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Review/Reseña

Bret Gustafson, *New Languages of the State: Indigenous Resurgence and the Politics of Knowledge in Bolivia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009.

After Interculturalism in Bolivia

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Having spent a lot of time recently with graduate students working on dissertations on Indigenous politics, I read Bret Gustafson's book with those students in mind. Gustafson has written a magisterial book on Indigenous politics in Bolivia that should be required reading for all graduate students interested in Indigenous politics, decolonization, and political ethnography. That said, my heart goes out to those students who read Gustafson's first book in hopes of finding a model for their dissertations. As they look for clues on how one actually does "engaged anthropology" in Latin America, they will find that Gustafson has raised the

bar substantially for anthropologists (and for those of us non-anthropologists who think we do ethnography). To follow his example in writing this book, students will learn that they should not only become fluent in Spanish and conversant in anthropological and social theory, but also spend time working with Mayan linguists in Guatemala, study Aymara in the Andes, then spend years (*fourteen* in Gustafson's case!) acquiring fluency in Guarani and working closely with Guarani and *karai* (non-Guarani) intellectuals.

To make matters even more daunting, Gustafson reminds readers early in his book that in important ways his decades of work were inadequate. Gustafson comes to this realization after a conversation with a Guarani leader who acknowledged the years of work that Gustafson has contributed to Guarani causes, but suggests that if he were *really* serious, he would return to live and die in Guarani country. "You will not die in peace [if you don't come back]," the leader explains, as Gustafson has left parts of himself in the various Guarani communities in which he has lived. "When you are on your deathbed, you will be calling out *Hika*, *Itavera*, *Tetaguasu*, *Kamii*, *Isoso*." Gustafson puts a fine point on the exchange: "Against anthropologists' celebratory claims of having 'engaged' people, from Guarani eyes, had I really *engaged* them, I would have stayed forever" (29). One of the achievements of this book is the ability to see both the book's contributions and limitations "from Guarani eyes" as well from the eyes of politicians, NGO officers, *karai* union leaders, scholars of Indigenous politics and other perspectives. While Gustafson is clear about his support of Guarani causes, the text provides multiple vantage points from which readers can take the measure not only of arguments and methods, but also of the policies, practices, and personalities at the center of the story. This multi-sited (and *multi-sighted*) study manages to deliver a compelling and serious intellectual message with both clarity and humility. This book examines Indigenous knowledge and politics as a set of multiscalar processes through which Indigenous intellectuals and their allies negotiate and contest specific state policies and more pervasive manifestations of "the coloniality of power."

This is a book I will ask my graduate students to read, though I will counsel them that they need not replicate Gustafson's fourteen years of engagement. I will ask them, though, to read it for the intellectual craftsmanship illustrated by the careful architecture of the multi-sited political ethnographic study and for what the book has to teach about the importance and impossibilities of conducting fieldwork in and on Indigenous territory.

The Architecture of the Argument

One of the familiar refrains that I have been sharing with graduate students is that their projects should never have too many moving parts; these parts should all fit and work together: careful literature reviews and preliminary fieldwork should generate compelling research questions and possible explanations. These are then taken to carefully selected sites and approached with well-designed and ethically-informed methods. There are always surprises along the journey, but at the start one must be clear what one is asking and why it matters. By these standards, Gustafson's research design is very sturdy.

Reviewing existing studies of intercultural bilingual education (or EIB, by its Spanish initials), Gustafson notes that interventions have either been "top-down" and elite-led reforms that strive to be technically sound but politically blind, or "bottom-up" critiques that see EIB as a neoliberal wolf in multicultural sheep's clothing. Both of these views miss the social fields in which these policies are produced and implemented. Accordingly, Gustafson asks two broad questions that bridge the gulf between top-down and bottom-up critiques: (1) How are school reforms connected to big processes of authority, citizenship, and the very "nature of the state itself"?; and (2) How is EIB "articulated with indigenous and non-indigenous alliances seeking to dismantle the 'coloniality of power' in Bolivia" (4-5)? These big questions require an ambitious methodological approach, one temporally and spatially flexible. Gustafson describes his methodological approach as "a multiscalar processual ethnography focused on articulation across time and space... going beyond the discursive and institutional boundaries of the aid project or the classroom, [and] transcending the

dyadic models of state-movement opposition to consider how these boundaries are blurred or hardened in shifting political practices” (22). Though these nets are big, Gustafson’s focus is precise. The subsequent chapters examine the long histories of Guarani resistance and state rule, the politics of knowledge, and the transnational networks of politics. Briefly, I will turn to each of these areas.

As with many works on Indigenous politics, historical legacies loom large in this narrative. The book begins with an examination of the Guarani mobilization and subsequent massacre of 1892. Efforts by Guarani leaders to contest the violence of the Bolivian state and local landowners met a bloody and brutal end. Though many works have explored such colonial legacies in Bolivia, Gustafson’s work does a particularly effective job of showing how those legacies played out differently on the Guarani frontier than in the Andean center of the country. While the 1952 revolution and corporatism transformed state-society relations in the western highlands, Guarani country continued (and in many places continues) to be dominated by the decentralized despotism of large landed estates. In Gustafson’s interviews, the echoes of the 1892 massacre ring out with ethnographic clarity into the present, including a remarkable conversation with a Guarani elder, a blind grandmother, who spoke with him about an event organized by the Association of the Pueblo Guarani (APG) to commemorate the massacre perpetrated by the non-Indigenous people or *karai*. In Gustafson’s translation from Guarani, she said:

