Book Review – Irene Silverblatt, *Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World*

CARLOS PÉREZ, California State University, Fresno

Silverblatt, Irene. Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 299 pp., \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper ISBN 0-8223-3406-2 cloth, ISBN 0-8223-3417-8 paper, October 2004

In this fascinating work, Irene Silverblatt, a cultural anthropologist, explores the origins of the modern world by examining the role of the Spanish Inquisition in colonial Peru. Continuing her innovative approach to Peruvian colonial history, which began with *Moon, Sun, and Witches* (an ethno-historical study of gender during the pre-conquest and post-conquest periods), she begins by meditating on Hannah Arendt's conclusion concerning the origins of modern totalitarianism. Silverblatt rejects Arendt's assertion that modern totalitarianism has its roots in nineteenth century European imperialism, which created a bureaucratic state based on "race thinking" to control the conquered peoples. Instead, she finds this totalitarian model emerging with the first wave of European expansion led by Spain and Portugal. Applying Arendt's insight to this earlier period, Silverblatt, focusing on the Spanish Inquisition—an institution that the anglophone world considers premodern—argues that the Inquisition contained the seeds of the modern state, based on bureaucracy, race, and the rationalization of violence.

Based on extensive archival research, *Modern Inquisitions* provides a unique interpretation of the Inquisition records as Silverblatt disentangles not only the underlying reality of the Inquisition but also the relationship between inquisitors, "heretics," and the invention of a state founded on the mysteries of race. Silverblatt draws the reader into that colonial world by presenting its terrors through the inquisitorial experience of three "heretics" caught in an "invented" conspiratorial web that enveloped Jews, Portuguese, merchants, witches, Indians, and blacks.

Silverblatt subsequently shifts her focus to the Inquisition itself by outlining the bureaucratic contours that make it so reminiscent of modern state structures. She presents a coherent explanation of how the fetishized "state" originates through the procedures followed by the bureaucrats of the Inquisition. The mysteries of race buttress these mysteries of state as they contribute to the organizing of power in colonial society. The idea of blood purity, which first appeared in Spain to differentiate between Old Christians and New Christians, when introduced into the Americas provides the rationale for differentiating between the various human groups existing in the New World and imbues them with being.

Finally, the author examines three problems besetting the colonial authorities: the “Jewish problem,” the “woman/witchcraft problem,” and the “Indian problem.” Silverblatt explicates how race thinking permeates the rationalizations made by the inquisitors as they ponder these questions. The author concludes by following the threads of that past that she has so vividly evoked to present its vestige in the modern state and in the myth of U.S. exceptionalism.

By providing a suggestive interpretation of the not so distant past, this book will prove valuable to scholars and graduate students alike, as well as to highly motivated undergraduates. Its analysis of nation-state formation and the origins of the modern world allow us to have a better appreciation of how past imperialism and colonialism contributed to the creation of the modern “civilized” West.