

The rarified air of the modern: airplanes and technological modernity in the Andes

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Deskripsi Lengkap: <https://lib.ui.ac.id/detail?id=20470030&lokasi=lokal>

Abstrak

This book examines technology, modern identity, and history-making in Peru by telling the story of the surprising success of Peruvian pilots and how their achievements generated great optimism that this new technology could lift the country out of its self-perceived backwardness. Though poor infrastructure, economic woes, a dearth of technical expertise, and a ghastly number of pilot deaths slowed the project after the first flights over Lima in 1911, the image of intrepid Peruvian pilots inspired a new sense of national possibility. Airplanes seemed to embody not just technological progress but enlightened rationality, capitalist enterprise, and nation-state aggrandizement. By 1928, three commercial lines were transporting passengers, mail, and merchandise from Lima to other parts of the country and South America. The expansion of Peruvian aviation illuminates how a Eurocentric modernizing vision has served as a powerful organizing force in regions with ambivalent relationships to the West. This technology simultaneously naturalized modernity and generated dissatisfaction with inferior or inauthentic results. More broadly, the fitful development of Peruvian aviation venture underscores the important role that technology plays in larger, complex historical processes. Even as politicians, businessmen, military officials, journalists, and ruling oligarchs felt a special kinship with Peruvian aviation project, diverse socioeconomic groups engaged aviation to challenge power asymmetries and historical silences rooted in Peruvian postcolonial past. Most observers at the time considered airplanes a universal technology that performed the same function in Europe, the United States, and Peru. In reality, how Peruvians mobilized and understood airplanes reflected culturally specific values and historical concerns.