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Ironies of Power

Class, Culture, and Diplomacy in the Andes

by
James D. Bowen

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

Daniella Gandolfo *The City at Its Limits: Taboo, Transgression, and Urban Renewal in Lima.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Richard J. Walter *Peru and the United States, 1960–1975: How Their Ambassadors Managed Foreign Relations in a Turbulent Era.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.

The Andean region has become synonymous with conflict and disorder (Burt and Mauceri, 2004; Drake and Hershberg, 2006; Mainwaring, Bejarano, and Pizarro, 2006). Every country in the region has experienced at least one major economic meltdown during the past two decades, and all except Colombia have lived through two or more extraconstitutional transfers of political power (sometimes reversed, sometimes not). Both Colombia and Peru have survived extended periods of civil war, and class and ethnic conflicts simmer close to the surface across the region. While the sources of instability and conflict are numerous, the books reviewed here all point to the impact of vast power discrepancies on social order. Conflict and order in the region are shaped by the different ways in which the marginalized and weak confront the dominant and powerful and, by extension, how the powerful respond to these challenges. These books collectively provide theoretical grounding and methodological tools for understanding the exercise of power in ways that can account for situations (rare but real) in which the weak seem to get the better of the strong.

Marc Becker, Daniella Gandolfo, and Richard Walter approach these issues from very different perspectives. Becker works to debunk the myth that indigenous peoples in Ecuador were manipulated by leftist political activists throughout the twentieth century. He shows that instead indigenous activist and leftist organizers established a fruitful collaborative relationship that provided the organizational basis for the large-scale indigenous mobilizations that have shaped Ecuadorian politics since the 1980s. Gandolfo, an anthropologist, draws our attention to the implications of a very specific transgressive act (a Lima street sweeper's baring her breasts in public to protest the mayor's decision to privatize urban sanitation services). Her analysis shows how taboos (and their violation) shape the meanings of and possibilities for political activism in societies shot through with inequality of various kinds (class, gender, race, etc.). Walter, by contrast, moves from the distinctly local to the global in his nuanced diplomatic history of U.S.-Peru relations at the height of the cold war.

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What these books have in common is attention to the complex and complicated ways in which power is exercised and resisted at various levels of society. Ranging from formal international diplomacy (Walter) to the individual (but politically loaded) transgression of social taboos (Gandolfo), interactions between actors with vastly different economic, political, and cultural resources can produce unexpected outcomes. None of these books assert that marginalized groups regularly get the better of their more powerful counterparts, but all of them focus on areas and tactics that allow subordinate actors to take advantage of the many ambiguities and ironies of political power to protect themselves and push back against political, economic, and social domination. While each book deals with a different piece of the puzzle of political power, taken together they present a compelling account of the intricacies of domination and resistance in twentieth-century Andean America and offer important lessons for contemporary politics in the region.

At the most local level, Gandolfo's *The City at Its Limits: Taboo, Transgression, and Urban Renewal in Lima* gives us an anthropological and personal tour of the power of taboo and political culture. Using the case of a woman publicly baring her breasts as a form of protest against the privatization of urban sanitation services in Lima in 1996, Gandolfo explores the power of historical memory and cultural taboos (and their transgression). During the neoliberal onslaught of the mid-1990s popular sectors had few political and economic resources with which to resist conservative urban renewal projects such as those pursued by the Lima mayor Alberto Andrade. Transgressing the economic and political dictates of the neoliberal revolution thus increasingly meant violating the cultural taboos on which such projects were built.

Gandolfo provides a rich analysis of attempts by the mayor and the Lima elite to remember history in ways that were conducive to attempts to cleanse the urban center of "undesirables" and to restore Lima to "the way it used to be." These attempts at reform were contested by many who lived and worked in the center, such as the sanitation workers whose jobs were privatized on Andrade's watch. Building on the writings of Bataille and Gramsci, she shows how political battles over urban planning and development invoked cultural norms of decency, cleanliness, beauty, and filth.

