

Book Reviews

J. Lat. Amer. Stud. 48 (2016). doi:10.1017/S0022216X16001504

Carlos Aguirre and Javier Villa-Flores (eds.), *From the Ashes of History: Loss and Recovery of Archives and Libraries in Modern Latin America* (Raleigh, NC: Editorial A Contracorriente, 2015), pp. 342, \$29.95, pb.

Sharing stories about libraries and archives is a venerable fixture in historians' gatherings. Among scholars of Latin America, they frequently lean towards the dramatic. All too common are horror stories of archives lost, capricious access policies, and collections of books rotting in abandonment. Sometimes, too, they are about documentary treasures serendipitously found, and about heroic research under adverse conditions. In a profession in which methodological common ground can be elusive, the use of documentary repositories stands out as a crucial ritual, and yet paradoxically, knowledge about them – while constituting an essential part of the historian's toolbox – mostly circulates only through anecdotal conversations and extremely specialised publications.

From the Ashes of History begins to fill this gap by assembling a group of such stories in scholarly form. It comprises nine essays (five in Spanish, four in English), by historians from across the Americas. In the introduction, editors Carlos Aguirre and Javier Villa-Flores offer a brief account of the histories of archives and libraries in the region, from colonial times to the present: they alternatively faced destruction, neglect and recovery. They also situate the volume theoretically as a collection of case studies about 'the relationship between power, history, and memory, a relationship that is mediated by the availability and accessibility (or not) of sources, evidence, documents, and printed materials' (p. 25).

The case studies are all fascinating in their own right. They illuminate the political, socio-cultural and epistemological causes and consequences of the fragile condition of Latin American documentary institutions. They all achieve the rare combination of erudition and readability that characterises good historical scholarship. At the core of all the contributions is the problem of the historical conditions of possibility of asking and answering certain questions about the past, and the practical consequences of those operations. The authors of the chapters grapple with this problem through historically grounded studies, following a broad range of analytical and narrative strategies.

Pedro Guibovich's characteristically erudite essay about the archive of Lima's Inquisition emphasises its role in the workings of the institution, as well as its fate in colonial and postcolonial times, during war and peace, to conclude that documentary losses have helped perpetuate the 'black legend' about Spanish colonialism. Amy Chazkel's history of the officially sanctioned burning of the Brazilian Treasury's slavery records in the 1890s recreates the political life of historical documentation during contentious debates about the moral and economic role of slavery's legacy. The burning, she forcefully argues, was ordered because these documents 'could not be sufficiently neutralized or depoliticized' (p. 74). In his study of the mid-twentieth-century destruction by fire of Peru's National Library, and ensuing

reconstruction efforts and debates, Aguirre shows in truly *Vargasllosian* fashion that it represented a 'microcosm' (p. 93) of broader societal trends, including authoritarianism, disdain for culture and post-war international relations context. Lila Caimari and Mariana Nazar's article about police archives in Argentina also traces their history to the functioning of police institutions, to argue that narratives of state abandonment obscure more ambivalent trajectories in which contingency and human mediation were as important as documents themselves.

Emilio Crenzel's history of the archives of forced disappearance in Argentina also emphasises long-term archival and political trends, across dictatorship and democracy, and argues that their different uses, from secret tools of repression to public, political and judiciary ones for human rights activists 'actively produced the meaning' (p. 167) of their documentary contents. Particularly insightful is the tension, also present in the essays by Kirsten Weld and Horacio Tarcus, between the 'archival logic of human rights culture' (p. 157) and attempts to draft textured political histories. Following Charles Tilly's taxonomy of the social meanings of explanations, Villa-Flores explores competing attempts to explain the mysterious fire that destroyed Mexico's largest archive and library of cinema as signalling a critical juncture in the negotiated relationship between the Mexican state and its citizens. The burning of the public *Cineteca* revealed that by 1982 a sense of crisis, vulnerability, and impunity permeated Mexico. Weld's article synthesises the findings of her historical ethnography of the creation, use, disappearance, and 2005's recovery of Guatemala's secret police archive. She reconstructs the 'archive wars' (p. 230) that actively shaped the country's brutal civil war and aftermath, and uncovers the central roles played by on-the-field stakeholders, such as the human rights activists turned amateur historians who transformed an archive of repression into an instrument of justice. Javier Puente's account of his quest for documents about the indigenous community of San Juan de Ondores in the Peruvian Central Andean highlands unearths the politics behind the 'fractures' (p. 202) that allegedly characterise peasant-state relationships in Peru. Written as a reflexive travelogue, the chapter convincingly shows that the analytical combination of ethnography and research in central and local archives reveals new histories of long-term engagement (and violence) between peasant communities and the Peruvian state. Finally, Tarcus analyses the creation of archives about Argentina's leftist and working-class culture by civil society (in which the author himself played a major role) in the context of secular 'cultural underdevelopment' (p. 336) and of the neoliberal dismantling of the left. He shows that historical narratives about these actors were and are shaped by the constraints faced by those in charge of managing their archives, including their own analytical biases.

