notions concerning the common good of the community, the rights of the community to express its interests in negotiation with the government, and to defend those rights against abuse, by force if necessary. By analyzing Comunero slogans and rhetoric, Phelan detects connections and continuities with political ideas and conventions that were present in the works of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish theologians, and argues that these had been transmitted through the practices of Hapsburg government. In his view, the Comuneros rebellion was essentially a defensive response to Bourbon encroachments on the customary freedoms of the community, animated by a shared belief in a "*corpus mysticum politicum*, with its own traditions and procedures designed to achieve the common good of the whole community" (p. xvii). The Comuneros were neither nationalist precursors nor social revolutionaries; they were conservatives who sought to protect their interests by preserving an existing order, and who understood the political language of the Spanish Golden Age, rather than that of the European Enlightenment.

However, although Phelan has advanced our understanding both of the Comuneros revolt and of the political ideas and outlook prevalent in late colonial Spanish America, his book is neither a definitive account of the Comunero movement nor a convincing analysis of the relationship between action and ideology in colonial rebellions. Indeed, it is because he fails to develop a clear view of ideology that his account of the Comuneros—stimulating and suggestive though it is—remains incomplete.

The main area of confusion lies at the heart of the book, in its discussion of the nature and sources of the ideas that inspired and guided the Comunero rebellion. Although Phelan notices "a profound coincidence between the implicit theory of the Comuneros Revolution and the rich body of classical Spanish political theory" (p. 85), he recognizes that there is no firm evidence that even the Comuneros leaders were directly acquainted with that body of theory. He confronts this problem by reference to the similarity of terms and concepts used in Comunero rhetoric to those of antique Spanish political thinkers, and asserts that Hapsburg political practice had established and observed an "unwritten constitution" in New Granada, a set of conventions enshrined in customary procedures that symbolized a pact between the

monarch and his subjects. However, while this argument enables Phelan to postulate the existence of an essential continuity between traditional concepts of political authority and the concepts by which the Comunero leadership legitimated their challenge to colonial government, it does not explain the moral consensus, the inherent comprehension of *comunidad*, which he sees as the vital unifying force behind the movement. How the mass of the rebels understood their grievances and justified their defiance of government is less readily explained.

Conscious of modern historiography on preindustrial crowds and their political behavior, Phelan avoids crude characterization of the rebel masses as a mindless mob incapable of organized action and governed by explosive, momentary passions. Equally, he denies that the Comunero leadership was simply a conspiratorial Creole cabal, manipulating popular aspirations when those goals had been attained. However, in the symbiotic relationship between rebels and their leaders to which he vaguely alludes, it is an elite of Creole propagandists and patrician captains that was primarily responsible both for organizing the rebellion and infusing it with the peculiar ideological content expressed in Comunero writings. Thus, from asserting that, if the leadership had not actually read Spanish political theory, they had imbibed its main principles through the practices of Hapsburg government, Phelan moves to portray this leadership as the makers and shapers of popular opinion, the vital ideological catalysts of the rebellion.

However, this constitutes a facile and one-sided view of the role of ideology in the Comuneros rebellion which, though giving long overdue regard to Hispanic political ideas and traditions,⁵ fails to do justice to its ideological dimensions. No attempt is made to define ideology, which is assumed to exist only in the realm of political ideas available in structured and written forms. By accepting this limited definition of ideology, and concentrating on the rebellion as an isolated political event, Phelan neglects the possibility that the Comuneros stood within a lively and continuing tradition of popular action. Ideology is not necessarily constituted solely of ideas that may be communicated in systematic and written form. It has long been recognized that the beliefs, values, and ideas of illiterate people may be communicated through action and detected in structured forms of protest. There were many other smaller and less spectacular riots and rebellions in colonial New Granada, to which Phelan makes only superficial reference (p. 81). Yet, if we are fully to understand the nature of the Comuneros uprising, attention must be given to the patterns of behavior and the aims of the crowds involved in those lesser civil disorders. For, in those instances of popular protest, we may explore the workings of a more fundamental ideological tradition, what George Rudé has called "an inherent, traditional element—a sort of mothers' milk ideology, based on direct experience, oral tradition

or folk memory, and not learned by listening to sermons or speeches or reading books."⁶ To identify this tradition, and to understand its relevance to the *Comuneros*, demands an awareness of the context of a longer history of popular protest, a history forged by the readiness of peasant communities to act collectively against external authorities perceived to have exceeded their powers or failed in their obligations.

The frequent willingness of peasant communities in colonial Spanish America to defy authority in defense of some common interest is clearly attested by the Moreno Yáñez and Taylor studies of riots and rebellions among Indian villagers in regions of Ecuador and Mexico. In their different ways these studies show that such disorders—which historians have frequently regarded as aimless and unimportant incidents—were ordered and ritualized forms of protest, in which the participants' actions reveal allegiances to shared interests, values, and beliefs. Moreover, detailed examination of the collective protests of Indian villagers indicates the limitations of explanations formed in purely economic terms. To regard popular protests merely as responses to economic stimuli is to see them in only one dimension. If their participants are to become more than merely economic automata, then attention must also be given to the protestors' perceptions of their actions, and to the character of the ideas and beliefs implicit in their actions.

