



Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura

ISSN: 0120-2456

ISSN: 2256-5647

anuhisto\_fchbog@unal.edu.co

Universidad Nacional de Colombia  
Colombia

## Isidro Vanegas, ed. *El siglo diecinueve colombiano*. Bogotá: Ediciones Plural, 2017. 243 páginas.

Sanders, James E.

Isidro Vanegas, ed. *El siglo diecinueve colombiano*. Bogotá: Ediciones Plural, 2017. 243 páginas.

Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura, vol. 45, núm. 2, 2018

Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colombia

**Disponible en:** <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=127157707011>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.15446/achsc.v45n2.71035>



Esta obra está bajo una Licencia Creative Commons Atribución-NoComercial-SinDerivar 4.0 Internacional.

Isidro Vanegas, ed. *El siglo diecinueve colombiano*. Bogotá: Ediciones Plural, 2017. 243 páginas.

James E. Sanders james.sanders@usu.edu  
Utah State University, Estados Unidos

Vanegas Isidro. El siglo diecinueve colombiano. 2017.  
Ediciones Plural. 243pp.

Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y  
de la Cultura, vol. 45, núm. 2, 2018

Universidad Nacional de Colombia,  
Colombia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15446/achsc.v45n2.71035>

Redalyc: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=127157707011>

Political history was fairly recently seen as a moribund field, the study of machinations among elites that had little connection to culture and society. Over the past couple of decades, however, political history has transformed itself by focusing on larger issues of the culture of politics and by incorporating the experience and agency of subalterns into the story of state and nation formation. This valuable volume of eight essays and an introduction reveals how much political history has changed and how these changes have revolutionized our understanding of the nineteenth century. For a collection of essays, the volume is unusually coherent in its themes, the essays as a whole sustaining an argument about the vibrancy and inventiveness of Colombian nineteenth-century political culture. As Isidro Vanegas notes in his excellent introduction, the Colombian nineteenth century has long been seen as a failure, both in nation and state building. However, this sense of failure and stagnation was not the view of many in Colombia during the nineteenth century, especially before the Regeneration. Instead, many politicians, letrados, and even everyday people (Liberals especially, but also some Conservatives), saw Colombia as a political success in comparison with Europe and the United States.

Beyond this rejection of the nineteenth century as a “failure,” a number of themes bind the essays together. All are concerned with the “new” political history that moves beyond studying how competing elites controlled the state, instead focusing on how multiple actors used politics to define society and how this politics shaped people’s social, economic and cultural lives. Another recurrent theme of the volume is how ordinary people, or subalterns, were not just “carne de cañón o carne de urna” but participated in politics in a rich variety of ways (p. 16). A theme uniting many of the essays in the volume is a welcome focus on the Cauca, a region of critical importance to understanding the nineteenth century, but one that still has received less attention than Bogotá, the eastern highlands, or even the Caribbean coast in Colombian historiography.

The essays proceed more or less chronologically, covering the whole of the nineteenth century, beginning with Vanegas' "Revolución neogranadina: La feliz catástrofe." Vanegas argues, contrary to so much history that emphasizes continuity between Colony and Republic, that the political actors of the time certainly saw "La Revolución Neogranadina" as completely transforming society, "como un acontecimiento que había transformado todos los ámbitos de la experiencia social" (p. 19). The essay emphasizes the great importance of the work of François-Xavier Guerra in highlighting the revolutionary nature of the independence movements, but also offers a trenchant critique of Guerra's vagueness when treating how the historical actors themselves understood and fought over the nature of the new political regime and his unwillingness to challenge "la oscura imagen" of nineteenth-century Latin America as a whole or Europe as the center of modernity (p. 27). Vanegas' essay thus helps to rectify a still dominant trend in much scholarship of the Spanish American revolutions, which focuses on events (and ideas) in Spain as being the most important motor force (such as in the work of Roberto Breña), instead of developments in the Americas. The essay then carefully traces how notions of sovereignty and thus ideas about the appropriate political regime changed over the course of the New Granadan Revolution and how it truly was a revolution, not just a war of independence. Why was it a revolution? Vanegas insists on the importance the historical actors gave to adopting "una república democrática," to creating a nation, and to adopting the "principio de igualdad" (p. 33).