While the essays are excellent and the introduction is solid, the book leaves important questions unanswered. The first regards the choice of case studies: some topics (in particular human rights and authoritarianism) and countries (Peru and Argentina) make up most of the volume. The editors do mention 'political violence and repression' (p. 22) as an important factor behind the destinies of Latin American repositories, but their prominence in the book demanded a more thorough treatment. The choice of countries is not explained at all. The second issue has to do with some omissions. There are no essays about the modern fate of archives for pre-Columbian societies, and none of the papers focuses specifically on paradigmatic repositories such as the Archivo General de Indias, or any country's National Archive. Lastly, the volume would have benefited from including a comparative study on the peculiarities of Latin America's destroyed and recovered repositories.

These issues notwithstanding, this is a highly original and important book. It will be particularly useful to those beginning research projects on the topics treated in the case studies, and will also be of interest to scholars of the history of culture in Latin America, and to those interested in interrogating the conditions of possibility for the production of historical narratives. Moreover, to the credit of editors and contributors, and despite dealing with what might initially seem like a somewhat esoteric theme, it is remarkably readable, packed with well-written, thoroughly documented, and fascinating stories that specialists and non-specialists alike will enjoy.

Yale University

ADRIÁN LERNER

J. Lat. Amer. Stud. 48 (2016). doi:10.1017/S0022216X16001516

Bruno Seminario, *El desarrollo de la economía peruana en la era moderna: precios, población, demanda y producción desde 1700* (Lima: Universidad del Pacífico, 2015), pp. 1298, S/. 150.00, hb.

‘Esta breve historia’ – this brief history – these are the opening words of the introduction to Bruno Seminario’s extraordinary book presenting his original estimation and analysis of the Peruvian national income accounts back to 1700. Surely there has rarely been so inappropriate a beginning, since it needed 1,298 pages for the author to recount and present all the scholarship set before us after many years’ work. The book reconstructs the national accounts for Peru back to 1700, and makes estimates on an even longer period. To do the reconstruction, regional and sectoral estimates are constructed and presented. Not content with this, the author presents an analysis of enormous breadth, covering European and sometimes world history, to derive a comparative picture over the long run. The methodology is thorough, and sophisticated in its use of filtering and smoothing techniques. The author’s knowledge of several huge literatures is extraordinarily impressive. The effort to determine the evolution of the terms of trade, the real exchange rate and other relative prices, is valuable and impressive, and covers territory that the ‘Bible’ (Angus Maddison) did not attempt for Latin America (indeed, he could have been more critical of Maddison). His concern to evaluate the impact of natural disasters and epidemics results in new and original work and is to be welcomed. He frequently checks his findings against common sense and others’ findings.

Inevitably, in a work of such vast scope and detail, there are many points to be debated. There will be huge debate not only over the methodology but also over the interpretation. My own largest doubt concerns domestic institutions and the political economy of the interaction of the growth path and domestic politics, policy and institutional shaping. The author finds that cycles are crucial to Peru’s performance and develops a worrying counterfactual that without wars and natural disasters Peru would have grown faster than the United Kingdom (p. 1231) or would have equalled Europe (p. 223). In other words, external events appear to be entirely responsible for Peru falling behind. I would suggest an alternative interpretation of his data. It may be that either or more probably both the vulnerability to crisis and the slow speed of recovery are at least in part caused by the impact of the preceding boom period on relevant institutions. That negative impact may take the form of the distortion of institutions and/or policies, or simply the absence of development. Thus the *guano* boom seriously affected tax collection, diverting finance to government and bureaucracy centred on Lima, and produced exchange rate and tariff impacts that damaged