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Review of Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, How to Write the History of the New World

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Review of Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World*

Abstract

In a plenary session of the Spanish Royal Academy of History (April 1776), Francisco Jose Viana y Teran lectured his colleagues about the type of history that the Academy should promote and the role history should play in vindicating the Spanish nation's past, especially at a time when many European scholars and philosophers were claiming that the Iberian peninsula had isolated itself to prevent the penetration of Enlightened ideas. For Viana, and undoubtedly for many of his colleagues, the vindication of their nation, "unfairly calumniated by foreigners," required something other than propaganda and apologies. It called for a comprehensive national history proving that Spain had always belonged to a select group of civilized nations and, therefore, was entitled to political autonomy and intellectual respect. The history promoted by the Academy could no longer be the one favored in previous centuries—the recording of the rulers' exploits. Instead, historians should study "peoples' customs and mores, the inconstancy of the laws, the influence of the government, the phases of national progress, the vices and preoccupations that made possible our national decline, and what we have to do in order to restore the nation to its previous glory."

Disciplines

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Comments

At the time of publication, author Antonio Feros was affiliated with New York University. Currently, he is a faculty member at the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania.



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History, Empire, and Patriotism in the Spanish Atlantic World

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In a plenary session of the Spanish Royal Academy of History (April 1776), Francisco Jose Viana y Teran lectured his colleagues about the type of history that the Academy should promote and the role history should play in vindicating the Spanish nation's past, especially at a time when many European scholars and philosophers were claiming that the Iberian peninsula had isolated itself to prevent the penetration of Enlightened ideas. For Viana, and undoubtedly for many of his colleagues, the vindication of their nation, "unfairly calumniated by foreigners," required something other than propaganda and apologies. It called for a comprehensive national history proving that Spain had always belonged to a select group of civilized nations and, therefore, was entitled to political autonomy and intellectual respect. The history promoted by the Academy could no longer be the one favored in previous centuries—the recording of the rulers' exploits. Instead, historians should study "peoples' customs and mores, the inconstancy of the laws, the influence of the government, the phases of national progress, the vices and preoccupations that made possible our national decline, and what we have to do in order to restore the nation to its previous glory."

The critical role of history in saving the honor and, many believed, the future of the Spanish nation is the central topic of *How to Write the History of the New World*, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra's splendid book on the intellectual history of the Spanish Atlantic world during the eighteenth century. His main thesis is that during this period the attention of Spanish and Spanish-American scholars centered upon what kind of history to write and how to respond to northern European scholars' negative views of Spain and Spanish America. At the time, debates developed around many important themes: what is the best way to collect authentic information and what

sources should be favored? What should be the role of history in the implementation of national reforms? What should be the key themes of historical narrative? Can history help to discover the origin, evolution, and future of societies? Crucial in these historiographical debates was what criteria should be used to assert the "truthfulness" of the acquired information and what should be the topics of historical inquiry. In chapter 1, Cañizares-Esguerra analyzes what he calls "a new art of reading" developed in the eighteenth century, which led authors to "argue that testimonies had to be judged by their internal consistency, not by the social standing or learning of the witnesses," criteria that previous generations had favored (p. 6). Men like Cornelius de Pauw, the Comte de Buffon, the Abbe Raynal, William Robertson, Alexander von Humboldt, and others aimed to create a new history of the Americas in "which evidence from linguistics, natural history, ethnology, and geology took precedence" over the testimonies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish colonizers and chroniclers (p. 13). These latter works were now dismissed as products of "ignorant, patriotic, and credulous" individuals who "had lacked sufficient curiosity to pose important philosophical questions about the peoples and lands they encountered" (p. 12).

As northern European scholars increasingly mistrusted the testimonies of Spanish conquistadors and missionaries, they also questioned the reliability of Amerindian sources, a topic Cañizares-Esguerra studies in chapter 2. His main thesis is "that the so-called Enlightenment reversed the more generous and tolerant views on diversity held by Renaissance humanists" (p. 7). He argues that northern European enlightened historians dismissed Amerindian sources because they viewed them as produced by "peoples with inferior mental qualities" and, therefore, as unreliable (p. 119). In contrast, Spanish humanists showed a more complex, nuanced, and even openly sympathetic attitude towards these sources,

which they viewed as necessary for a true understanding of the history and evolution of Amerindian peoples.

