

Between Class and Ethnicity: Encounters of Ecuador's Indigenous People with the Political Left

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Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements. By Marc Becker. Duke University Press, Durham, NC & London, 2008.

The origin of Latin America's indigenous movements is a highly contested issue. They are often seen as the new social movements, developing around cultural identity claims as opposed to socioeconomic, or class, demands. A major catalyst, in this view, was the process of democratization that made long-suppressed voices heard. The rise of transnational civic activism focused on ethnic, environmental, and gender rights is also attributed an important role (Brysk, 2000; Van Cott, 2005; Yashar, 2005). Marc Becker adopts a different perspective. His analysis draws our attention to the pervasiveness of the class agenda behind the indigenous mobilization. The book examines the history of Ecuador's indigenous struggles, paying special attention to political activism among the bonded hacienda peasantry (*huasipungueros*). Most of the book deals with the period between the 1920s and the 1970s; the geographic focus is on the Andean provinces, and especially the Cayambe Province located in the vicinity of the national capital and characterized by high levels of land concentration. Building on the earlier studies of indigenous political activism (including the work by Albo, 1991; Schryer, 1990; Ibarra, 1999; Postero & Zamosc, 2004), Becker argues that ethnicity and class often appear as two aspects of the same identity. He also suggests that ethnic and class identities can be intertwined with the gender ones. One section of his book deals with the gendered nature of Ecuador's indigenous mobilization. In Becker's view, indigenous women were often better able to preserve their ethnic identity and the spirit of rebellion than the menfolk coopted by the hacienda system. Indeed, one of the founders of Ecuador's indigenous movement was a Kichwa woman, Dolores Cacuango, well-known for her political radicalism.

The book's most significant contribution is its analysis of interactions between indigenous peasants and urban leftists. The main organizational venue for these interactions was the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians (FEI), created in 1944 by

communist and indigenous (mostly Cayambe) leaders. Challenging the widespread view, according to which the FEI was little more than a rural-based political arm of the communist party, Becker demonstrates that the relations between communists and indigenous leaders were a two-way street. One outcome of these relations was the adoption of leftist views by many indigenous people. The other was a fusion of the class-based demands with indigenous ethnic claims – such as claim for bilingual education – in the communist party's platform.

Perhaps the most vivid manifestation of the alliance between communists and *huasipungueros* (the former often identified the latter as the emergent agricultural proletariat) was their shared struggle for labor rights, including minimum wages and a ban on unpaid family labor. What started as a 'proletarian' struggle, however, soon turned into a peasant mobilization for land reform. Various authors explain this metamorphosis with reference to the *huasipungueros'* deep attachment to land, apparently underestimated at the initial stages by their communist allies. Becker introduces an additional element into this explanation by pointing to the evolving ideological orientation of Ecuador's communist leadership: following changes in the position of Comintern, it abandoned the idea of proletarian revolution and turned to a more conciliatory strategy of building broad anti-imperialist fronts (something that, according to Becker, Dolores Cacuango saw as a mistake). This ideological shift within the communist party was followed by the rise of nationalism within Ecuador's military who came to power in the 1960s and 1970s, implementing two rounds of land reform. The land reform put an end to bonded labor relations, already unpopular among the modernizing hacienda owners. Ironically, it also sealed the fate of the FEI as a representative of Ecuador's indigenous peasantry. Deprived of its *huasipunguero* support base, the FEI lost its political influence and became replaced by new indigenous organizations, such as the Ecuadorian Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (CONAIE), the National Federation of Peasant and Indigenous Organizations (FENOCIN), and the Ecuadorian Federation of Evangelical Indians (FEINE). Grounded in the Amazonian and freehold Andean communities, these new organizations attributed much more importance to ethnic issues, even though CONAIE and especially FENOCIN continued to embrace elements of the class-based agenda.

Becker's analysis of the complex relations between Ecuador's indigenous people and leftists is not without flaws. The author offers only a sketchy (and somewhat trivial) discussion of the indigenous mobilization after the end of the land reform. He does not explain the factors behind the rise of the new ethnic leadership: in the book, this leadership appears as *deus ex machina*, ready to continue indigenous struggles after FEI's decline. Becker also seems to ignore both the persistence of ethnic governance practices in freehold Andean communities and the emergence of the urban indigenous intelligentsia whose members, often holding strategic positions in the bilingual system of education, emphasized the importance of ethnic identity as opposed to class consciousness. Furthermore, he overlooks the influence of the Amazonian organizations whose leaders, along with the Andean indigenous intellectuals, pushed for a reformulation of the indigenous movement's objectives

in ethnic terms. Conceptually, these omissions have to do with Becker's cursory treatment of ethnic issues. Ethnic identity in his interpretation is associated mostly with cultural traits, such as language, dressing code, and local customs. He downplays its political implications, such as indigenous peoples' aspirations for political autonomy and control of local resources: aspirations that are not always compatible (as it became painfully obvious during the current administration of Rafael Correa) with the leftist view of national economic and social development. In addition, Becker seems to overlook the existence of a certain arrogance on the part of non-indigenous leftists, many of whom saw people living in Andean peasant communities as the 'masses' (the word also used and abused by Becker), who presumably had to be 'led' into a struggle for socialism.

Despite these omissions and conceptual or terminological problems, the book is a valuable and timely contribution to the study of Latin America's indigenous movements. By focusing on the often-forgotten history of the collaboration between indigenous people and political left, the book sheds additional light on the origins of the 'left turn' in Latin American politics. In effect, the election of Correa as Ecuador's president would have been unthinkable without the CONAIE-sponsored mobilization against economic neoliberalism, a mobilization that in turn had been influenced by the legacy of FEI-led struggles. Moreover, the constitutional assembly dominated by Correa's supporters proclaimed Ecuador a plurinational state, something that the previous assembly had failed to do. This persistence of a cross-ethnic appeal of the leftist agenda along with the constitutional changes gives credence to Becker's arguments. Yet, the relations between the Correa government and indigenous organizations are certainly not as harmonious as one would expect, after having read Becker's book. Occasionally getting close to rupture, these relations are strained by bitter conflicts over mining on indigenous territories and indigenous opposition to the South American Regional Integration Plan Initiative (IIRSA) supported by leftist governments, including Correa's. The author's somewhat idealistic view of the Indian-leftist alliance aside, the book offers a much needed counterpoint to the political-cultural perspective on Latin America's indigenous movements, helping our understanding of the origins of 21st-century Socialism in countries with a long history of indigenous struggles.

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