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Published on H-Environment (December, 2017)

Commissioned by David T. Benac

Of Geography and Nation

In *Mapping the Country of Regions: The Chorographic Commission of Nineteenth-Century Colombia,* Nancy P. Appelbaum closely examines the trailblazing work of Colombia’s Chorographic Commission, a small team charged with the large task of mapping Colombian territory—that is, everything within the boundaries of what was known by mid-century as the Republic of New Granada. New Granada (later, Colombia) was still largely terra incognita; with no roads to speak of during the years in which the commission was active (1850-59), most of it was accessible only by mule, canoe, or carguero (human porter). It was all steep mountains, vast plains, and dense jungle. The commission’s importance thus lay in the fact that it was the first official effort to gather geographic information about the entire country through study of each of its major regions. The purpose was to assert national sovereignty, strengthen governance, and spur economic development.

Throughout her book’s eight chapters, Appelbaum skillfully synthesizes the findings of previous, mainly Colombian, scholars to explain how the commission operated, shaped (or, reinforced) certain perceptions of the country and its history, influenced public education, and ultimately, laid a foundation for the work of later geographers. She also offers her own original analysis of the maps, reports, and illustrations commissioners produced, shedding light on how these materials portrayed or represented a given province and region. In the process, she reveals the ideas, biases, and assumptions that underlay such representation. Appelbaum thus shows us how the commission did more than produce a body of scientific knowledge. She shows how it formed part of a larger mid-century elite (mostly Liberal) nation-making project, one that used geography to advance republican ideals and goals while preserving older colonial hierarchies of race and culture; her book, in short, demonstrates how Colombia became the proverbial “country of regions.”

Chapter 1 surveys the commission’s intellectual and political origins. These included precedents in the research and writings of earlier “patriotic geographers,” the first and most important of whom was the Popayan-born Enlightenment intellectual and independence martyr, Francisco Jose de Caldas. As Appelbaum informs us, Caldas’s writings (ca. 1808-10) first articulated the
link between geography and national identity, between Colombia’s physical environment and its destiny as a republic including prospects for social and economic development. They also expressed an enduring vision. Privileging Colombia’s temperate Andean highlands—for Caldas, the heart of all civilization in the country—over its hot, humid lowlands (the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, eastern plains, and Amazonian jungle), this vision would influence the Chorographic Commission’s interpretation of the character and relative value of different parts of Colombian territory, their respective inhabitants included. Indeed, led by Italian-born engineer Agustín Codazzi, the commission would use the tools of modern science to reinforce Caldas’s distinctly hierarchical, Andean-centric view of a country that was highly diverse geographically, demographically, and culturally.

The same chapter also shows how the commission was shaped by trends in Colombian politics, particularly the rise of two rival political parties, Liberal and Conservative. While noting its early association with Liberalism—its founding under the presidency of José Hilario López (1849-53) and inclusion of Manuel Ancizar, a respected intellectual and Liberal spokesman—Appelbaum sees the commission as the result of a bipartisan consensus; an early supporter, after all, was General Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera, president in 1845-49 and, until circa 1860, affiliated with Conservatism. By the late 1850s, moreover, elites of both parties embraced the ideal of a decentralized political order (Federalism) as the best guarantor of peace in a country marked by great regional differences. The commission’s work would provide a handy scientific rationale for such an order.

Chapter 2 discusses the commission’s methodology, specifically its use of chorography—a time-honored way of documenting the main features of a given district or locality (for example, landscape and climate) by combining maps, text, and illustration, often in the same document. The commission’s approach also combined modern tools of measurement, such as the barometer and hydrometeor, with less scientific sources of information. As Appelbaum shows later, it incorporated the knowledge of local informants whom Codazzi trusted and relied on. Such a hybrid methodology had been developed by Codazzi during his earlier experience in Venezuela where he had learned to improvise in the face of a lack of state funding and resources. We thus learn of the practical constraints faced by scientists working in poor countries lacking the wealth and institutional stability of their US and European counterparts. This chapter also highlights the intellectual influence of Alexander Von Humboldt. Humboldt’s earlier studies in northern South America set a standard for Codazzi and his team, especially with their emphasis on the relationship between different elements of a given geographic environment.

Three subsequent chapters describe the commission’s encounters with the physical and human environments of five major Colombian regions: the northeastern and northwestern Andes, respectively (the former encompassing today’s departments of Boyacá, Santander, and North Santander, the latter the department of Antioquia); Pacific lowlands, including territory comprising the modern-day department of El Chocó; Orinoco River Basin or eastern Plains (present-day departments of Casanare, Arauca, Meta, Vichada, and Guainía); and Amazon Basin (Caquetá, Amazonas, Vaupés, and Guaviare). These chapters highlight two central themes of the book. One is the contrast between commissioners’ positive view of the temperate Andean regions and their ambivalent view of the rest of the country, especially the steamy coastal Orinoco and Amazonian lowlands. For men such as Codazzi and Ancizar, the Andean highlands were the hope of the nation. By virtue of their cooler, “healthier” climate, hard-working inhabitants and racial mixture—a process seen as leading to a more homogenous, ultimately “whiter” and, thus, civilized society—they would lead the way to future national prosperity. Appelbaum demonstrates this well in her examination of the writings and other materials resulting from Ancizar’s visit to northeastern Andean provinces, such as Socorro.

