

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cynthia E. Milton. *The Many Meanings of Poverty: Colonialism, Social Compacts, and Assistance in Eighteenth-Century Ecuador*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. xxi + 356 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5178-0.

Reviewed by Marc Becker (Truman State University)

Published on H-LatAm (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Kenneth Kincaid



Colonial Poverty

In 1931, Augusto Egas, the director of the Junta Central de Asistencia Pública in Quito, Ecuador, complained in his annual report that indigenous unrest on the agency's haciendas threatened to undercut their work with the "truly poor." When I came across this remark while conducting my dissertation research, I read it as a revealing comment on the deep geographic and class divisions in Ecuador. To fund hospitals and orphanages for needy whites and mestizos in urban areas, a social welfare agency exploited the labor of rural indigenous workers on landed estates that a liberal government had expropriated from the Catholic Church. Egas trampled on the rights of what were arguably the most dispossessed and marginalized members of society in order to provide resources to those closer to his social class. I interpreted his perspective as typical urban white elite ignorance and disdain for rural indigenous realities,

Cynthia E. Milton's book *The Many Meanings of Poverty* adds an additional layer of explanation to Egas's interpretation of who comprised the "truly poor." In a richly detailed and thoroughly researched scrutiny of the various faces of poverty in late colonial Quito, Milton examines how society drew distinctions between the deserving and not-so-deserving poor. In addition to racial and class divides, Milton points to colonial social constructs that appeared to linger in Egas's twentieth-century ideas of who were the worthy or "truly poor."

Milton's central argument is that colonial structures required different meanings of poverty, and that as socio-racial hierarchies came under pressure in the late colonial period these meanings of poverty began to change. Changes in views toward poverty, in turn, changed governmental policies. The right of poor people in the colonial period to solicit alms was never questioned, but debates revolved around an issue of whether this should be a religious charity (*caritas*) or governmental social welfare program (*beneficencia*) function. Under Bourbon rule, the government increasingly took over these functions that previously had been held under the domain of the church. Although Milton does not trace this discussion beyond the colonial period, it is not hard to see a rather direct genealogy to Egas's social welfare agency that originally was known as the Junta de Beneficencia.

At a risk of overly simplifying Milton's lengthy and complex argument, colonial elites made a distinction between the economic and social poor. The "false" or unworthy poor may be economically destitute, as with the Indigenous laborers on Egas's twentieth-century estates, but they were not from a socio-racial category worthy of appealing to religious or governmental resources. In contrast to the economic poor were the social poor. While not necessarily destitute, widowhood or other misfortune pushed these of a previously privileged socio-racial status into economic discomfort. They were wor-

thy (“truly poor,” in Egas’s view) because their poverty did not result from their laziness or racial inferiority (as with the miserable or wretched poor, including Indigenous workers on Egas’s haciendas). Among the “many meanings” of poverty, then, were these worthy poor for whom poverty meant living below their social expectations as defined through gender, racial, and class considerations. They ably parlayed their perceived rights into pensions, and in this way shaped colonial governing policies.

Milton includes fascinating discussions of the survival strategies of the economic poor, including migration, pawning, and social networks. In addition, Milton examines how theft became a survival strategy (or what some current activists would see as the criminalization of poverty). As Milton notes, “poverty pushed people to take extralegal measures to make ends meet” (p. 47). Poorhouses were part of these survival strategies, as the “wretched poor” became direct targets of state policies. Poorhouses were the first attempt at state intervention, but in the end Milton notes that these policies failed to remove paupers from the streets or abate public ills.

Milton analyzes how the categories between the deserving and wretched poor began to blur in the late colonial period, with the wretched “undeserving” poor gaining access to resources meant for the respectable poor. Before 1780, Milton observes, race mattered but was never mentioned. After Tupac Amaru’s revolt, the reverse increasingly became true. Race was repeatedly mentioned in petitions but no longer was so determinant in government actions. Moving from a racial to class basis changed meanings of the miserable or wretched poor. Increasingly, the economic poor used the same tropes as the social poor, though as would appear in Egas’s twentieth-century comments these distinctions never completely disappeared. In what to me seems to be a stretch in her argument, Milton states that when the

“deserving poor” began to include both the economic and social poor, it strained “the imagined social boundaries upon which colonial rule rested” (p. 214).

Several times throughout the text, Milton mentions a saying that the poor will always be with us without recognizing or acknowledging its biblical roots. While a biblical exegesis would be well beyond the purpose or intent of this review, conservatives use Jesus’s comment in Matthew 26:11 as a justification to maintain a fundamentally unjust social order. In fact, this is my main complaint of Milton’s book. Although perhaps not an intentional omission, Milton never questions the existence of poverty. She fails to examine social structures that result in (economic) poverty, nor does she interrogate the unequal distribution of resources. In the twentieth century, it was Indigenous workers who questioned this inequality that led to Egas’s denunciation of them as an unworthy poor.

This leads me to a secondary and perhaps unjustified complaint of Milton’s exclusive focus on the urban center of Quito. Although Indigenous peoples are by no means absent in this book (as in the twentieth century, Indigenous migrants to Quito are a key example of an unworthy poor), the discussion never extends to rural Indigenous communities. I imagine that in the colonial period, as in the twentieth century, there was a complete absence of either *caritas* or *beneficencia* in rural areas, but this absence could provide a basis for a still deeper interrogation of the many meanings of poverty in colonial Ecuador that Milton so ably examines.

Even with these limitations, Milton aptly uses poverty as a lens through which to view changes in state structures. Her extensive use of archival sources, detailed analysis, and careful tracing of social and policy changes under Bourbon rule will make this an important and valuable book for specialists on late colonial Quito.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Marc Becker. Review of Milton, Cynthia E., *The Many Meanings of Poverty: Colonialism, Social Compacts, and Assistance in Eighteenth-Century Ecuador*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24989>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.