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Foucauldian Biopolitics and Nation Making in General Juan Velasco's Peru, 1968 - 1975

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This brief academic article examines the military government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru from 1968 through 1975 via the lens of Michel Foucault's foundational concepts of biopolitics and biopower. It analyzes a variety of primary and secondary sources, including legal documents from Velasco's government, state propaganda posters, economic appendixes, historiographical analyses from the time, and other important documents. By examining this varied set of documents, we are able to get a better understanding of how biopower was utilized by Velasco's government, as best seen through the discourse they maintained, to legitimize their undemocratic hold on power. This comprehensive research study also allows us to apply basic concepts of state power, authority, discourse, and biopolitics to other pivotal moments in twentieth-century Latin America.

Keywords: *Peru, Modern Latin America, history, biopolitics, military government, democracy, authoritarianism, gender studies, history of medicine, agrarian reform, propaganda, nationalism*

When General Juan Velasco Alvarado became the President of Peru in late 1968, after coordinating an armed coup d'état that removed sitting president Fernando Belaúnde Terry, Peru would be brought into a period of radical, revolutionary governance unlike any it had seen before. Velasco's military junta, known as the *Gobierno Revolucionario de las Fuerzas Armadas* (GRFA), would go on to undertake major changes in Peruvian society and politics, including the 1969 Agrarian Reform Law that expropriated lands for redistribution amongst working class communities, the 1969 Sanitary Code that mandated vaccinations, and the 1973 codification of national Social Security. However, as is commonplace in the history of twentieth-century Latin America, questions of the role of gender, sexuality, and public health during Velasco's seven-year presidency have been little talked about despite the large role they played in legitimizing his undemocratic regime and creating the nation of Peru we recognize today.

Instead, the military junta from 1968 to 1975 decided to dedicate itself to the cause of the working and middle classes, with little distinction or emphasis put on the rights of women or on the rights of the LGBTQ+ community within Peru. The junta continued to strongly encourage traditional family values and uphold gendered divisions of labor throughout its governance, despite the "revolutionary" title of Velasco's new military junta. Applying French philosopher Michel Foucault's foundational concepts of biopower and biopolitics to the gendered discourse employed and public health initiatives promoted by Velasco's government allows us to understand how through the maintenance of a patriarchal and heteronormative national narrative and national identity, the Velasco government was able to legitimize its rule despite its undemocratic rise to power. This can best be seen in the hypermasculinity of the government that maintained ideas of gendered divisions of labor, both wage and reproductive labor, and in the strong emphasis on public health initiatives in the discourse of Velasco and through a wide variety of legal documents related both to the agrarian reform and the national public health system

Historiography

This historiographical section will mainly be focused on providing context for the two main scholarly topics that directly pertain to this research study, namely (a) the development of Foucault's concept of biopolitics and related radical feminist theory, and (b) the vast amount of literature that already exists on Velasco's government.

In order to properly understand the major arguments of this article, it is essential to thoroughly comprehend Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower and biopolitics. Biopolitics can be defined as the process through which human life, at the level of the population, emerges as a distinct political problem that needs to be addressed in the West (Foucault 34). Nation-states, in response to this issue, react by attempting to control the bodies of their different citizens either through the maintenance of gender roles or through making certain public health standards mandatory. The exemplary work of Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito within his monograph *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* goes into detail on the connection between public health, medicine, and Foucault's concept of biopower, allowing us to comprehend the true nature of Foucault's argument related to the state, discourse, and the human body. Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe takes Foucault's concept of biopolitics a step further, this time coining the term "necropolitics" in

his own groundbreaking monograph by the same name to state that the ultimate expression of a nation's sovereignty lies within its power to decide who may live and who may die. Simply put, this means that a state's ultimate exercise of sovereignty is best seen in its ultimate exercise over control of mortality. These concepts are necessary to keep in mind when applying a biopolitical analysis to any moment in history in which the nation-state's exercise of power to remain in power, as in Velasco's regime, is in question.

