

Aline Helg
*Liberty and Equality in Caribbean
 Colombia, 1770-1835.*

University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 363 pp.

Aline Helg's *Liberty and Equality* appears in the context of a recent flurry of English-language scholarship on the independence movement in northern South America. Some works focus on prominent individuals: Karen Racine's biography of Francisco de Miranda; biographies of Simón Bolívar by Richard W. Slatta and Jane Lucas de Grummond, David Bushnell, and John Lynch; and studies of Manuela Sáenz by Pamela Murray and Sarah K. Chambers. Rebecca A. Earle has examined the collapse of the royalist regime in Colombia, especially after 1815.¹ A few historians, including Helg, have responded to Victor M. Uribe's call for sociohistorical analyses of independence by examining Colombia's Caribbean coast with its majority population of African descent and showing the intersection of their aspirations with the ambitions and ideologies of the creole elite in the region.²

Although Helg published a book on Colombian education in 1984, she is best known for *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (1995). In the current work she addresses similar issues, but in a very different setting. As she shows in the first part of the book, in the late colonial period the Caribbean coast of the future Colombia was a thinly populated region with one important city, Cartagena, and a vast, generally impoverished hinterland where the presence of state and church was limited. According to census data from 1777-80, of a total population of 170,404, only 35,051, or 20 percent, most of them women, lived in the five important towns. Cartagena, the largest of these, had a population of 13,393. Free people of color were by far the most numerous in Caribbean Colombia, representing 64 percent of the total population; whites and Indians accounted for 10 and 18 percent, respectively, and slaves for 8 percent.

Given the numerical preponderance of non-whites, Helg poses three questions: "Why did Caribbean Colombian lower classes of color not collectively challenge the small white elite during [the] process [of nation formation]? Why did race not become an organizational category in the region? Why did the Caribbean Coast integrate into Andean Colombia without asserting its Afro-Caribbeanness?" (6-7). By integrating into Andean Colombia, she asserts, the Afro-Caribbean accepted a national imaginary that privileged mestizos and whites and minimized diversity, at least until the adoption of a new constitution (1991) and the passage of Law 70 on Negritudes (1993) gave legal recognition to indigenous and black communities.

In the second part of the book Helg provides multi-faceted answers to her questions while offering a detailed account of the independence movement in the Caribbean provinces of modern Colombia from its beginnings in 1810 to the disintegration of Gran Colombia in 1830. She identifies several conditions that inhibited the emergence of race as a fundamental organizing category in the Caribbean and the creation of a sense of regional identity sufficiently strong to separate from Bogotá. She observes that by extending political rights to all male citizens who met certain economic requirements, the electoral law of 1810 and subsequent legislation ended overtly racial discrimination. (This decision contrasted with the exclusion of pardos from citizenship in the Cádiz constitution of 1812.) Helg also stresses the fragmentation of the Caribbean area as people continued to identify with individual cities and towns as opposed to a region or nation. "People still conceived of towns and villages as hierarchical, corporative entities whose headers were their 'respectable citizens' and bodies, the lower classes" (238).

To be sure, elites did not see the establishment of legal racial equality as incompatible with slavery, which was not fully abolished until 1852. Whites were also fearful of race war, as had occurred in Haiti, and the *pardocracia* that might result. On the rare occasion when leaders made racial

appeals, elites responded quickly to crush the perceived threat.³ This was the case in 1828 when the pardo general José Padilla mounted a short-lived anti-Bolivarian coup in Cartagena. After its failure he was accused of planning a race war and, having been implicated in the assassination plot against Bolívar on 25 September 1828, he was executed in Bogotá. As Helg recounts the details of this murky affair, however, it is far from clear that Padilla's message was primarily racial in character, and she quotes the British consul to the effect that Padilla's pardo followers quickly deserted him.

"In the end," Helg concludes, "the most abiding reason why the Caribbean region avoided large-scale social conflict and remained within New Granada was the continuing existence of vast uncontrolled hinterlands and frontiers as well as an unguarded littoral offering viable alternatives to rebellious and free-spirited individuals" (262). More specifically, the long littoral created ample opportunities for illegal activities that flourished in the absence of legitimate export industries. "Smuggling prospered and became fully irrepressible because it grew parallel to a culture in which many people in both the elites and the popular classes benefited from the lack of state and church control" (263). These conditions prevailed as the Caribbean region remained impoverished, and the independence era marked the beginning of a long decline for Cartagena. In his dissertation, which covers events only to 1816, Alfonso Múnera offers an alternative answer to the third of Helg's questions: after its defeat and reoccupation by Spanish forces under Pablo Morillo in 1815, he states, "Cartagena disappeared as the center of power in the Caribbean, and the future Republic of Colombia could finally organize itself as an Andean republic."⁴

In writing this excellent monograph, Helg consulted numerous archives in Colombia and elsewhere. As is often the case with efforts to probe the minds and wishes of "the popular classes," their voices emerge mainly in the writings of the elites or at least the literate. The book is enriched by frequent comparisons of

conditions and events in Caribbean Colombia with those elsewhere in Latin America. It is striking, however, that she omits comparisons with two other sections of nineteenth-century Colombia where conditions were similar to those on the Caribbean coast: the Cauca Valley and Panama. In the former, where the colonial economy was based on commercial agriculture and mining using slave labor, racial tensions remained high throughout the century. The situation of Panama was unique because of its role as a commercial entrepot during much of the colonial period. In contrast to the provinces studied by Helg, it was a part of the Afro-Caribbean that ultimately rejected integration with Colombia. Despite these reservations, Helg's book should become obligatory reading for those interested in Colombia's Caribbean coast.