The responses of Spanish historians to the views of northern European scholars are discussed in chapter 3. Actually, Ca=izares-Esguerra sees Spanish works and debates not only as a reaction to the dismal representation of America and Spain by northern European scholars but also as the product of important historiographical debates and political/institutional factionalism within the Iberian peninsula. Ca=izares-Esguerra asserts that the Spanish Enlightenment was “a patriotic movement” that attempted to renew Spanish history, cartography, and science in response to the “negative representations of the Spanish mind,” as well as a consequence of Spaniards’ realization that “colonial empires were lost or won by those who controlled the description of lands and peoples” (p. 134). His main conclusion is that, contrary to a prevalent perception in academia, Spaniards led all other Europeans in breaking away from “antiquated interpretations of the American past” (p. 133), and that they did so by insisting on the value of Amerindian sources and documents produced during the three centuries of Spanish government. In doing so, the author studies a number of specific debates regarding the history of the New World: the work of Lorenzo Boturini, the debates regarding whether or not to publish in Spanish William Robertson’s *The History of America* (1777), and the debates surrounding the commission and publication of Juan Bautista Muñoz’s *Historia del Nuevo Mundo* (1793).

Chapter 4 continues with similar topics, but now from the perspective of scholars who worked and lived in America. These Spanish-American scholars, such as Juan Jose de Eguiara y Eguren, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Juan de Velasco, Juan Ignacio Molina, and, above all, Francisco Xavier Clavijero, sought to challenge the credibility of northern European enlightened conjectural histories. They not only sought to recover the credibility of Amerindian sources and histories, but also aimed to vindicate their predecessors, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chroniclers, and, at the same time, deny northern Europeans the necessary knowledge and training to understand the history of the American peoples and Spanish colonization. Chapter 5, in turn, discusses a group of scholars interested in analyzing Amerindian sources—artifacts, hieroglyphs, stones, and ruins—who further emphasized the originality of Spanish and Spanish-American approaches to the writing of the history of America.

This short summary does not fully acknowledge the originality of Ca=izares-Esguerra’s work, and his com-

prehensive treatment of sources and topics. Indeed, although his thesis may appear straightforward, it should be said that *How to Write the History of the New World* is one of the most complex, subtle, and richly argued books ever published in the field of Spanish Atlantic history. What makes Ca=izares-Esguerra’s book so successful is the author’s recognition that an investigation of eighteenth-century “epistemological debates” over constructing a “new” history for a “new” nation also required an understanding and analysis of wider intellectual and political debates centering on the so-called “dispute of the New World” (masterfully studied by Antonello Gerbi); science and scientific progress; “the character of nations”; empires and colonization; the origins of humankind; and whether or not there were many “human races,” with one superior to the rest.

There are, however, arguments and analyses that will leave some readers unconvinced. For example, one has the feeling that Ca=izares-Esguerra does not give the same thorough treatment to northern European historiographical views as he does to Spanish and Spanish-American historiography. The old historiographical paradigm—that the northern European Enlightenment was unequivocally the first and most important step towards “modernity”—should not be substituted by a new paradigm, equally simplistic, that Spanish and Spanish American scholars were the first “moderns.” Equally puzzling is Ca=izares-Esguerra’s failure to explain why Spaniards, despite all the sophisticated debates presented by the author, were unable to write a revised history of the New World until late in the nineteenth century. In reading chapters 3 and 4, one has the feeling that many decisions reached in the cases he studies were influenced not by epistemological disagreements, but by factional, political, and institutional divisions as well as, on particular occasions, by xenophobic prejudices, as in the case of Boturini, whose work some scholars opposed not due to historiographical differences but because he was a foreigner and thus viewed as someone naturally inclined to denigrate Spain.

Minor differences aside, no other historian, with the exception of David Brading (*The First America*), has been able to question so thoroughly and intensely the old stereotypes (the product, as Ca=izares-Esguerra rightly points out, of books written by northern European enlightened scholars) that unfortunately still characterize many scholarly descriptions of the intellectual history of Spain and Spanish America being produced in the Anglo-American academic world. Although only time will tell how much impact this work will have in the field of Spanish Atlantic history, *How to Write the History of the New*

World has opened up new topics and approaches, and offered new questions and answers, to a field that no longer should be dismissed as minor and marginal.

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