In the work of Moreno Yáñez, the ideological aspects of peasant rebellion are reflected through a series of descriptive accounts of Indian uprisings in different regions of highland Ecuador throughout the eighteenth century. In the first major section of the book, Moreno reconstructs ten different rebellions, with a wealth of detail and extensive quotation from primary sources. At times, these accounts are marred by uncritical use of judicial sources, but they tell a fascinating story of Indian riot and rebellion, replete with details that reveal much about the behavior and outlook of Indian villagers in this region.

On the basis of these narrative accounts, Moreno seeks to categorize and explain Indian rebellions in terms of the social tensions generated by "internal colonialism." Behind his analysis lies Stavenhagen's dictum that "As Spain was to the colony, so the colony was to Indian communities: a colonial metropolis" (p. 16). Accordingly, on a general level Moreno relates Indians' protests to the changing economic relations of metropolis and colony during the eighteenth century. He suggests that readjustments in the structure of the imperial economy led to an intensification of colonial exploitation of the Indian peasantry, with a concomitant deterioration in its relationship to dominant white society. Against this background, his detailed reconstructions of various rebellions offer closer examination of the specific sources of conflict in different places and at different times.

In the rebellions considered, economic grievances played an im-

portant part in precipitating conflict. Resistance was invariably triggered by the threat, imagined or real, of new taxes or new labor demands, which brought to the surface the underlying tensions of a social structure characterized by continuous latent conflict over resources. Once resistance was provoked by the action of external authorities, Moreno detects a general pattern in the development of the various uprisings, a pattern characterized by movement from the rallying of crowds, accompanied by noisy verbal and musical manifestations of defiance, to violent attacks on property and persons, and finally terminating with a sudden relapse into apparent, if uneasy, calm. He also notices certain common elements in these uprisings in terms of their duration, their geographical extent, their leadership, and their aims. Typically, they lasted for only short periods, were highly localized, frequently threw up their own temporary leaders, and were directed against changes in the practices of government rather than against the system of government itself. While the study is concerned with Indian rebellions in rural areas, and avoids investigation of urban popular protests of the period (such as the great Quito riots of 1765), a distinction is drawn between the motives of Indian and mestizo rebels. In some of the rebellions considered, where mestizos allied with Indian rebels, Moreno detects a fundamental divergence of attitude. In his view, the mestizos identified with dominant white society, and their rebellion was limited to protest against "bad government." The Indians, on the other hand, could be much more radical, as they attacked the very institutions—of tribute and forced labor—on which the colonial system was built, and at times even proposed alternative systems of native government.

In identifying common features and forms in Indian uprisings, Moreno helps dispel the view that Indians were the passive victims of exploitation, showing that they were capable of strong and structured resistance. Of particular interest is his proposal that Indian rebellions could foster and incorporate the development of a "native consciousness" with revolutionary implications (p. 426). Here there are interesting parallels with the "Inca nationalism" that has long been regarded as a vital element of Indian rebellion in Peru, and that continues to attract serious consideration among students of those rebellions.⁷ Unfortunately, Moreno does not explore this theme beyond the descriptive level and his presentation of the evidence poses more questions than it answers. For the evidence is of itself of questionable value: Spanish investigators and judges were often as willing to seek evidence of deeply subversive intent as some of their informants were ready to provide it. Consequently, such evidence must be treated with caution, and its interpretation must be linked to thorough analysis of Indian traditions of social hierarchy and political authority. It is also important to place Indian rebellions in the perspective of our knowledge of peasant rebellions

in other historical contexts. It can be argued that Indian rebellions in Ecuador and Peru, like peasant rebellions in preindustrial Europe, essentially stemmed from defense of institutionalized customs and relationships with external authorities, and could not conceive any attack on the institutional order itself. Indeed, there is a sense in which Indian uprisings may be seen as an integral part of that institutional order. For Indians were, as Moreno's own evidence shows, accustomed to use legal channels for redress of their grievances and their occasional recurrence to direct, violent action may have been regarded simply as a justifiable extra-legal means of bringing the abuses of local officials to the attention of higher authorities when the boundaries of customary and tolerable exploitation had been crossed. In this case, it is vital to define the character and workings of customary relationships and to assess the extent to which contemporary perceptions of them were influenced by Hispanic and Indian cultural traditions.

Strong support for explaining rural riot and rebellion in terms of a peasant conservatism that strove to defend existing accommodations and relations between competing social groups is found in Taylor's study of Indian behavior in eighteenth-century Mexican villages. As its title indicates, Taylor's book is not solely concerned with the phenomenon of rebellion, but is a much more ambitious investigation of social behavior in Indian peasant communities. In the first two sections of the book, there are excellent essays on alcoholism and crime that overturn the crude conception of drinking and interpersonal violence as indices of social demoralization and disintegration and give a masterful account of the rituals, conventions, and bonds that held communities together. Analysis of the norms and values that defined village society is then logically extended into an analysis of peasant rebellions, approaching them as an aspect of peasant behavior rather than as political events that reflect breakdowns in the system of colonial government.

