Ethnic and Racial Studies

The allure of labor:
Workers, race, and the making of the Peruvian state

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BOOK REVIEW


In The Allure of Labor, Paulo Drinot elegantly explores how the Peruvian state sought to define, teach, improve, guard and control labour during the early twentieth century. Drinot argues that the state’s interaction with labour was shaped by Peruvian elites’ racial views. He goes on to demonstrate that elites regarded Indians as non-workers who impeded the nation’s advancement to industrial development and civilization. This led the Peruvian state to draw a distinction between workers and Indians, seeking a non-Indian labour force. Consequently, Peru’s early twentieth-century labour policies supported racial and regional schisms that continue to trouble modern Peruvian society.

Drinot’s analysis of the Peruvian labour state focuses on four state agencies: the Sección del Trabajo del Ministerio de Fomento (Labour Section of the Ministry of Development); the ‘barrios obreros’ (state-funded housing areas for workers); the ‘restaurantes populares’ (state-funded worker eateries); and the ‘Seguro Social Obrero’ (worker’s social insurance). The Sección del Trabajo embodied the state’s desire to become labour’s guide and manager: it granted official recognition to workers’ organizations and mediated between workers’ and employers’ demands and grievances. Thereby, it gave the state the capacity to define labour and a structure to guard and control it.

The other three agencies, the ‘barrios obreros’, ‘restaurantes populares’ and the ‘Seguro Social’, demonstrated a ‘biologization’ of labour administration (p. 186), as their work assumed the roots of social problems to be in individuals’ bodies and, therefore, that properly tending to and disciplining these bodies would resolve society’s ills. Bodies, and the race of these bodies, were seen as pliable to their surroundings. Hence, to enhance labourers’ bodies, Peruvian elites turned their attention to workers’ housing, food and health. Thus, Drinot shows that the provision of state services in these areas was not just an attempt to co-opt labour or counteract appeals from the left, rather it was part of a quest for the ideal work force. Through the ‘barrios obreros’, for example, the state sought to regenerate workers’ minds and bodies by providing hygienic dwellings with access to sporting facilities for the proper use of physical energy. To foster independence, houses were designed to avoid the sharing of bedrooms between parents and children; to impede cross-contamination of poor habits or dangerous ideas, they were built to prevent the sharing of washrooms and hallways between households. Food was also seen as central to the proper development of healthy, hard-working individuals. The easily accessible cuisine introduced by ‘Asian’ (Japanese and Chinese) immigrants was professed to be particularly harmful to the well-being of workers. Asian immigrants were racialized and portrayed as degenerate and unwholesome, damaging Peruvian workers with deleterious meals. The state’s ‘restaurantes populares’, on the other hand, claimed to provide not only healthy sustenance but also didactic spaces where labourers would learn about hygiene, manners and punctuality. The Seguro Social similarly sought to safeguard and improve workers’ well-being by providing needed medical services. Interestingly, by establishing who would have access to this Seguro, the state defined labour on a gendered (male) and racial (non-Indian) basis. In short, the four institutions reviewed by Drinot delineated who belonged in the labour force, fostered the development of this force...
as non-Indigenous, endeavoured to protect workers from foreign influences and leftist political movements and simultaneously denied Indigenous people access to many of state benefits.

Drinot’s book provides a fascinating investigation into how the Peruvian state strived to fashion labour into an agent of progress. His contribution to racial and ethnic studies comes from his examination of the racial construction of labour and the racial logic behind Peru’s labour policies. Drinot explores how technologies and rationalities of government interact with racial narratives and structures, adding to research on the relationship of labour policies and racial hierarchies. To add to his analysis one might inquire how the labour state played with or reacted to Peru’s discourse of mestizaje. Were industrial workers inherently defined as mestizos once they left manual work? Did a new ethnic/racial hierarchy develop among industrial workers, contributing to the tensions between industrial centres and the highlands? How have labour policies affected the construction of the cholo narrative? The Allure of Labor opens up space for fruitful discussions, providing a wealth of historical data on Peru that can enrich existing debates on the racialization of food, space, health and labour.

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