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Irene Silverblatt, *Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. xv + 299, £65.00, £ 16.50 pb.

The problem of how to approach history is never straightforward. Scholars may present to their readership an interpretation of how the society under scrutiny saw itself and functioned within its own historical and ideological context, or they may attempt to trace how a past society has developed into its present form. Projecting an historical interpretation of a time period forwards to a modern readership often produces very different results from casting back into that same past from the present day. In *Modern Inquisitions*, Silverblatt chooses the latter approach, combining modern sociopolitical theory with various seventeenth-century sources from colonial Peru, such as inquisitorial trials, extirpation documents, sermons and chronicles, to piece together a timely and thought-provoking analysis of the colonial origins of modern society or, more specifically, the origins of our institutionalised prejudices of race, religion and gender, and the gradual creation of a modern, fetishised, bureaucratic state. As she puts it, 'we focus on the connections between the seventeenth century and "modern" life, not the distinctions between them' (p. 228).

Silverblatt closely analyses the establishment and function of the colonial Peruvian Inquisition as a modern bureaucracy and state forger. Drawing on Foucault, Bourdieu, and others, she argues that, far from being merely a backward looking, medieval institution that thrived on terror, the Inquisition was 'a bureaucracy that typified the evolving institutions of the emerging modern world: it was a state structure in the making' (p. 11). Thus the modern state created bureaucratic institutions like the Inquisition, while these emerging bureaucracies fashioned the state into what we see today. Perhaps more importantly, by focusing on the trials of Portuguese merchants for an alleged conspiracy of Jewish apostasy and treason, the trials of colonial women for witchcraft, and the extirpation of idolatry, Silverblatt outlines the beginnings of what she terms 'racial thinking'. Inquisitorial insistence that the defendants classified themselves according to caste and lineage (with all their associated prejudices) contributed to an ideological stratification of an ethnically diverse society along simplistic racial lines. This racial thinking justified and exacerbated already existing social inequalities and, by creating and mixing varying degrees of associations of guilt and delinquency with these relatively new racial categories, it formed the basis of what developed into modern-day racial prejudice. Nevertheless, these categories were contested as the various groups often defined themselves differently from the ideological norm and resisted attempts to be classified according to the wishes of the colonial authorities.

Silverblatt's approach is not without a necessary cost. By searching for the origins of modern western society, the investigation seems as weighted towards understanding ourselves as it does towards the society under scrutiny. Moreover, by giving importance to prominent contemporary concerns, it tends to focus on issues that would very likely have been of secondary importance to the historical subjects. This, in turn, can lead to anachronistic interpretations of events. An example could be the citation of one unfortunate defendant who compared the inquisitors passing judgement on him to God (p. 87). Silverblatt does mention the possibility that he was speaking with irony. However, in the preceding and following chapter she appears to use the citation as evidence in a theoretical argument that demonstrates the gradual deification of the inquisitorial bureaucracy. The term 'godlike', used on

various occasions to refer to the inquisitors, gives the impression that this was a contemporary perception, even when the testimonies that Silverblatt analyses belie this. Similarly, the focus on gender in the idolatry trials is apt to mislead readers into thinking that the extirpation was inspired more by the misogynistic assumptions of the extirpators than by the need to drive out the devil who was believed present in all indigenous religious practices regardless of gender. It is true that in the urban context the great majority of those prosecuted by the Inquisition for ‘witchcraft’ were women, but the evidence is not really there to support a similar gender focus in the idolatry trials.

Silverblatt does present material from the chronicler Guaman Poma de Ayala that suggests the existence of an ideological trend to denigrate women in the hispanicised mindset. Yet very few sections of colonial society escaped Guaman Poma’s vitriol. The point is that, as Silverblatt observes, ‘the aim of the Inquisition was to “reconcile” heretics to the one true faith’ (p. 252, note 5). In the Hispanic colonial world, the main religious issue was the battle for souls, and this can be lost when searching for evidence to address more modern preoccupations. Still, the modern focus of the investigation does unearth fascinating details that add to the overall picture of an emerging colonial Andean society, for example the capitalisation of semi-hispanicised indigenous mountain gods who demanded monetary offerings rather than merely agricultural and subsistence goods (p. 209).

One of the most challenging aspects to the book emerges when Silverblatt gets to grips with the implications of the bureaucratisation of torture. The use of torture to extract ‘the truth’ was by no means exclusive to Spanish colonial institutions. ‘The history of the West’, she writes, ‘teaches us that torture, bestowed with legitimacy by state institutions, was intrinsic to our civilization’ (p. 75). This is a painful truth to swallow, but one made even more pertinent by the history of the twentieth century, the recent and tragic history of South and Central America, and atrocities being committed, even since the date of publication, in the name of democracy and the preservation of western civilisation.

The modernity of the Hispanic Inquisitions was further demonstrated by the systematisation, documentation and regulation of the procedures of torture, precisely, although not always effectively, to prevent arbitrary abuses. Yet this too carries significant resonances for contemporary society: ‘Abuse is splintered into columns of an account ledger, torture is fragmented into events and responses, horror is objectified into smaller and smaller components’ (p. 84). By showing the bureaucratic nature and modernity of the Inquisition (and inquisitorial torture), Silverblatt exposes the common fantasy of contemporary society that tends to demonise those who commit atrocities in order to distance itself from having to realise or admit that, given the appropriate conditions, ordinary people are quite capable of doing the same.

Perhaps the greatest significance of *Modern Inquisitions*, then, is that it highlights the difficulty of dealing with an institution that nowadays would be considered a moral and physical horror. Such understanding is so important and so uncomfortable because we know that these things are not confined to the distant past. Silverblatt herself says that *Modern Inquisitions* is ‘a cautionary tale’; and events in the time since the book’s publication have only served to show how timely and pertinent its central claims really are.