In *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World* James E. Sanders makes a broadly conceived and provocative argument about the modern history of republicanism. The scope of his interpretation goes beyond nineteenth-century Latin America to touch on the wider history of the Atlantic world from the age of republican revolution to the era of industrial modernity. Sanders deals thoughtfully and persuasively with questions related to republicanism and liberalism (and the popular varieties of both), race and nation building, imperialism and anti-imperialism, and the development of civil society and its public sphere, all of which are examined within the overarching conceptual framework of modernity. The book challenges historians to modify their understanding of the macro-level narrative of modern Latin American history by adding a chapter, so to speak, to that master narrative.

Modernity, according to Sanders, was manifested in nineteenth-century Spanish America as a shifting set of ideological visions or mindsets, starting with Europhile cultural modernity in the 1810s-1840s, followed by American republican modernity—the focus of his study—in the 1850s-1870s, and ending with Western industrial modernity, which closes out the century from the 1880s-1900. In other words, he argues that these three stages of development in Spanish America’s relationship to the condition of modernity occurred in a roughly chronological sequence during the nineteenth century.

In Sanders’s view Spanish American republicans have not been given the credit they deserve for forging the world’s most advanced, “universalist” republics in the third quarter of the nineteenth century (the timing is important). This is the chapter that needs to be added to the master narrative. In this sense the book attempts to shift the historical meaning of Spanish America’s political history in those decades away from the periphery toward the center of the modernizing Atlantic world. Sanders disputes the views of a wide range of modernity scholars and asks us to focus on the question of what modernity meant to people all across the world who lived through its disruptive emergence.
As he moves through this basic progression of modernity’s stages Sanders uses a host of interesting examples to illustrate his point. We get wonderful life histories of the Chilean Francisco Bilbao and the Colombian David Peña, for example. We also learn about the Spanish American volunteers who joined Giuseppe Garibaldi’s army in Uruguay and the San Patricio battalion in Mexico. Bilbao, in particular, plays a starring role in the book. At the beginning of chapter five Sanders writes that Bilbao “more than any other writer, thinker, revolutionary, or politician . . . embodied the spirit of American republican modernity.” The reaction of Bilbao and other Spanish American radicals to the French intervention in Mexico is central to Sanders’s idea that Europe, at that moment, could no longer call itself the center of world republicanism.

The book also provides us with a strong sense of how Spanish American newspapers from around the region (but especially Mexico and Colombia) covered events such as the execution of the Emperor Maximilian or the Union Army’s victory over the Confederates in the U. S. Civil War. Sanders’s reading of the rich Spanish American newspapers of the era is one of the joys of the book.

To his credit Sanders admits that the generalizability of his argument to all of the Latin American republics is questionable given his focus on the histories of Colombia and Mexico. In Colombia, American republican modernity (or ARM) was embraced wholeheartedly by the Afro-Colombian democratic societies that rallied behind the Constitutions of 1853 and 1863. In Mexico, ARM was closely linked with support for La Reforma and the epic struggle of Mexican republicans against both domestic conservatives and foreign imperialists. But what if we look at Chilean history instead? Bilbao and his band of revolutionary students and young professionals were kicked out of the country for their subversive writings and activities. The majority of Chile’s liberal elites of the 1850s moved fairly quickly past the discourse of ARM straight into that of Western industrial modernity, though I am sure we would find expressions of ARM in the artisan-based popular movement that stayed active in Chilean cities in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. So the question is, was the discourse of ARM as dominant throughout the region as it was in those two countries?

The only problem I had with the book is that gender analysis is almost entirely overlooked. In my mind it is difficult to justify the use of the term “universal” republics
when Spanish American women of this era were completely excluded from the collective activities of politics. In Sanders’s defense this was the case on both sides of the Atlantic and there is really not much you can say about women’s direct participation in politics in nineteenth-century Spanish America. Yet numerous studies have demonstrated that another aspect of gender, masculinity, was a very important part of the collective identity of the men who joined the movements, campaigns, and organizations about which Sanders wrote. When one pauses to consider the gendered dimension of radical republican ideology in the nineteenth century it can be striking to see just how deeply traditional notions of masculinity run through ARM.

In my view this book ultimately makes a compelling argument about Spanish America’s position in the history of the modern Atlantic world. I found myself thinking about its implications for the way we teach modern Latin American history as well as world history. The book calls on us to rethink in particular the role of ordinary men of all racial groups in the rise and triumph of liberalism in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Sanders has put his finger on the fact that there was something exceptional about the transatlantic and North-South geopolitical conditions at that particular historical moment that allowed such a radical, egalitarian vision of modernity to flourish in (at least) parts of Spanish America. But in order to see his point we have to look beyond the traditional center-periphery model of international relations.

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