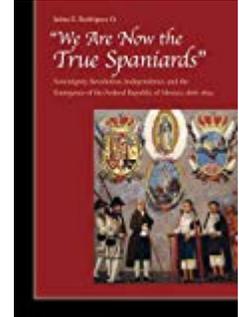


Jaime E. Rodríguez O. *We Are Now the True Spaniards*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2012. xx + 497 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-7830-5.



Reviewed by Evan C. Rothera (The Pennsylvania State University)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Untitled [Evan Rothera on *We Are Now the True Spaniards*]

"We Are Now the True Spaniards" is based on twenty years of research in Spanish and Mexican archives and represents the culmination of Jaime E. Rodríguez O.'s distinguished career. This book rejects the interpretation that the Hidalgo Revolt and subsequent insurgencies led to independence and dismisses insurgencies as "a series of discontented movements that were ancillary to the political process that shaped the modern Mexican state" (p. 2). The political transformation within the Spanish Monarchy was, Rodríguez O. argues, the true revolution. Indeed, independence was not inevitable because, he contends, most *novohispanos* preferred autonomy and home rule to separation from Spain. In sum, Mexican independence was not the result of an anticolonial struggle but rather "the consequence of a great political revolution that culminated in the dissolution of a worldwide political system" (p. 3).

There are many stimulating ideas and arguments in this book. Rodríguez O. describes a vi-

brant Hispanic political culture and rejects the notion that the political structures established in Mexico after independence were alien systems imported from other countries. The story of Spain's trials and tribulations during the Napoleonic Wars has been told before but Rodríguez O. tells it again with verve. He describes the rejection by Spaniards of the usurper José Bonaparte, guerrilla resistance, and how Spaniards and Americans feared being subjugated by the French. With the deposition of King Fernando VII, sovereignty reverted to the people and both Americans and Spaniards established local governing juntas. When New Spain's *ayuntamientos* selected a representative to the Junta Central in Spain they provided him with specific instructions that emphasized "their loyalty to Fernando VII, their opposition to the French, their desire to remain part of the Spanish Monarchy, and "that this America is not a colony, but an integral and essential part of the Spanish Monarchy" (p. 80). In other words, New Spaniards did not want

independence so much as autonomy and the ability to govern themselves.

The decision of the Junta Central, in 1810, to order elections for a *Cortes* for the entire Spanish Monarchy offered novohispanos two possibilities. They could either “participate in a political revolution within the Spanish Monarchy” or join “an armed revolution to establish their own autonomous junta to govern New Spain” (p. 97). The heart of the book is an examination of these two revolutions. Rodríguez O. does not paint a positive picture of the insurgencies and he minimizes the desire for independence among insurrectionists. On the other hand, he offers an excellent account of the “profound revolution” (p. 152) at Cádiz. He illustrates the importance of the deputies from America in shaping the Constitution and argues that most Novohispanos chose to work through the political system rather than turning to violence. The Constitution of 1812 created new institutions of local government—the provincial deputation and the constitutional ayuntamiento—and ushered in popular elections. Rodríguez O. chides scholars for ignoring the political revolution in favor of focusing on the insurgencies when, “by any standard, the political revolution was more profound and extensive than the insurgencies” (p. 192).

Fernando VII’s decision in 1814, shortly after he returned to the monarchy, to abolish the Cortes and all its acts, including the Constitution of 1812, complicated matters. Six years later, in the midst of widespread dissatisfaction, Fernando restored the Constitution. Novohispanos were unwilling to allow this new opportunity to achieve political power to slip through their fingers. When the new Cortes failed to address American concerns, American representatives proposed other means to ensure home rule. Agustín de Iturbide became receptive to autonomist arguments and the Plan de Iguala offered a compromise, “a way of retaining representative constitutional government that did not preclude reconciliation with Spain” (p. 259).

Independence, Rodríguez O. reiterates, was hardly a rejection of Spain or Hispanic political traditions because Mexicans “carefully followed the precedents of the Hispanic constitutional system” (p. 270). However, it did not take long before the executive and legislative branches of the new government began to fight over sovereignty. The Mexican Cortes attempted to prevent Iturbide from taking power and Iturbide, in turn, arrested his political opponents. More than anything else, this provoked tremendous opposition to Iturbide, who, in turn, misunderstood the nature of this new political crisis. Iturbide assumed when people demanded the election of a new Congress, they were also calling for his ouster. In fact they were not. Even after Iturbide’s abdication, problems did not cease because the national elite “continued to act as though the old balance of power remained unchanged and that supreme authority resided in the capital” (p. 305). Provincial elites, Rodríguez O. contends, became determined to create a government in which they could manage their own destinies. In sum, provincial elites, empowered by the events of the past decade and a half, demanded autonomy. Iturbide’s failure and that of the national elite, argues Rodríguez O., ensured that “a federal republic became the only possible solution to the political crisis” (p. 334).

All told, this is a fascinating book. However, some of Rodríguez O.’s claims, particularly about political participation in New Spain, seemed somewhat problematic. He asserts, for instance, that the Constitution of Cádiz unleashed a wave of political activity and that “contrary to general belief, elections were held throughout the kingdom and that hundreds of thousands, perhaps more than a million, novohispanos participated in electing forty-one deputies to the Ordinary Cortes of 1813-1814” (p. 5). He argues that “even the vast illiterate population was better informed than is generally believed” (p. 44). He charts an “astounding” growth in political participation from 1820 to 1823 and cites as evidence thousands of bundles of documents in the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN)

that “record the intensity and diversity of political activity in the country (p. 308). He reiterates his point about “hundreds of thousands of citizens, possibly more than a million or about a sixth of New Spain’s population” (p. 339) participating in elections and government in the book’s conclusion.

There are several potential issues with this analysis. The first is that one-sixth of the population does not seem either extraordinary or a large percentage. Looking at this statistic another way, five-sixths of the population either chose not to participate in elections and government or were prohibited from participating. In addition, Rodríguez O. is indisputably correct that the AGN is filled with bundles of documents. The question, at least in this reviewer’s mind, is what exactly do these documents tell us? Certainly national and provincial elites had access to government documents but Rodríguez O. does not provide much evidence that the vast majority of the people either saw, understood, or had access to these documents. When officials noted that copies of documents were made for local distribution, to whom were they distributed? Finally, Rodríguez O. is clearly attentive to the difference between high and low politics. He states that while he focuses on high politics he “does not assume that *low politics* [his italics] did not exist” (p. 3). However, he does not spend much time on low politics and focuses, for the most part, on political elites. There is nothing wrong with this—we need to study elites as well as subalterns—but one wonders if this focus leads Rodríguez O. to read the high level of political participation by the elites into other social classes. It should also be noted that Rodríguez O. ventures very deeply into local politics. He offers many extended descriptions of political life in villages—usually focused on the elite—and while they were interesting, this reviewer, at times, thought he might have included a bit less detail.

Problems aside, this is a deeply researched, thought-provoking, and provocative book. Be-

cause it assumes the reader has a great deal of familiarity with the topic, it is not really a book for undergraduates or a popular audience. However, this is clearly a book graduate students and scholars will have to contend with and it will likely be utilized in a variety of graduate seminars. Rodríguez O.’s analysis stands as the most forceful enunciation of one interpretation of Mexican independence.

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