Saunders, James E. (2014) *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth Century Latin America*. Duke University Press (Durham, NC and London), ix + 352 pp. £60.00 hbk. £16.99 pbk.

In Florencia Mallon's landmark study of the emergence of national consciousness amongst the Mexican and Peruvian peasantry, she noted that 'to understand ideas of nation and nationalism we must ... deconstruct the twin myths of bourgeois and western exceptionalism' (Mallon, 1995, p. 5). In *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, James E. Saunders has systematically undertaken the decentering that Mallon calls for, challenging the myth that liberalism, democracy and modernity are concepts that emerge from Europe and flowed towards the Latin American periphery where they were haphazardly adapted and adopted. Saunders argues that Latin Americans did not see themselves as slavish followers of Europe: on the contrary, they saw Europe as politically backwards, mired in the monarchical past. In contrast, Americans saw themselves as the vanguard of modernity and democracy.

Opening with the execution of Maximilian the First in Mexico as a 'world-historical event that ignited a firestorm of debate over the meaning and locus of modernity' (p. 2), Saunders looks at the motivations of political actors throughout Latin America, such as those responsible for the Emperor's execution, to uncover how they understood political modernity and the path towards it. Upon an impressive archival basis, he demonstrates that the Americas were the site of crucial developments in democracy and republicanism between the late 1840s and the early 1880s. Moreover, what he calls 'American republican modernity' was not defined in a subordinate relation to European culture. They saw equality as the principal marker of modernity, and saw Latin America as the crucible of this modernity. Latin American political discourses of the time did not just challenge the idea that modernity flows from metropole to periphery – they also 'dismissed the claim that Europe was the metropole' entirely (p. 8).

The book is organised into short narrative chapters which immerse us in the worldview of the actors interspersed with longer chapters that systematically compare and analyse the competing discourses of modernity circulating amongst these actors. The narrative chapters illustrate the ideas behind those actors and events that appear in the names of plazas, streets and statues across Latin America. The ideas and motivations of the soldiers that fought behind Garibaldi in Uruguay, those of the battalion of San Patricio in the Mexican-American war, as well as the experiences of and influences on Chilean Francisco Bilbao and

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Afro-Colombian David Peña, show how ideas about universality, liberty, equality and fraternity were developed in response to various historical challenges and opportunities experienced by these actors.

The analytical chapters broaden out and give a sense of how these personalised developments fit in within the wider social and political panorama, showing how these ideas interacted with other, competing discourses about modernity and Latin America's political possibilities. Overall, we get a sense of modernity operating not as a 'thing' to be achieved but as a field within which different actors struggled to assert and develop their own ideas and interpretations. In the middle of the nineteenth century we see this field dominated by ideas and interpretations that see Latin America as the 'vanguard of the future' (p. 179), visions of modernity based on expanded citizenship and political inclusion. These were, however, not to last: by the 1880s other visions, ones which understood modernity in terms of economic and technological progress, dominated, and Latin America was once again seen as orbiting in the periphery of a modernity centered on the US and Europe.

Saunders's work will prove useful not only to those interested in deepening their understanding of the development of political ideas in the aftermath of Independence. By keeping a constant focus, particularly in the analytical chapters, on competing discourses, we are also able to read a history of the visions of modernity that eventually eclipsed the American republican ones. We are told that the central contradiction between republican visions and competing liberal ones was 'the need for capital to create economic development along the lines of the North Atlantic versus republicanism's political utopia of equality' (p. 132). His study, therefore, functions also as an intellectual history of liberalism, as well as of other twentieth century political claims that echo the central tenets of these modern visions. There is in general an exciting development of literature that deals with the development of political ideas in the Americas by focusing on the transnational lives of different actors, and this book makes a valuable contribution to this field.

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