Taboos—"the complex regimen of prohibitions that human beings and societies put in place themselves and the things and behaviors that they deem to be less than human, the violence and the excess they associate with the dark, abysmal world of their own renounced animality"(xii)—create and reinforce social hierarchies in much the same way as norms about gender, class, and race relations. The task of the anthropologist (and also of the would-be political activist in Gandolfo's account) is to deconstruct such taboos in order to expose the underlying power relationships that seek legitimization through them. As Gandolfo notes, wealth and power make the observance of taboos easier. Questioning the role of taboos in generating and sustaining social hierarchies thus subverts, if ever so slightly, their power to legitimate and protect the perquisites of power. To this end, Gandolfo returns to the street sweeper's exposed breasts. Her nudity not only violates cultural taboos (after all, what "decent" woman would expose herself in such an undignified way?) but simultaneously turns the power of taboo on its head by using transgression to voice political critique.

Although she rarely cites it, Gandolfo's study fits squarely within the scholarship on new social movements and identity politics that has shaped much research on power and resistance over the past three decades (e.g., Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998). As a consequence, it demonstrates the hallmark strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. While we get a compelling account of the power of cultural symbols and the myriad ways they can be manipulated by both the strong and the marginalized, the analysis lacks significant grounding in the institutional and economic realities within which such symbolic politics plays out.

Becker's *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movement* explores a different face of power: class power based on the ability of exploited

peoples to form alliances and common agendas to resist dominant-class oppression. His analysis is part of a healthy scholarly tradition dating back at least to Mariátegui (1971 [1928]) that searches out the confluence of class and racial oppression in societies (like those of the Andes) in which class and racial cleavages often overlap. Tracing the emergence of Ecuador's indigenous movement back to the organizing efforts of the Partido Comunista Ecuatoriano (Ecuadorian Community Party—PCE) and other class-based, leftist political movements, Becker reveals the long-term dynamics of a movement that gained notoriety for its high-profile protests of the 1990s and early 2000s and argues that movements based on indigenous cultural identity need not be antithetical to class-based (and often more urban) popular movements. Here his argument stands in stark contrast to that of the new-social-movements school, which sees class and ethnicity as inherently different sources of social movement politics.

This is a crucial contribution. Becker demonstrates the collaborative relationship between indigenous activists and leftist movements, convincingly undercutting traditional arguments about the uneven and often exploitative or paternalistic relationship between indigenous peoples and the political left (Guerrero, 1997). Indigenous peoples were not manipulated or exploited by the nonindigenous left, he argues; rather, each group learned from the other. "Leftist influences helped trigger a shift in Indigenous strategies from reacting to local and immediate forms of exploitation to addressing larger structural issues" (12). In this sense, his analysis demonstrates the classic Marxian transition from a "class in itself" to a "class for itself" (Lukács, 1971 [1923]). What the organized left could provide was a language and an institutional structure to link indigenous peoples' preexisting grievances about (mostly localized) inequality and abuses, particularly within the hacienda system, to larger struggles against exploitation. Thus, struggles against abuse and mistreatment on particular haciendas were transformed into broader demands for agrarian reform.

Becker's work is politically engaged in that, by undermining the narrative of leftist paternalism, he simultaneously undermines elite discourses that assume that subaltern actors are incapable of self-organization and are therefore easily manipulated by outsiders with nefarious purposes (Prieto, 2004). This is not just a historical narrative but one that has clear links to contemporary elite discourses regarding indigenous peoples (Bowen, 2011). This sort of historical investigation also highlights possibilities for broader alliances in the twenty-first century, given the current frayed relations between indigenous movements and other leftist currents in Ecuador (as well as other countries of the region).

In *Peru and the United States, 1960–1975*, Walter uses a treasure trove of diplomatic cables and related sources to delve into the intricacies of U.S.-Peru relations at the height of the cold war. Rather than falling back on facile characterizations of the relationship as one of imperialism or dependency, Walter teases out the nuances of an undeniably unequal relationship. Inequality (or even dependency), however, is not the same as domination, and Peru was, on important occasions, able to outdo the United States in the game of state-to-state relations. Most notable in this regard was the ability of the military regime of Juan Velasco (1968–1975) to negotiate a resolution to a long-standing dispute over the expropriation of oil fields owned by the International Petroleum Company (IPC). Although the dispute dragged on for several years and the United States repeatedly threatened to implement the Hickenlooper amendment (which would have cut off foreign assistance to any government that illegally expropriated the property of U.S. companies), the final resolution of the dispute was largely favorable to Peru. Likewise, the military regime's agrarian reform policy impacted significant U.S. economic interests (193). The Peruvians' hard-headed diplomacy prompted Nixon's secretary of state (William Rogers) to ask, "How can such a little country produce such major headaches for the US?" (195).