Despite the production of a large amount of historical literature on the political and economic aspects of Velasco's military junta and their controversial passing of the 1969 Agrarian Reform Law, the topics of gender and sexuality have been little analyzed. As Peruvian scholar Narda Henriquez writes, only in the 1990s would a gendered perspective in the humanities and social sciences gain legitimacy and become institutionalized within the Peruvianist (scholars dedicated to the study of Peru) community (370). Prior to this, gender, and in turn sexuality, was seen as a superfluous form of analysis that was secondary to other forms of analysis. Yet, the topics of gender and sexuality are crucial to understand how governments or nation-states, in their process of nation-building, utilize traditional discourses of sexuality and gender to maintain their hold on power. For example, Joane Nagel, in *Nations and Nationalism*, discusses the close relationship that exists between the ideology of hegemonic masculinity and the ideology of hegemonic nationalism (249). In the historical process of nation-building and institution-making, these have been two processes that have been dominated by men, with Nagel citing the parallel growth of modern concepts of masculinity and modern nationalism as evidence of their interconnectedness. This author also discusses the role of women in nationalist culture as being defined by hypermasculine definitions of femininity as is seen in the role of women being directly related to their reproductive capabilities for the national group (253). The link between nationalism and masculinity is one that has been pointed out by many scholars yet the hypermasculinity present in the military regime of Velasco has yet to be analyzed thoroughly, which is what this brief article aims to do.

On the other hand, most of the existing literature on Velasco's government has revolved around the political and economic peculiarities of his government, with the primary historiographical debate being about the ubiquity of Velasco's government on the political spectrum. Peru's supposed socialist status during the period is shown in its willingness to form diplomatic relationships and establish embassies with the Soviet Union and Cuba (Contreras and Zuloaga 253). In their work, Carlos Contreras and Marina Zuloaga support this statement by further tying the leftist tendency of Velasco's government to the communist uprisings seen in Peru during the 1980s and 1990s (259). Further study of the diplomatic relations between Peru and the U.S. by Hal Brands indicates that the shaky relationship between the two would be further challenged by the Cuban Question (482). These changes in foreign policy have been used to classify the GRFA as a radical leftist government that would only return to capitalist normalcy in 1975 with the Morales-Bermudez coup.

With the rise in popularity of the Marxist approach in the period directly after Velasco's regime, many other Latin Americanists have offered a different interpretation. William Bollinger's seminal work on the revolution in Peru examines Velasco's seven-year presidency in the context of modern Peruvian history and stresses how the common belief in dependency theory shared throughout Latin America would make the

GRFA incapable of completely doing away with the class system and, more specifically, would only “buttress the praxis of Latin America’s Communist Parities, wherein class analysis is forsaken” (20). Scholar Thomas Bamat’s article builds on Bollinger’s foundational Marxist work by offering us the language of “urban-industrial bourgeoisie,” which describes the specific area of production controlled by those that came into power after 1968 (136). In Bamat’s words on the presidency of Velasco, “the populist reform project of the military never broke with the logic of capitalist accumulation” (134).

Other interdisciplinary scholars analyzing the subject would further complicate the categorization of the ideology shared by the junta. Economic historians describe the complex multi-layering of political ideologies present as state capitalism. State capitalism, as it is explained in the work of E.V.K. FitzGerald, is an economic model that essentially turned the public government into a capitalist system (70). The contradictory nature of this economic model can be seen both in the anti-imperialist and nationalist discourse promoted and in the expropriation of foreign-owned lands despite the continued relationship between foreign capital (in FDI/loans) and the GRFA. The role of Velasco’s Peru in the wider international market economy is explored by Barbara Stallings, who presents various appendixes showing foreign loans from the U.S. and the World Bank to Peru at the time (175). Meanwhile, Stephen Gitlitz, who was living in Peru during the Velasco years, wrote a detailed account of the agrarian reform process where he breaks down the process into two regions to emphasize the socially beneficial and revolutionary effects of the parcellation of lands by the government (18-19). This conclusion is vastly different from the one given by Willem Assies, who argued that the *Cooperatives Agrarias de Producción* (CAPS) were disguised forms of simply commodity production (72). Dr. Anna Cant supports the major argument relating to the significance of the 1969 Agrarian Reform Law in breaking away from societal and ideological norms in her visual analysis of the agrarian reform posters promulgated by the GRFA. Yet, the breadth of literature on this topic has deigned to consider the intertwined relationship between gender, public health, and the fight for political legitimacy that characterized Velasco’s military regime.

Analysis

As poststructuralist scholar Judith Butler first posited, gender is a social performance that is meant to express to society one’s own gender – “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). There have been multiple instances in history in which the performance of gender, specifically masculinity, has been utilized as a biopolitical tool of the government in the process of state or nation building. Some of these instances include the continued existence of male hierarchies in India post-Independence and recent research completed on the close relationship between the modern Chinese state and its fight against “a crisis of masculinity” as is stated in Tiantian Zheng’s article (Sivakumar et al.; Zheng). The performance of hegemonic masculinity is seen in the appearance of Velasco throughout his government, especially in the videos filmed of him giving his famous Agrarian Reform speech on the 24th of June in 1969 (24 de Junio 1969 Se Inicia el Proceso de Reforma Agraria en Perú) . In this short video promoting the passing of the 1969 Agrarian Reform Law, Velasco stands tall in his Peruvian Armed Forces military uniform with all his badges and insignias on full display for the public. Behind him stand files of more Peruvian military officers,

all standing silently and proudly in their own military garb, providing a line of visual physical support behind the President.