¹ Karen Racine, *Francisco de Miranda: A Transatlantic Life in the Age of Revolution* (2002); Richard W. Slatta and Jane Lucas de Grummond, *Simón Bolívar's Quest for Glory* (2003); David Bushnell, *Simón Bolívar: Liberation and Disappointment* (2004); John Lynch, *Simón Bolívar: A Life* (2006); Rebecca A. Earle, *Spain and the Independence of Colombia, 1810-1825* (2000); Pamela S. Murray, "'Loca' or 'Libertadora'? Manuela Sáenz in the Eyes of History and Historians, 1900-c. 1990," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 33 (2001): 291-310; Sarah C. Chambers, "Republican Friendship: Manuela Sáenz Writes Women into the Nation, 1835-1856," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 81 (May 2001): 226-57.

² Victor M. Uribe, "The Enigma of Latin American Independence: Analyses of the Last Ten Years," *Latin American Research Review* 32.1 (1997): 255; Alfonso D. Múnera, "Failing to Construct the Colombian Nation: Race and Class in the Andean-Caribbean Conflict, 1717-1816" (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 1995); Marixa A. Lasso, "From Racial Fear to Racial Harmony: Race and Republicanism in Colombia, Cartagena, 1795-1831" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 2002); idem, "Race, War and Nation in Caribbean Gran Colombia, Cartagena, 1810-1832," *American Historical*

Review 111 (April 2006): 336-61.

³ In "Race War and Nation," Lasso shows that when *pardos* in post-independence Cartagena asserted racial grievances, they were accused of employing a discourse that was unpatriotic and seditious.

⁴ Múnera, "Failing to Construct the Colombian Nation," 14.

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Joanne Rappaport
***Intercultural Utopias: Public
Intellectuals, Cultural Experimentation,
and Ethnic Pluralism in Colombia.***

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and glossary of terms in Spanish and Nasa Yumi.

The publication of Joanne Rappaport's latest work on indigenous political culture in Western Colombia makes her one of the few scholars to have published three scholarly monographs in English on Colombia. An in-depth look at Nasa intellectualism and organizations, the work is a rigorous assessment of how cultural meaning is woven into politics. Rappaport's participation in, rather than observation of, these events adds a richness and complexity to her analysis, while testifying to the potential of a first-person perspective to provide insight beyond the navel-gazing of post-modern subjectivity. The introduction considers the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca's (CRIC) approach to interculturalism, a praxis going beyond multiculturalism in advancing, "ethnic pluralism in the political realm" (Rappaport 5). This section also introduces "frontier Nasa," activists and leaders who live in the borderlands between indigenous and dominant culture. While they do not see themselves as indigenous intellectuals, they are crucial in mediating between Nasa and non-Nasa spheres, representing Nasa interests, and developing interculturalism. The introduction flows into chapter one, "Frontier Nasa/Nasa de Frontera," an in-depth consideration of

this group who, to an outsider, seem to fulfill the role of organic intellectual. Rappaport discusses their tendency to identify Shaman as the only Nasa intellectuals, as they live completely within the Nasa world, a reminder of the limits of outsider perspectives. In this section Rappaport also considers the enormous gap between the career possibilities for frontier Nasa and scholars from wealthy countries or large Colombian institutions, to say nothing of the different purpose of the scholarship produced by both groups. The chapter contains an example of Rappaport's intellectual breadth with her use of the concept of a Klein bottle as a metaphor to describe the Nasa "ethnoscape." The award of a recent Field's medal to a topographer has spread lay awareness of this mathematical discipline, but its application to explain the relation between inhabitants of the Nasa heartland and urban activists as existing on a single surface, despite the appearances of separate planes, stretched this reviewer to the limit of his understanding. Here and elsewhere Rappaport challenges the reader to think beyond commonly held categories. Chapters Two and Three, "Colaboradores," and "Risking Dialogue," examine the views and roles of non-Nasa, Colombian and Gringo, activists and anthropologists who have worked with CRIC and similar organizations. This extended discussion maps the range of CRIC's activities and documents the challenges of weaving together divergent agendas. These three chapters almost stand on their own as a comprehensive examination of politics, participation, and inter-ethnic collaboration.

The rest of the book builds on this foundation in considering how these collaborations impact public life, but there is a shift to more traditional objects of ethnographic inquiry. The shift registers as points on a continuum rather than as a break, but it is palpable in Chapter Four, "Interculturalism and Lo Propio." Focusing on CRIC's bilingual education program (PEB), Rappaport discusses translation, linguistics and conceptual mapping, bringing the intellectual production of the groups discussed in the first three chapters directly into the text. One striking
