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The Allure of Labor: Workers, Race, and the Making of the Peruvian State
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Reviews


*The Allure of Labor* is a path-breaking, revisionist reinterpretation of state policies towards labour and its role in the modernization of Peru in the first half of the twentieth century. Setting aside, but not rejecting, the traditional Marxist or economistic view of the conflict between capital and labour, with state policy standing firmly on the side of capital, Drinot sees another cultural, but largely racialized, dimension to the state’s response to the rise of labour during this period, one that would exclude the vast majority of Indian workers in the country. For Peru’s intellectuals and policy-makers in the 1920s and 1930s, modernization depended on industrialization, which was synonymous with their idea of civilization and progress. A westernized modern workforce was seen as a valuable resource to be formed, protected and improved through the actions of government.

Consequently, the state fashioned a comparatively progressive array of labour legislation and forward-looking social policies that would create what they hoped would be, or appear to be, a modern, disciplined and efficient, if essentially white-mestizo workforce, which would be capable of advancing industrialization in the country. Such reformist policies, according to Drinot, can be discerned through a careful analysis of the constitutions of 1920 and 1933 as well as of the actions of state agencies created to regulate and oversee workers. These activities included collective bargaining, the construction of affordable housing, the availability of inexpensive food in markets, improved public health measures (such as hospitals for workers) and social insurance programmes (such as a worker pension system). These different kinds of reform, instituted by what he calls the ‘labor state’, are the topic of the individual chapters of this well-argued and carefully researched book.

The workers who were the object of these new labour laws and programmes were, however, a relatively small portion of Peru’s labouring population. Ethnically they constituted the white-mestizo, largely coastal workforce in the factories, ports and railway system which made up the modern industrial and export oriented transport infrastructure that funnelled to foreign markets the commodities produced on the coastal plantations and highland mining enclaves. On the other hand, coincidental with the colonial and post-colonial ethnic composition of the country since its inception, the majority indigenous population laboured as peasants in the Indian communities and as tenants on the semi-feudal hacienda estates in the highlands. They were excluded from the new labour laws, regulations and agency-created benefits during this period. They constituted in the minds of the policy-makers the core of
Peru’s great ethnic and developmental divide in the southern Andes, what those in
government referred to as La Mancha India or Indian Stain, to be left outside and treated
differently from the industrializing model of the country’s future.

Was the construction of this reformist labour state merely a smokescreen designed by
ambitious politicians such as Augusto Leguia, who rode a wave of popular support to the
presidency (1919–30) responding to worker demands at the end of the First World War in the
Great Labor Strikes of 1918–19? Or was it a means to co-opt or incorporate labour in order to
assuage the calls during the Great Depression for radical reform or revolution, which came
from the populist-nationalist APRA party or the Communist party? Drinot does not deny that
these were indeed partly the motives of policy-makers in constructing the labour state. What
he finds in his research, however, was that it was also the allure of labour, a mind-set that saw
the need to protect and improve worker conditions through the paternalistic actions of the
government and thereby create an aura of progressive reform as a means of reaching, or at least
appearing to reach, the goal of a modern, industrial country. On the other hand, one could
argue that perhaps it was simply a copycat version of the programmes implemented by
European and American governments, which were reforming their own labour practices and
laws. Peruvian elites have a long history of embracing western cultural styles and political
trends. Other Latin American governments were following along the same path. By doing so
Peru could imagine or delude itself into believing it was following the path to western
modernity and ‘civilization’.

In any case, the racialized and paternalistic nature of the new labour laws and reforms was
predictable in view of Peru’s history of excluding and ‘othering’ its huge Indian population.
These reforms only applied to the small, if growing, white-mestizo factory and other
workers on the modernizing coast. In Peru’s historical narrative, blame for the country’s
backwardness was generally placed squarely on the ‘uncivilized, Indian Other’. Since
Indianness was incommensurable with progress, they could only enter the world of the
modern mestizo worker and qualify under the new social laws of the labour state once they
cast off their traditional, rural communal autochthonous ways and became, in effect, ‘de-
Indianized’. Until that point, they would remain outside the labour state, with their own
rights and rules, within the confines of their own isolated, anachronistic and unproductive
communities and haciendas.

Were the new labour laws effective in bringing about their intended benefits for workers –
better and affordable housing, lower food costs and worker pensions? Not really; perhaps they
were more a show than a concerted government effort for change and betterment of their
condition. In the capital a few government-run popular restaurants sprang up serving cheap,
clean and nutritious meals. However, they were patronized as much by the middle class, who
found their spick-and-span, orderly and commodious interiors to their liking, as by workers
and their families. The huge new Hospital de Obreros stood out as a shining progressive
symbol in an otherwise bleak public health system for the new working man. A worker
pensions system got off the ground, with contributions by both workers and government, but
they could hardly make a dent in their dim prospects in old age. Likewise a few public housing
projects with the latest European Bauhaus design appeared in Lima, so that a fortunate few
found improved quarters. Overall, though, not much changed, even if these examples from
the labour state served to express the allure of a modernizing workforce consistent with a
modern, industrial progressive society. Meanwhile, the Indian mass remained locked in its
perpetually impoverished, backward, ‘uncivilized’ state, an enormous structural obstacle to national unity and development.

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Jody Pavilack, *Mining for the Nation: The Politics of Chile’s Coal Communities from the Popular Front to the Cold War* (2011), 416 (Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, $84.95).

*Mining for the Nation* is an important book dedicated to understanding a crucial period in the twentieth-century history of Chile, and Latin America more broadly: the ending of the Second World War; the breakdown of the centre-left alliances that were integral to the fight against fascism and the abandonment of the ‘radical democratic promise’ which they held; and the shift to the hard divisions and ‘exclusionary politics’ of the Cold War (2), which would decisively influence the limits and possibilities of democracy, citizenship and social reform in the region until at least 1989. The book also constitutes a comprehensive study of Chile’s coal region and an important contribution to the history of labour, mining and industrial relations, which until now has largely focused on the northern copper and nitrate zones of the country. Centrally, the book examines the key but often overlooked relationship between union struggles – largely under the influence of Communist and Socialist parties – and the deepening and widening of democracy and citizenship rights in Chile in the first half of the twentieth century. In so doing the author reinterprets traditional ‘class conflict’ within the more recent paradigm of struggles for democracy and citizenship rights, but without neglecting the material issues that motivated grass-roots labour organizing during this period. She also examines in detail the complexities of local and national politics, principally from the perspective of working-class miners and their representatives, and links local notions of and struggles for social rights and greater democratization to national and international struggles for democracy and social justice. Yet, while the book addresses the broader international context, the analysis remains focused on the role played by domestic political actors, above all the inhabitants of Chile’s coal communities.

*Mining for the Nation* specifically examines the Chilean Popular Front governments and the centre-left coalitions that supported them from the election of the moderate Radical party candidate Pedro Aguirre Cerda in 1938 to the ‘great betrayal’ of the third Popular Front president, Gabriel González Videla, in 1947. In that year, after having recently been elected president with decisive Communist party support, particularly in the coal mining region of central-southern Chile, González Videla ‘moved violently against Communists, coal miners, and other popular sectors, putting an end to what promised to be one of the most progressive episodes of governance in the Americas’ (4). Not only did he unleash ‘the most thorough and severe repression ever experienced in the coal mining region’ (1) against striking miners and their families, he subsequently passed ‘one of the most draconian internal state security laws in