In fact, the Peruvian Armed Forces and most Latin American militaries have traditionally been a bastion of hegemonic masculinity in the region and military garb has been consistently used to reinforce traditional ideals related to nation building and their relationship with masculinity. Similar uses of military garb to express the interconnectedness between hypermasculinity and nation building has been used by other left-wing revolutionaries in Latin America such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in Cuba (Fidel Castro en Nueva Delhi, 1983; Statement by Mr. Che Guevara (Cuba) before the United Nations General Assembly on 11 December 1964). Other regional military dictators or 'strongmen' whose capacity to govern was intimately tied to their military background and constant use of military costume include Chilean Augusto Pinochet, Dominican Rafael Trujillo, and Argentine Jorge Rafael Videla. Throughout the twentieth century in Latin America, guerrilla movements and state armed forces would build on this connection between hegemonic masculinity and nation building via their constant use of military outfits as well as in the language and visuals seen in the posters utilized to celebrate the passing of the Agrarian Reform Law.

Ideas of hegemonic masculinity were also promoted through the imagery seen in the collection of Agrarian Reform posters distributed by the Peruvian state at the time. Many of the posters utilized to promote the 1969 Agrarian Reform Law reinforce traditional gender norms and nuclear family structures through their use of images of women and men upholding these traditional norms. For example, in the poster titled "*24 de Junio: Día del Campesino*," a Peruvian peasant woman wearing the classical Andean hat worn by those working in the mountain range holds up a large pickaxe in one hand while still carrying her baby on her back in the traditional Andean form (1969 Agrarian Reform Poster: *24 De Junio*, qtd. in Cant). She proclaims in Spanish, "We are free, the revolution has given us this land," in a true revolutionary format, at the same time upholding traditional ideas about a woman's major role as a mother for her children and as a major unrecognized contributor to reproductive labor. This image shows the juxtaposition of the revolutionary women fighting to protect the values outlined by the 1968 military coup d'état while still reinforcing traditional ideals regarding a woman's position in a family and as a protective mother of their children.

The promotion of traditional gender roles can also be seen in another poster from the Agrarian Reform poster collection. This poster is titled, "*Sácale el jugo a tu tierra!*" or 'take out the juice of the land,' a term used to promote the complete usage of the arable land (1969 Agrarian Reform Poster: *Sácale el Jugo a Tu Tierra!*, qtd. In Cant). In the pop art inspired piece of propaganda, one can see two groups of people, one male group and one female group, working the land in two different aspects. The male group at the top of the poster utilizes oxen and other heavy equipment to plow the land, a form of labor typically given to men in the gendered division of labor. On the other hand, the female group of workers, located at the bottom center of the poster plant seeds in the ground, a form of labor typically given to women in the gendered division of labor. While no language is visualized on the poster, the gendered division of labor seen in this second

poster and the juxtaposition of both a revolutionary woman and a loving mother seen in the first poster reveal the maintenance of restrictive gender norms by Velasco's government.

While hegemonic masculinity was being promoted through the military garb utilized by Velasco and traditional gender roles and family values were being promoted through the various Agrarian Reform posters printed by the government, the legal documents being ratified by the military junta affected the role of Peruvian women. The most famous of these to be passed was the 1969 Agrarian Reform Law which restructured the organization of property and land within Peru into a more equitable format (*Nueva Reforma Agraria de 1969*). However, the first article of this law states that the campesinos or land working class, and more specifically "*para el hombre que la trabaja,*" [for the man who works it (the land)] should rightfully receive their fair share of the property's profits. It is gendered language like this that will become the starting point for the exclusion of women from the benefits of equal land distribution in the modern period in Peru. Not only is it important to consider the gendered language found throughout this piece of legislation, but also the astute observation made by Assies that during the period, the redistribution of lands to the mostly male heads of families and CAPs or worker's cooperatives continued the exclusion of women from the redistribution process (74-75).

