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## [Schaefer on Fallaw, 'State Formation in the Liberal Era: Capitalisms and Claims of Citizenship in Mexico and Peru'](#)

Review published on Thursday, April 29, 2021

**Ben Fallaw, and Nugent, David, eds.** *State Formation in the Liberal Era: Capitalisms and Claims of Citizenship in Mexico and Peru*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020. 360 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-4038-9.

**Reviewed by** Timo Schaefer (University of Oxford) **Published on** H-LatAm (April, 2021)  
**Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

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The book's title omits the most crucial piece of information. The "liberal era" in question is the period between 1850 and 1950. The editors describe that period as "a century of nation-building activity" marked by efforts to "[extend] citizenship" to groups previously excluded from the Mexican and Peruvian polities and to "[integrate] national economies into a global capitalist economy" (p. ix). To study the history of this "liberal era," the editors lay out rather a surfeit of concepts and ideas—in the preface they list seven key "conceptual issues" they promise will be treated in the book (p. xviii). The three ideas that appear to be the most central are that in Peru and Mexico, in the period under study, (1) capitalism developed in ways that were spatially uneven; (2) people's "lived," "active," or "concrete" citizenship entailed rights and obligations that most of the time had little to do with the formal rights and obligations enshrined in laws and constitutions; and (3) "the state" was constituted more by contested claims to the right to use force than by an actual Weberian monopoly on legitimate violence.

These are broad, familiar ideas. In introductory essays to each of the book's two sections—one on the first and one on the second half-century under study—the editors use those ideas to frame their interpretation of the course of Mexican and Peruvian history between 1850 and 1950. The essays effectively drive home some of the salient differences between the histories of Mexican and Peruvian state formation: the dispersion of capitalist accumulation in Mexico's relatively unified late nineteenth-century economy versus the concentration of guano-derived wealth on the Peruvian coast, for example, or the Mexican experience of a social revolution that had no real counterpart in the Andean country. When it comes to explaining the two countries' individual historical trajectories, however, the introductory essays are not so effective. One problem is that the essays proceed from a flawed historiographical premise. They assume that independent Mexico and Peru before roughly 1850 were characterized by a predatory "caudillo rule" in which, "rather than creating new sources of wealth through capitalist development, caudillos were locked in a zero-sum struggle to seize wealth" (p. 5). It is from this premise that the authors derive their conception of 1850-1950 as a "liberal" century of not only capitalist development but also the extension of citizen rights. Yet this is a view of nineteenth-century Latin America that disregards the better part of the past two-and-a-half decades of scholarship. Historians now treat the late nineteenth century as an era of rollback for citizen rights that had been won in the previous half-century—see Hilda Sabato's synthesis of this historiography in her panoramic *Republics of the New World: The Revolutionary Political Experiment*

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in *19th-Century Latin America* (2018). In Mexico in particular, most citizens entered Fallaw and Nugent's "liberal era" with an experience of "lived" or "active" citizenship that wasn't too far off from the formal citizenship promised by the country's constitutions.

An additional problem is that the introductory essays are simply too ambitious—that they cover too much historical ground—to allow the authors to develop their ideas at a reasonable level of detail. Having read the essays twice, I am still not sure what the editors mean when they write that Peru's coastal "corridors of capitalism ... bent the surrounding space in corridor-specific ways" (p. 31), or what historical reality they describe with their statement that these corridors of capitalism "created insecurity and hardship for untold numbers of people" (p. 134). That latter statement is undoubtedly plausible but still calls for some kind of empirical specification. In an edited collection such as this, most of the historical detail may of course be expected to come from the individual contributions. But in this volume the concepts and ideas the editors lay out in the preface and introductory essays hardly crop up in the other chapters.

The topics dealt with in the empirical chapters are varied. Carlos Contreras offers an overview of the history of Peruvian taxation between 1850 and 1934. Thomas Passananti describes the relationship between the Porfirian state and the National Bank of Mexico, a largely foreign-owned company that proved unable, the author shows, to consistently impose its business agenda on the Mexican government. Other chapters are about a 1931 debate about the Peruvian franchise; "revolutionary capitalism" in Yucatán in the little-examined 1924-35 period; peasant-landlord relations in two Peruvian districts in the context of Augusto Bernardino Leguía's modernizing administration; and state-mediated labor conflict in a Peruvian silver mine between 1918 and 1938.

The book will be of special interest to historians of forced labor in Mexico and Peru—the one topic to be examined by a subset of the volume's chapters. Sarah Washbrook shows how in Porfirian Chiapas "'traditional' colonial forms of rule, rent seeking, and labor control" (p. 84) enabled *jefes políticos* and their agents to enrich themselves by pocketing public funds while forcing indigenous citizens to work for free, or for hunger wages, on the public projects for which the purloined funds had been intended. Benjamin Smith examines how forced labor (disguised as the customary communal labor obligations variously known as *faena*, *fagina*, *tequio*, or *cuatequitl*) contributed to the massive road-building efforts of Mexican postrevolutionary governments between 1920 and 1958. And David Nugent (in a chapter that appears to be based on archival research but is strangely devoid of supporting citations) claims that in the Peruvian Chachapoyas region, the conscription of *corvée* labor for road building was highly efficient in the 1920s, when local government was under the firm control of one particular political faction, but highly inefficient—in fact, a colossal failure—in the 1930s, when local government was in shambles. Government functionaries in that decade would blame not only each other but also the lack of patriotism of the indigenous peasantry and the subversive propaganda of APRA fanatics to explain their inability to conscript highway-building labor. While labor coercion is a much-studied topic in Latin American history, these chapters contribute to a better understanding of how such coercion worked at the local level of government.

This is an ambitious but not, in my view, a successful edited volume on a century of Peruvian and Mexican state formation. Yet the quality of the contributions is often high, and where I was frustrated by the lack of coherence and focus, other readers might be pleased by the diversity of the research on display.

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