Her discussion of Codazzi’s and others’ experience in the Pacific lowlands (chapter 4), meanwhile, highlights the extent to which commissioners embraced grim Old World stereotypes of the tropics. In accordance with such stereotypes, Codazzi himself saw Chocó and adjacent areas as uninhabitable, “a grave for the white race” (p. 89). Civilization would come to the region only through the intervention or mediation of the region’s Afro-Colombian population; the latter’s supposed greater resistance to the rigors of tropical climates, including diseases like malaria, would prepare the way for the arrival of white settlers. In contrast to the Andean areas, moreover, the Pacific region’s value lay less in its people—Indians and former slaves whom Codazzi saw as poor nation-building material—than in the natural resources, for example, gold and quinine, that could be extracted from them. The commission’s attitude toward the eastern Plains (Ilanos) and Amazon Basin would be similar. Indeed, commissioners generally saw the lowland regions as backward areas requiring colonization.
by the sturdy, more advanced peoples of the Andean interior; only then would they realize their potential and contribute to the good of the nation.

A second central theme or insight springs from Appelbaum’s careful scrutiny of original commission documents, including manuscript maps and writings housed in the Biblioteca Nacional in Bogota. Appelbaum finds a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the realities documented by commissioners in the field and, on the other hand, the claims or representations of their later publications. While paintings and manuscript field reports document considerable racial and ethnic diversity in each of the regions commissioners visited, the final published materials (maps and writings) give an impression of regional homogeneity; they elide the existence of significant racial minorities and ethnic groups. An example of this can be seen in the case of the commission’s work on Antioquia. In her study of the Antioqueño materials, Appelbaum notes the gap between Codazzi’s writings on the region (particularly his final report) and the paintings of commission artist Henry Price. While Codazzi’s report characterizes the Antioqueños as members of an homogenous, mostly white “race,” Price’s delicate watercolor paintings show something else: a racially heterogeneous population. Indeed, his paintings of people in the Antioqueño capital of Medellín stand out for their prominent depictions of the city’s black or Afro-descended inhabitants, women especially.

As Appelbaum explains, commissioners resolved this apparent contradiction by adopting a classification scheme or typology that accounted for differences in appearance, habits, and occupation. Antioqueños, thus, comprised different types (tipos), akin to natural variations within a species or subgroup marked by common cultural characteristics. According to the commission, along with the progressive effects of mestizaje or racial mixture, such characteristics, for example, a Yankee-like industriousness, explained the region’s overall “whiteness.”

In one of the book’s most interesting chapters, chapter 6, Appelbaum examines the commission’s encounter with the vast eastern Plains and Amazonian jungle, two regions that, together, comprised some two-thirds of Colombian territory. The encounter seems to have been overwhelming and, in the case of team members who fell ill during the trip, traumatic. Neither region could be entered or explored without substantial assistance from indigenous guides and informants; in the case of the Amazonian jungle (then known as the territory of Caquetá or Gran Caquetá), Codazzi depended heavily on brothers Miguel and Pedro Mosquera, two Caquetá-born merchants and men of color who knew the region well and served as crucial interlocutors with local peoples.

Codazzi’s dependence on the knowledge of such men and other numerous collaborators, most of them anonymous, is evident in the original 1856 manuscript map of the former province of Casanare (comprising much of the eastern llanos), images of which appear in the chapter. Appelbaum analyzes the map, highlighting its notations with allusions to geographical information received from these collaborators—and, not least, the presence of diverse indigenous groups across the region. Yet, as she also explains, Codazzi—with those who carried on his legacy after his 1859 death—wore ideological blinders. He insisted on portraying the eastern Plains as “solitary,” as empty and undeveloped space (pp. 132, 164). This view was reinforced by later published maps that omitted the original notations, along with mention of the diversity of Casanare peoples. Commissioners’ representation of the llanos, moreover, ultimately encouraged Colombian citizens to see the entire region as, in Appelbaum’s words, “open for business” (p. 166)—ready for the wave of land developers, ranchers, and settlers who, in fact, began pouring into the region in the late nineteenth century.

In sum, Appelbaum’s study deepens our understanding of the work of the Chorographic Commission and the role of geographic science in the project of Colombian nationhood. In light of recent state and private interest in developing formerly neglected regions, such as the Chocó, it also has broader relevance. Indeed, this study sheds light on the origins of a liberal-capitalist order that, buttressed by science and technology, still favors the Andean core regions at the expense of the country’s lowland peripheries; the latter, after all, continue to be seen as backward places in need of civilization/modernization, suitable mainly for raw material extraction. The “country of regions” is, now more than ever, a country of uneven and inequitable national development.

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