Another major issue that had not been properly addressed in Velasco's 1969 Agrarian Reform Law pertained to the rights of women in Peru surrounding property ownership. Since the times of Spanish colonization, traditional gender roles and family structures had been consistently promulgated via the influence of the Catholic Church and the powerful reach of the European colonial powers. This meant that up until the later end of the twentieth century it remained extremely difficult for women to own property and even if they did, men had the legal privilege of being in complete control of their wives' property and assets. Until the passing of the Civil Code of 1984 after Peru's return to democratically elected governance, the official recognition of men as heads of the household would give a husband the power to make their own decisions without any necessary consultation from their wife over their own properties and belongings (Duran 568). This legal privilege given to men over their wives' properties and assets was due to women's official recognition as adult minors, which meant that their husbands were officially designated as the legal representatives of their wives and were the ones that held all the power regarding the couple's assets and properties. Existing unresolved issues like this would render the changes made in Velasco's famous 1969 Agrarian Reform Law for most if not all women in the nation useless.

Although we have already analyzed hypermasculinity, restrictive gender practices and gender roles as a biopolitical tool utilized by Velasco's regime, we have yet to analyze the role played by public health programs in the Peruvian nation-state building process. For Italian scholar Roberto Esposito, the nation state's continued interest in maintaining an intimate connection with the personal lives of its citizens can especially be seen in the existence of governmental vaccination campaigns and other public health efforts put forth by the state (54). Velasco's government would enact various reforms and invest much of the government's efforts into the Ministry of Health and the public health sector within the ambitious 'Inca Plan,' a document published in 1974 by the Peruvian state that acted as a framework for the major

initiatives that they had hoped to undertake when taking power. State-promoted discourses like these and the military junta's obvious interests in making "medicine socially oriented and available to all of the population" would formally establish the 1969 *Código Sanitario* and various other laws regarding public health (*Código Sanitario de 1969*). Analyzing this Sanitary Code and the vast amount of sectors of one's life, both over time and thematically through Foucault's lens of biopolitics allows readers to better conceptualize the use of biopolitics by the government. Articles 17 through 47 cover state-mandated health practices from conception for expectant mothers, childhood until school age, and organ-donation postmortem. Other topics covered within this comprehensive Sanitary Code include property, food, animals, pharmaceuticals and cosmetics, transportation of dead bodies, international relations, mental health, alcoholism, education, environmental health, and health at work, further evidence of the ever-looming, biopolitical presence of the state when it comes to exercising their power over their constituents.

Hand in hand with the detailed propositions of the 1969 *Código Sanitario* was the state's formal codification of its social security program in the 1973 "*El Decreto Ley No. 20212: Ley de el Seguro Social*." Years earlier, the 1969 Sanitary Code had established an "Authority of Health" to be directly responsible for the governments' work on revitalizing the national healthcare system of the nation, including the 1973 law's intended expansion of social security to all sectors of Peru's population. Unlike the far more personal Sanitary Code ratified early in the regime, this piece of legislation aimed to formalize and define the structure of a social security system that was not tied to the urban capital of Lima and its wealthier, landed elite; however, the law expanded its reach into the rural interior of the nation (1973 *Ley de Seguro Social*). Readers should note the constant use of biopolitical language to refer to the different sub-structures created for this national public health project, in this case the term "*organo*" or "organ" to refer to the creation of an organ of control, organs of advisory opinions, organs of finances, and regional organs, all working together in a greater health system that one might call an organ system. The content of the law sought to ensure every citizen within Peru, whether they be a government or private worker or whether they live near the urban coast or in the distant highlands of the Amazon, was covered under both the watchful and helpful eye of this newly integrated public health system. Actions like these that were taken to further Velasco's involvement and consolidate his government's power show the use of biopolitics in another way unrelated to sexuality or the maintenance of traditional gender norms

Conclusion

After its rocky rise to power through a 1968 coup, the government headed by General Velasco knew that its position in power came from providing economic, social, and political stability to the nation. The military junta that led Peru from 1968 to 1975 would undertake many different policies and laws, such as the 1969 Agrarian Reform Law, the 1969 Sanitary Code and the 1973 Social Security Law, which were all different ways in which the autocratic government retained its hold on power. In the constant use of military uniforms, as can be seen in videos of Velasco's speeches, hypermasculinity would stress the imposition of masculine ideals and their intimate connection to the nationalist discourse. At the same time, the military government would reinforce traditional gender roles through its pop-art inspired posters and propaganda

published and distributed by the Peruvian government promoting the 1969 Agrarian Reform Law. Further examination of this period in Peru's history shows the continued exclusion of women from property ownership and the state's care in maintaining various degrees of control over its populace through public health efforts both at the personal and systemic levels. Ultimately, the utilization of Foucault's foundational concept of biopolitics allows us to crack open the box on topics little discussed, such as gender, sexuality, and public health in examinations of Velasco's junta period. By controlling the bodies and private lives of its citizens, or at least determining the boundaries of what can be construed as socially acceptable vs. socially unacceptable, the undemocratic government was able to stay in control of the state and benefit from its position of power.

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