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Linda Arnold's book examines the bureaucracy of the viceregal government of New Spain and changes to this bureaucracy after independence. The first chapter argues that in order to understand the modern states that emerged in Latin America, one must carefully examine the professionalization of the imperial bureaucracy in New Spain under the Bourbon dynasty, and the career of that bureaucracy during the Napoleonic Wars and the struggle for independence. Arnold accepts Eric Van Young's concept of the "Age of Revolution" as an apt characterization of the period from 1750 to 1850. Accordingly, she evaluates changes that occurred in the imperial bureaucracy during the transition from colony to independence by examining the bureaucracy throughout this 100-year span of upheaval.

Arnold draws upon previous studies dealing with the biographies of individual viceroys, the Bourbon Reform, and policy changes in the fiscal sector. The most original part of her contribution lies in her analysis of the neglected topic of internal decision-making in the bureaucracy. She also discusses the influence of both imperial policy and revolution on the lives and careers of the men who acted as intermediaries between state and society. The story unfolds in eight chapters. Following the introductory chapter, she deals, in turn, with the overall changes in the size and composition of the bureaucracy between 1742 and 1835, with the reorganization of the viceregal secretariats in Mexico City, and with changes in both the judiciary and the fiscal apparatus. Arnold then examines the job security, income, and families of bureaucrats as well as their career opportunities, personnel policies, and politics, before providing a three-page conclusion. In this conclusion she states that the modern Mexican nation, linked to its colonial past, "shows no signs of abandoning that colonial legacy." This colonial legacy, Arnold argues, is a product of the Enlightenment.

The strength of Bureaucracy and Bureaucrats lies in its wealth of detail. The book falters, however, in those sections dealing with broader historical implications and in the theoretical generalizations drawn from the study. This general level of analysis is inadequate, perhaps even trivial. Arnold grounds her study of government officials in the broader context of changing public policy and the political turmoil accompanying the transition to independence. She does not, however, refer to the vast literature dealing with the "age of revolution" from the social scientific perspective currently being used by most Mexican historians.

Historians rooted in the social sciences, including people such as John Tutino and Eric Van Young, generally explain both political conflict and continuity of cultural norms in terms of the complex dynamic of competing as well as coinciding interests among distinct socio-economic classes. In contrast, Arnold presents both the war of independence and the ensuing period of civil war as primarily the outcome of an administrative program - the consolidacion de vales reales of 1804, a program which, she argues, had a disastrous effect on the subjects of the colony. This program is also portrayed as an unsuccessful attempt to bridge the gap between the ideological rhetoric and reality "notwithstanding their "remarkable achievements."

Nowhere does the author discuss the excessive centralization that, as so many writers have mentioned, bedeviled colonial Mexico, as it does modern Mexico. Nor does she mention the increasing influence of Mexico's northern neighbour. Will the Mexican bureaucracy eventually fall apart again? Arnold's central argument on the theme of ideological continuity simply does not derive from her detailed examination of the intricacies of the late colonial bureaucratic system and its radical transformation in the republican context. In short, the author runs into some logistical problems in applying the findings of her case study to all of Mexican history from the end of the Hapsburg dynasty until today.

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