Book Reviews: Indigenous Peoples, Civil Society, and the Neo-Liberal State in Latin America

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“Civil society”: what’s in it for Latin American indigenous peoples? Ten essays penned by anthropologists, historians and activists grapple with this question in this very welcome volume. The value of ethnographic research is abundantly apparent throughout.

The essays illustrate the varieties of civil society—and its definitions. Discussing CRIC, the first indigenous organization in Colombia, Joanne Rappaport asks whether, despite its role as a powerful internationally recognized critic of neo-liberal reforms (114), it fits under the civil society rubric, given its marginality and militancy. Suzana Sawyer focuses on the process in which subaltern subjects in Amazonian Ecuador fashioned a shared identity of being marginalized and injured (67) when mobilizing against Big Oil’s devastation. Her analysis of how a backwoods court successfully ruled against multinational Chevron demonstrates that civil society is not necessarily local or democratic. Other authors speak of “perverse” and “uncivil” society. Daniel Goldstein and collaborators cogently make a case for seeing the lynchings carried out by residents of El Alto, Bolivia, as civil society actions. Avery Dickins discusses the outcome of NGO-sponsored eco-tourism to nearby caves in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. She documents town residents’ struggles to resist dependency, and deploy development projects and conservation measures toward their own ends. Pedro Petarch discusses three traditional Maya medicine organizations in Chiapas. In one, an organization of shamans, ultra-left activists appropriate its discourse in order to disseminate an anti-global capital rhetoric, something the shamans do not support. Such “ventriloquating” affords the radicals legitimacy they otherwise would not receive. As Edward Fischer points out in his well-crafted Introduction, civil society organizations “face great challenges working within a system that does not function as it is supposed to” (12).

The relation between the indigenous movement and the state is discussed, including ways indigenous organizations take on para-statal functions. Several authors point out that, unlike ethnic militants in other parts of the world, Latin American mobilizations embraced inclusiveness and membership in the nation. Fischer notes that the citizenship rights being demanded were in fact offered by the nation-state—but only in principle (26). Michiel Baud outlines over a century of organizing in Andean areas. And María Elena Casaú’s Arzú’s analysis
of essays written by several Guatemalan Maya leaders explores how newly established areas of political participation in civil society, which allow resistance acceptable to the state, also allow Maya elites to increase their real power.

Clearly, the neoliberal state has failed Latin America’s indigenous peoples in many respects. The poor have to shoulder the most risk, elites are even stronger, economic inequality has increased, and a disregard for human rights is evident in many places. Goldstein calls Latin American transitional nations “low-intensity democracies” (49). For Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, Guatemala’s reforms have served to promote “the indigenous as decoration,” authenticate the tourist industry, support acquiescent and agreeable indigenous figureheads, and further the ladinoization project. Rappaport concludes that while neoliberal multiculturalism has permitted more organizations to gather under the civil society umbrella, long-term changes “in the articulation of ethnic minorities within the structures of the dominant society” have not resulted (118).

Rudi Colloredo-Mansfield and Baud take issue with characterizing the indigenous movement as emblematic of identity politics. Linking the indigenous movement and identity politics is flawed, because, first, there is no shared way of being indigenous, and second, “[c]ontrary to what has often been suggested, [activists’] main objectives do not so much concern ‘identity’ as they do social and economic problems” (Baud 36). However, there is no “shared way of being” for any identity. And who is not aware that indigenous activists want “work, security and schooling along with recognition of their cultural and ethnic rights” (Baud 36)? Of course indigenous identity by itself is a “thin political resource” (Colloredo-Mansfield 89). But if we see identity as a means rather than an end, the utility of analytically opposing demands for recognition of cultural and ethnic rights with other demands disappears. Colloredo-Mansfield himself says that “identity becomes a means of politics” (88). Mobilizations typically involve a process of embracing a politics of difference through which activists can advance claims to citizenship as ethnic actors (Rappaport 114). Such “projections of ethnic difference” (115) increase activists’ chances of securing other goals—territory, schools, whatever. Identity politics is politics—finding out the best way to get something from powerful actors and institutions, and acting on the information. Identity is realized by performing and instantiating a relationship. Performances of indigeneity aim to convince powerful Others, who valorize
“authentic” indigenous difference, that a particular indigenous subject position is worthy of being recognized and taken into account when decisions are being made.

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