The flip side of U.S. consternation at Velasco's insistence on driving a hard bargain was a surge in Peruvian nationalism. U.S. governments have long struggled with how

to interpret and respond to nationalism in developing-world countries (often mistaking it for communism, Islamism, or some other distasteful “-ism” of the day). This was evident in the aftermath of the IPC dispute, which created lasting fears of communist infiltration among U.S. officials but sparked intense nationalism, even among Velasco’s detractors, in Peru. The nature of Peruvian nationalism at this point was likely summarized most accurately by a quotation in the *New York Times* of a celebrating Peruvian: “We beat you Gringos fair and square, and now we can be friends” (210).

This type of analysis fits neatly with other recent studies of U.S.-Latin America relations that show the somewhat surprising ability of smaller and poorer Andean countries to negotiate with the United States from a nonsubordinate position (for a similar analysis of U.S.-Ecuador relations, see Pineo, 2007). In fact, the marginality of Peru from the U.S. cold-war perspective created myriad opportunities for Peruvian diplomats to exploit U.S. leaders’ fears, prejudices, and lack of information to gain important leverage with their North American counterparts. This is most clearly visible in the negotiations over the expropriation of IPC properties in Peru.

Although Walter’s analysis is centered on state-to-state relations, he does not lose sight of the ways in which domestic political coalitions and power asymmetries impact international politics. In this sense he provides a broad framework within which both Gandolfo’s and Becker’s works might be located. Both the anticommunist crusade of the early to mid-twentieth century and the neoliberal revolution of the late twentieth century were clearly driven from Washington, but Latin American peoples (and their governments) were able to respond in sometimes quite effective ways.

In addition to the important contributions each book makes, taken together they show telltale signs of the disciplinary boundaries that produced them. A reader could easily walk away from *A City at Its Limits* with the sense that taboos and their transgressions are purely cultural phenomena devoid of significant connections to broader political and economic realities. While Gandolfo mentions the collapse of Peru’s political parties and the dramatic transformation of the Peruvian economy under Alberto Fujimori, these important processes receive scant attention. Readers are forced to assume the task of contextualizing the role of taboo and transgression within the context of Andrade’s urban renewal project and the broader political processes involved in Peru’s transition from an electoral democracy to a quasi-authoritarian state. Gandolfo does a far better job of contextualizing her role as researcher in a series of “diary” chapters. Although sometimes bordering on excessive self-reflection, these chapters serve an important function in locating the researcher (a Peruvian woman based in the United States with all the associated political, economic, and cultural baggage) within the narrative of taboo and transgression.

At the other extreme, Walter’s compelling account of U.S.-Peruvian diplomacy leaves little space for agency by nondominant actors. While U.S. and Peruvian business elites (not formally linked to the state) play important roles in his analysis, popular movements in both countries are largely marginalized. While there are good scholarly reasons to restrict the analytical focus to state-to-state relations, the approach has obvious and nontrivial costs.

While the international context plays little direct role in Becker’s analysis, he effectively describes the interactions of class and ethnic politics that drove indigenous organizing efforts throughout the twentieth century. Any attempt to analyze the role of indigenous peoples in contemporary Ecuadorian politics must begin from his thesis that the political power of indigenous peoples is a result of decades of organizing not just within indigenous communities but also with leftist activists and politicians throughout the country.

Taken as a whole, these books confront us with some of the ironies of power, domination, and resistance. Taboos that serve to control and repress certain forms of behavior can be turned on their heads by marginalized citizens seeking a voice in a political process that pays them little heed. International relations between superpowers

and relative diplomatic lightweights can be manipulated in ways that benefit the weak and call into question the hegemonic pretensions of a global superpower. Indigenous peoples' interactions with urban, leftist political activists can be understood as collaborative and empowering rather than manipulative and silencing.

Scholars of subaltern actors have been alerting us for decades to the important role that historically marginalized actors have played in all sorts of political, economic, and cultural processes (e.g., Mallon, 1995). Over the years much of this scholarship has gotten tied up in the linguistic knot of various forms of poststructuralist analysis. The books reviewed here demonstrate various approaches to the analysis of unequal power relationships. While they all accept (at least implicitly) the basic tenet that marginalized actors possess more significant political resources than is often assumed, they also demonstrate that the analysis of these power relationships can be done through sustained empirical research. The dismantling of hegemonic paradigms such as modernization and dependency need not mean the negation of theory and empiricism. These works provide overlapping examples of how such work might proceed.

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