

Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements. Marc Becker. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. 303 pp.

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Ecuador has been a hot bed of indigenous activism for decades, and Marc Becker's new book *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements* provides a rich historical context to current events. These days everything about indigenous rights seems to converge to Ecuador. The 2009 documentary *Crude* by Joe Balingier attracted a lot of attention to the misdeeds of Chevron and other oil companies that caused massive spills in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Last September civic protests against a new water bill proposed by the government left one Shuar teacher dead in a confrontation with the police. President Raphael Correa invested a good deal of energy to resolve the internal crisis, certainly having in mind that indigenous peoples were involved in the overthrows of the last two presidents. Recently a group of Achuar Indians were featured in a BBC story about the similarities between indigenous struggles in Ecuador and James Cameron's *Avatar*. All this political mobilization, Becker argues, should be seen not as new occurrences but, rather, as struggles rooted in decades of community organizing.

Becker offers a historical perspective to the multivocality that characterizes indigenous activism in Ecuador. The book explains, for example, why we should not be surprised that the heroes in Balingier's movie are not only indigenous communities but also a local and self-made rural mestizo lawyer as well, and international support groups, including Sting's Rainforest Foundation. The protests last September were organized by the National Teacher's Union (UNE) and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (CONAIE), an example of exactly the long-term collaboration between the Left and indigenous leaders that Becker focuses on. He argues that the collaboration of indigenous peoples with other political groups is not the result of some form of inauthenticity and corruption, as some critics have claimed. On the contrary, the relationship between Indian leaders and socialist militants is one of equality and collaboration, with one group shaping the other in the political arena.

Students will benefit from Becker's demystification of the often imagined sense of purity and cohesion in indigenous uprisings. Becker portrays indigenous peoples as "historical actors" and as such they "have always identified with a wide array of ideological perspectives" (p. 12). Therefore, he concludes, "it is a mistake to speak of a singular united Indigenous movement" (p. 12). The internal diversity of indigenous movements is often overlooked. Becker's narrative emphasizes the different constituencies of different indigenous organizations and how they change through

time and space. The highland organizations, which are the main focus of the book, are not the same as their lowland counterparts, for instance. The original indigenous associations changed as the social and political contexts have been transformed over the last 60 years.

His main question points to the old debate among academics and activists about class and ethnicity: are indigenous movements manifestations of ethnic conflicts or are they at heart class struggles? His answer is both. As Becker himself puts it, "these categories blur to the point where . . . they appeared as two aspects of a lived identity" (p. 15). Becker believes that we need to look at both ethnicity and class to see a more complete picture of the Indian experience during and after the colonial period including the process of political organizing. The book is centered in the interdependency of Indigenous peoples and leftists in the creation of political movements that attempt to transform the social orders that produce different classes and different ethnic groups.

One of the rich aspects of the book is the attention paid to the ability of indigenous leaders to navigate the quagmire field of categories, as they attempt to escape being framed by one term to the detriment of others. Being called an Indian can obscure the exploitation they experience as rural workers. For example, in describing Jesus Gualavisí, an indigenous leader and influential figure in the Ecuadorian Socialist Party (PSE), Becker notes that in the founding congress of PSE, Gualavisí proposed "a salute to 'all peasants [*campesinos*] in the Republic'" and suggested that "the party create an office to defend the interests of peasants and workers" (p. 17). Gualavisí, who according to Becker "was deeply involved in leftist politics and class struggles, [but] retained his ethnic identity and mannerisms," possessed a "double consciousness" (p. 25) and like other activists was able to invoke a political solidarity as both Indians and peasants.

Becker himself attempts to evade fixed or singular categorization of the people he historicizes. Although the title of his first chapter is "What Is an Indian?" there is no clear definition of what an Indian was/is for Becker. Perhaps it is the anthropologist in me that expected a definition of Indianness, something beyond a political identity. The closest I found to that appeared in the discussion of attachment to land. Citing activists, academics, and novelists, Becker notes the deep connection of Indians to land, to the point that they "were willing to work for lower wages in order to have access to land" (p. 65). Becker cites cultural and economic reasons to explain "a great love for the land that flowed in their blood," as the novelist Aníbal Buitron describes it (p. 65). But Becker touches on culture only to reinforce that political organizing, and perhaps a political culture, is at the core of what being an Indian in Ecuador means, at least at this historical moment. It is after all the very struggle for land that caused the strikes in the 1930s

that led to the First Congress of Peasant Organizations, which not by coincidence happened in the same region where Gualavisí had organized five years earlier the Peasant Workers Syndicate. That was the beginning of the process that would result in the creation of the Federación Ecuatorina de Indios (FEI) in 1944, and that would eventually culminate in the Patchakutik movement in the 1990s. Land strikes are the origin of the indigenous organizations of today and are formative to who Indians are in the Ecuador.