Many of the subsequent essays cohere to the themes set out in Vanegas' introduction and first essay. Magali Carrillo's "Pueblo, juntas y revolución" also considers the independence era as a revolutionary moment. Carrillo carefully studies how historical actors employed and debated ideas of sovereignty, authority, power and the pueblo —and how these changing ideas began to legitimize a representative system of government. Instead of considering these ideas fixed and defined, she sees them as equivocal and changing, only given life by the historical actors themselves. The essay focuses on how a pueblo soberano would be defined. In 1810 the various juntas, beginning with Cartagena, started to justify their existence and power by appeals to the pueblo or the "derechos del pueblo", even if others only appealed to the defense of the king and his authority (p. 53). However, soon a tension erupted between conceptualizations of a unified, theoretical pueblo that grants sovereignty and an existing, divided pueblo that would actually practice it. This divide in part reflected newly powerful ideas of equality, which if mostly at first concerned with the equality of various parts of the Spanish realm, would eventually involve notions of the pueblo as well. Remarkably early, debates emerged over whether the idea of the pueblo signified all the inhabitants of society or only "la parte baja" (p. 59). This debate, of course, would run throughout the nineteenth century, a central preoccupation of political culture, both elite and popular.

Many of the essays, such as Daniel Gutiérrez Ardila's "El momento agónico de la República de Colombia," argue how early, and how powerfully, republicanism became cemented in Colombia, in spite of efforts by some, such as Simón Bolívar, to weaken it. Another similarity is how these essays overturn older narratives established by nineteenth-century letrados; once seen as fact, these were really discourses of a particular party or person. Gutiérrez posits that José Manuel Restrepo's *Historia de la revolución* should not be read as impartial history, but as a partisan effort to help justify a Bolivarian dictatorship.

As with Vanegas's engagement with Guerra, Luis Ervin Prado Arellano, in "El letrado parroquial," expands upon the work of another giant, Ángel Rama. This essay argues that marginal, local authorities exercised the power of literacy (and both helped spread state legitimacy and act as mediators in a new republican system in the countryside), not just urban letrados. He posits that it was "el oficio de la pluma" that determined who held local posts, not a corrupt and venal gamonalismo, as in the older historiography (p. 101). This essay, as do several others, focuses on the Cauca, and makes good use of the underutilized Archivo Central del Cauca, especially the Archivo Muerto (one of the richest sources for understanding quotidian nineteenth-century political life). In "La Guerra de los Mil Días o mil conflictos fragmentados", Brenda Escobar Guzmán also examines local political leaders, in Tolima, but takes a sharply different approach than most of the other essays, arguing local struggles for power were more important than links to national developments. She argues that civil wars were mostly driven by men, "tipo warlords", looking to promote their personal interests, rather than following national politics or acting out of party loyalty (p. 241).

Two of the essays deal directly with the lively topics of associations and the public sphere. In "La sociabilidad y la historia política del siglo xix" Gilberto Loaiza Cano discusses how the republican system after independence allowed "la sociabilidad asociativa" room to expand significantly (p. 130). He argues this sociabilidad was dominated by elite letrados who controlled production and distribution of printed works (which he only sees breaking down with radio and television). However, he does trace how there was a "momento de expansión democrática," involving artisan societies, which peaked around mid-century (p. 141). Yet Adrián Alzate García's fascinating essay, "Fidelidades y consensos en conflicto: La naturaleza del asociacionismo político en el periodo federal", shows how popular associations remained vital and important through the 1860s and 1870s. He argues associations played a key role in promoting unity and building consensus around key issues, within a particular party, of course; nevertheless, they often could not contain interparty divides, be they of faction or of social class. He concludes that associations were critical for understanding the functioning of democracy and the rise of the public sphere in Colombia, and especially the roles of popular classes (another key contribution of the new political history).

Fernanda Muñoz also fruitfully considers the importance of popular classes in "Los indígenas de Pasto y la construcción del estado. Tierras de

resguardo y disputas legales, 1850-1885”. By examining Indians’ struggles over their resguardos, she reveals how state formation was not just a process from above, but one that involved the larger society as well. Indians helped make real the rights and practices of republicanism, while transforming them to suit their needs, as when they claimed Liberals’ right of “la defensa de la propiedad” to protect communal property (p. 203).

El siglo diecinueve colombiano reveals how far our understandings of the nineteenth century have evolved in the past twenty years. From seeing nineteenth-century politics as only an elite affair, a republican failure, and generally just a cynical scramble to loot the state, now the Colombian nineteenth century is one of republican experimentation, with serious intellectual debates over sovereignty, rights, and liberalism, that involved all classes of society. This collection makes a rich and important contribution to this debate.