In an intensive analysis of the uprisings that affected Indian communities in central Mexico and the Oaxaca region, Taylor uncovers the inadequacies of explanations based on theories of structural strain, or on correlations with specific economic circumstances, such as famines or epidemics. A preliminary survey of the behavior of Indian rebels provides a systematic account of the features of collective action that were typical in Indian rebellions. Identification of the patterns of behavior, the slogans, weapons, targets, and composition of the crowds involved show striking similarities with the evidence presented by Moreno Yáñez for eighteenth-century Ecuador. Equally interesting are some of the differences, and their apparent relationship to differences in the composition of Andean and Mexican Indian communities. In Ecuador, for example, *indios forasteros*, employed as laborers in *obrajes* and haciendas, often appear to have played a crucial mobilizing and organizing role in

rebellions, a factor that may be related to both the higher incidence of personal violence and the tendency of rebellion to spread rapidly through groups of Indian communities and to approach the level of regional insurrection.⁸

While allowance must be made for variations in behavior related to such differences in local social structure, Taylor's explanation of the primary motives and attitudes that underpinned Mexican Indian rebellions offers a sound starting point for their analysis in other parts of colonial Spanish America. In his view, the peasant village was in a state of continuous latent conflict over scarce resources with competing groups outside the village. Normally, this conflict was repressed by accommodations between groups (including the state), and rebellion was most likely to occur when this accommodation had broken down. Thus, underlying peasant rebellions were tensions that derived from the structure and distribution of economic and political power in colonial society as a whole. But these tensions were not, of themselves, sufficient to provoke rebellion. Rebellions tended to occur not because villagers sought to improve their position by attacking their exploiters but because there were occasions when they were moved to defend their collective interests against perceived threats to an existing social and economic equilibrium. These threats might be of an economic kind—such as new fiscal impositions, new labor demands, or land disputes—or they might be threats to the cultural habits and customs of the villagers—such as might be involved with jurisdictional changes, transfers of population, or interference with local procedures by parish priests. Thus Taylor draws attention to those fundamental sources of collective action that reside in the reaction of peasants to threats against “the ideal of the independent landholding community” (p. 142) with its limited and residual freedoms derived from isolation and a high degree of self-sufficiency.

In their different ways, these three studies all enhance our understanding of the ideological bases of colonial rebellions. Phelan seeks ideological influences in Hispanic thought and practice, Moreno Yáñez looks for elements of an indigenous consciousness, and Taylor emphasizes the meanings implicit in peasant customs and actions and their relationship to the very nature of the peasant community. They not only take discussion beyond mechanistic and reductionist economic explanations of the “causes” of rebellion, but also penetrate beyond the structured systems of political ideas that were transmitted through elite culture in Spanish America, taking us into the realms of *mentalités*. Taken separately, each of these books contributes to the study of societies in three different regions of Spanish America, and each will therefore be of interest to historians concerned with those areas. Seen together, they represent more than the sum of their parts. Collectively, they make a

valuable contribution to the study of popular protest which will be of use not only to historians of Latin America, but also to students of popular movements in other preindustrial societies. For the latter, there are many points of comparison and contrast with popular action in the contemporaneous societies of France, England, and colonial North America, all of which throw light on the concept of "popular ideology" and its utility in historical analysis. For the former, these studies offer both a stimulus and a background to further study of popular culture in Latin American history. In particular, these studies provide us with a timely reminder that work on modern peasant movements in Latin America frequently lacks a clear historical dimension, and they may thereby arouse a fresh awareness of the need to locate these movements in a tradition of conflict which stretches back into the colonial period.

NOTES

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Penguin Books, 1976), p. 392.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 303.
3. For a more complete statement of these problems, see James Lockhart, "The Social History of Colonial Spanish America," *LARR* 7, no. 1 (1972):6–46.
4. E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, no. 50 (Feb. 1971):78.
5. A suggestive outline of the character of these ideas and their importance in shaping colonial political attitudes is found in Richard Morse, "The Heritage of Latin America," in L. B. Hartz, ed., *The Founding of New Societies* (New York, 1964), pp. 151–59.
6. George Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (London, 1980), p. 28.
7. See Leon G. Campbell, "Recent Research on Andean Peasant Revolts, 1750–1820," *LARR* 14, no. 1 (1979):30–34.
8. For a fuller analysis of the special role of indios forasteros in Andean rebellions than is given by Moreno Yáñez, see O. Cornblit, "Society and Mass Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Peru and Bolivia," in R. Carr, ed., *Latin American Affairs*, St. Antony's Papers, no. 22, Oxford, 1970, pp. 9–44.