As if forced by the facts he narrates, Becker moves from using both the terms “Indians” and “rural workers” (or “peasants”) in fluid if not ambiguous ways at the beginning of book to having them side by side, in a complimentary form at the end. As several failed land reforms resulted in a political disenchantment in the 1980s, the movements were reorganized on the basis of ethnicity. In a contradictory way, fluidity of identities seems to be less of an option as political mobilization centers around the idea of indigenous nationalities and a plurinational state, which are nowadays key topics in the political agenda of the indigenous organizations in Ecuador. So, is class dead now?

His answer again is no. What happened is that “ethnicity became a rallying cry for what were essentially class demands, and contrasting class with ethnic identity results in a false dichotomy” (p. 192). Although Becker recognizes discontinuities—there is, for instance, a diminishing presence of indigenous women in the ranks of protesters and leaders—he is emphatic in asserting important continuities between old and new indigenous politics. The recent alliances with international organizations, like Sting’s, are an evolution of past collaborations with socialist parties and the church. The indigenous leaders of today still claim that social problems will only be solved through fundamental economic changes and land reform like FEI did in the past. The road blocks of last September were aimed to protect the rights of not only local communities but all Ecuadorians to their national water sources against transnational privatization. Class, ethnicity, and, now, nationalism are a trinity in indigenous activism, and why not?

Reference cited

Ballenger, Joe
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Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject. Sherry Ortner. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. 200 pp.

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Sherry Ortner has provided us with a guide to the state of social theory and its trajectory for several decades now. She

continues to do so in her collection of seven essays, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Five of these chapters were previously published, some as long ago as 1991, reminding us of changes in anthropology in the last two decades. We see the development in Ortner’s own reasoning in four chapters in which she weaves together analyses of theory with a description of her own grappling with it over time. She trains her analytical eye on class in the United States in the remaining three chapters, which are more ethnographic. Regardless of specific focus, each argument is presented in a crystal clear voice. And it is this voice that makes *Anthropology and Social Theory* such a pleasure to read.

Ortner begins with a new introduction on “Updating Practice Theory,” which chronicles changes in anthropological theory through her own work, identifying and analyzing the three particular “shifts” she sees as most influential since the 1960s: the “power shift,” the “historic turn,” and the “reinterpretations of cultures” project. It is the last that primarily concerns her in this volume as she develops a theory of the subject that transcends the limitations of traditional practice theory, one that provides a richer conceptualization of subjectivity as well as a more nuanced understanding of the relationship of power to agency.

This is especially clear in “Subjectivity and Culture Critique,” one of the most significant pieces in the collection. Acknowledging the importance of work focused on individual actors and the psychological constitution of their subjectivities, Ortner turns attention to a classically Geertzian concern: how certain cultural formations produce particular modes of consciousness and forms of subjectivity, such as anxious Balinese gamblers. To overcome the shortcomings of the “interpretation of culture” approach, especially its neglect of power and its essentialism, Ortner marries Geertz’s “culture” to Gramsci’s “hegemony” (via British cultural studies), a move signaled by the “culture” and “power” of the book’s subtitle. Her third concept, the “acting subject” is the agent who, while subjected through its subjectivity, can, at times, overcome its subjection.

This is because, unlike Bourdieu’s subjects, Ortner’s are at least “partially ‘knowing’ ” with “some degree of reflexivity about themselves and their desires, and . . . some ‘penetration’ into the ways . . . they are formed by their circumstances” (p. 111). And it is these kinds of subjects who play Ortner’s “serious games.” Ortner goes beyond the idea that subjects are capable of resisting power by looking at what she calls “full-blown serious games” or “projects,” in which people’s intentions, purposes, and desires direct them toward culturally meaningful lives, albeit within relations of power, whether Sherpa, Tswana, or Filipinas as described in her final chapter on agency and intentionality or the Gen Xers she writes about in “Generation X: Anthropology in a Media Saturated World.”