

WILLIE HIATT: *The Rarified Air of the Modern: Airplanes and Technological Modernity in the Andes*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2016.

The Wright Brothers, Alberto Santos Dumont, and Charles Lindbergh may be the best-known pioneers of aviation, but Peruvians are equally and rightly proud of the Paris-born son of Peruvian parents Jorge Chávez, the first man to cross the Alps in an airplane. People in Cuzco stake claim to the “Inca” aviator Alejandro Velasco Astete, the second man and first Peruvian to reach Cuzco by air. Tragically, Velasco Astete soon became, like Chávez, one of early flight’s many martyrs.

Willie Hiatt’s *The Rarified Air of the Modern* opens with a discussion of these tragic heroes to tell the story of aviation in Peru, but the author’s principal goal is to tell the story of what *the idea* of aviation meant to Peruvians from 1910 (the year of Chávez’s heroic exploit) up to approximately 1950. Hiatt convincingly argues that airplanes offered Peruvians the hope and the belief that they could escape from underdevelopment by skipping the technological stages of rail and road in which the country had already fallen behind, similarly to how cellphone towers and solar charging kiosks in rural Africa are believed to render traditional electrical grids unnecessary.

In Peru’s case it was not just technological backwardness that the airplane promised to conquer: it was also Peru’s uniquely challenging geography, where the Lima-La Oroya railway was for a century the highest in the world (today it is still number two) and travel from the Amazon rubber center of Iquitos took several weeks less to Liverpool by steamship than it did to Lima by canoe, mule, car, and finally train.

So Hiatt’s book narrates the spell that the vision of airborne modernity cast over Peruvians, and also chronicles the demoralization born of failure upon realizing that safe flight actually did require a robust prior infrastructure and that technological stages could not in fact be skipped. The book is filled with stories of catastrophic plane crashes and unusually high mortality rates for pilots, in the absence of properly graded paved airstrips, competent mechanics and machine shops, flight schools, fuel stations, weather forecasting, and roads.

Chapter 1 looks at the earliest efforts to promote aviation in the wake of Chávez’s heroic demise. The Peruvian Pro-Aviation League raised funds to attract European-raised pioneers of flight back to their native Peru, and ended up depositing most of its hopes and money in pilot Juan Bielovucic while marginalizing Carlos Tenaud, who died in an under-financed test flight from an inadequate airfield.

Chapter 2 focuses on efforts following World War I to establish a national military flight school, at first with French planes and instructors, later with Italians. These efforts had only limited success due to insufficient funds, gross mismanagement, and vocal dissatisfaction that resulted in a congressional investigation.

Chapter 3, adapted from a previously published standalone article, tells the story of the Quechua-speaking Alejandro Velasco Astete, whose successful 1925 flight from Lima to Cuzco ignited a weeks-long celebration of the pilot who became an icon for Cuzco *indigenismo*, a nationalist hero who united “technology’s emancipatory promise” with “Andean utopianism that imagined a world turned upside-down” (p. 72). Cuzqueños’ hopes that Velasco Astete’s exploit would presage the indigenous Andes’ emancipation from the dominant Lima were only partly shaken by the death of the “flying cholo” only a month after his feat, in a crash landing in Puno.

Chapter 4 looks at the hope that aviation might civilize the unexplored Amazon and unlock the isolated region’s immense untapped wealth in the depressed aftermath of the post-1912 collapse of the Amazon rubber boom. Chapter 5 examines tourism and travel writing at the dawn of the age of commercial passenger flight. Chapter 6 explores the military use of aircraft in the 1932 repression of the *aprista* insurrection in Trujillo and in wars against Colombia (1933) and Ecuador (1941). One subtheme of the chapter is aviation’s contribution to the U.S.’s rising regional influence.

Cultural histories of technology have to walk a fine line: too much technical detail can make for an overly dense read, while too little can leave the reader wondering whether excessive claims are being made on the basis of rather thin evidence. Most of the time, *The Rarified Air of the Modern* walks that fine line deftly; its rare slips are toward the latter more than the former.

When the book does wander into the deeper thickets of postmodern cultural analysis, the results are occasionally fascinating, as in Hiatt’s discussion in chapter 4 of how discourses that constructed natives as premodern “stick figures” (p. 92) relied on the trope of Amazonian savages mystified by flying machines, and yet crash-produced accidental encounters between air travelers and *actual* Amazonian indigenous peoples—as opposed to imagined ones—often spawned narratives that subverted those stereotypes.

Hiatt does from time to time build aggressive arguments about “the constitution of modern subjectivities” or “the anaesthetizing aerial gaze [that] failed to recognize its own contradictions” (p. 105), on the basis of close textual readings of articles in popular newspapers and magazines. His conclusions would be more convincing had Hiatt provided readers with better biographical information on the authors of those articles or on the editors of the papers that published them, rather than tending to assume—as he too often seems to—that these voices in

the press unambiguously spoke for some shared national, class, or community consciousness, and not just for the men (and the occasional woman) who actually wrote those words.

But this is a quibble. Most of Hiatt's flights of speculation show considerable insight, and together with his admirable storytelling skill they make for an entertaining and thought-provoking read. This is a book that I would very much like to use in my advanced undergraduate social history seminar, so I would urge Oxford University Press to proceed without delay to the paperback edition.

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CARLOS AGUIRRE & PAULO DRINOT (eds.): *The Peculiar Revolution: Rethinking the Peruvian Experiment Under Military Rule*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017.

On October 3, 1968, Peruvian military officers led by Army chief of staff Juan Velasco Alvarado overthrew elected president Fernando Belaunde and proclaimed the "Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces" (RGAF). Velasco announced that the new government aimed to radically transform Peruvian society, combat social injustice, end foreign domination, redistribute land and wealth, and put the destiny of Peruvians in their own hands. Within a week the RGAF expropriated the International Petroleum Company, a subsidiary of Standard Oil, a powerful US corporation. This bold move was followed over time by measures affecting much of Peruvian society: education, labor rights, concepts of property and land tenure, forms of political participation, the state's role in the economy, the rights of indigenous persons and cultures, and Peru's foreign policies.

The unexpected left-nationalist thrust of the RGAF aroused strong international political and scholarly interest. Many acclaimed Peru's groundbreaking reforms; some attributed to them a depth of purpose and a degree of popular support that turned out to be quite exaggerated. Others belittled the RGAF as just another military coup designed to protect the entrenched power structure and/or decried its impact on Peru's economic prospects. A few scholars suggested that Peru's experiment was innovative but deeply contradictory, an "ambiguous revolution" (Lowenthal), a top-down "revolution by fiat" (Jaquette), with inherent limitations.

These contradictions and limits became more evident over time. Economic constraints, especially the reticence of foreign and national entrepreneurs, produced financial pressures and undercut funding for projects. Velasco's health

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