There must be many bones in that place,
the karai killed the Guarani like locusts, it is said
the karai were killing for three days, it is said
they killed them with the big guns...
the dead were piled like firewood, it is said
and our blood ran like water in the creeks. (60)

“Her metaphors,” Gustafson adds, “rooted memories of the violence in the everyday images—of locust that swarm Guarani fields, stacks of shelters piled helter-skelter behind Guarani houses, shallow streams gurgling in rivulets through sandy creek beds” (60). Such prose is but one example of not only the strength of Gustafson’s writing, but also of his linguistic and ethnographic training that allow him to weave contemporary voices and

historical research into in a compelling historical ethnography. From this beginning, Gustafson introduces one of various “interludes”—ethnographic vignettes that come between every chapter and take the reader from one research site to the next, and make clear the various scales, moments and spaces across which Gustafson spins his ethnographic web. The book covers a lot of ground and does so quite gracefully, taking the reader from the front lines of EIB with Guarani educators, to behind the scenes of a Guarani hunger strike, then to an ethnography of the transnational networks that run from international NGOs to the Bolivian state to local Guarani communities.

From histories of violence, Gustafson moves to an exploration of the circuits of Guarani knowledge. He notes that while many Guarani, understandably, rejected Western schooling entirely as a colonial imposition, for many others Guarani schooling provided a terrain on which to engage the Bolivian state. Though one might wish he would have paid a little more attention to the textures of that Indigenous rejection of EIB, as María Elena García (2005) does in her own insightful ethnography of EIB in the Quechua highlands of Peru, Gustafson nevertheless provides great insights into the cultural politics of EIB. He pays particular attention to a group of Guarani scribes who in the late 1980s and 1990s produced Guarani textbooks and were the main agents of implementation for EIB, often with the support of external funders like UNICEF. Through two chapters, and years of participant-observation, Gustafson presents education as both a set of social practices through which social categories can be reproduced or transformed, as well as part of a broad web of knowledge and organizational practices that constituted a Guarani public sphere, one that formed the infrastructure of decolonizing Guarani social movements. “That Guarani scribes could arrive in a town, notify the karai school superintendent of their impending work and then proceed to the community to work in a classroom or hold a multivillage meeting constituted a profound transgression” (93).

Guarani scribes, however, not only articulated to Indigenous contestation, but also to what was—at the time—a neoliberal state. This complex articulation allows Gustafson to construct an ethnography of

neoliberal governmentality, a study that requires seeing not only “like a state” but also “like an NGO-backed movement.” Though I will return to this ethnography of governmentality below, it is important to pause to consider what this book has to teach us about the promise and pitfalls of ethnographic research by non-Indigenous researchers in Indigenous country.

Ethnography in the Age of Indigenous Resurgence

Anthropology and related disciplines have spent some time and much ink worrying about the colonial dynamics that created the very enterprise of fieldwork, in which a notebook wielding outsider comes to study a local people so that “we” can better understand “them.” Hyperaware of these legacies, anthropologists have sought to move away from colonial verticality and toward relationships of horizontality that are characterized by methods that are described with terms like “engaged” or “collaborative” and perhaps even “decolonizing.” The central insight here is arguably that ethically guided attempts at solidarity with the communities in which social scientist work can and should provide the basis for rigorous research that responds not only to Western academic agendas, but also local community interests. Gustafson’s work is certainly a shining example of what can be accomplished through long-term relationships working with Indigenous peoples. Perhaps even more importantly however, he is aware that “collaboration” is hardly a magic word. As Gustafson noted in a personal communication, the excitement around “collaborative anthropology” risks re-centering the anthropologist in the field as the noble figure of solidarity who choreographs the collaboration; hardly a decolonizing image. To his credit, Gustafson knows who this book is about, and is allergic to self-congratulatory reflection. If anything, he is aware of the limitations of collaboration and is generous with his ethnographic missteps.

Even in his decades of work with Guarani scribes, during which he produced linguistic and educational materials for Guarani EIB intellectuals, Gustafson lets the readers know the dirty secrets of collaboration: it can come close to paternalism and exploitation. “Collaborators claim legitimacy

through discourse of technical expertise and through solidarity voiced at meetings, workshops, or visits to Guarani schools. Yet we were products of the hierarchy we hoped to dismantle, there because donor organizations and the Guarani relied on symbols of nonindigenous academic authority, albeit for different reasons.” Even more troubling, he continues, “the fact that collaborators were often gringos implicitly affirmed local racist assessments that autonomous Guarani intellectual action was biologically impossible” (73). Gustafson, though, is not quite ready to echo Ivan Illich’s “to hell with your good intentions.” He is aware that his work could be useful (or not) to Guarani goals and that it would also make possible a kind of ethnographic insight that is impossible in the kind of parachuting interview-based fieldwork that characterizes my own field of political science. Nevertheless, the important lesson here for those about to embark on fieldwork is the one that comes from an Ioseña scribe who reminds Gustafson of one of the realities of fieldwork: “You can write these things and leave. We have to stay here” (74).

Gustafson also usefully reminds us what a strange thing it is to do research. If we are “engaged” with the communities in which we conduct research we should have some sense of their understanding of the terms of that engagement. Gustafson tells of an instructive experience in Itavera, where he comes to appreciate the difference between Western understanding of data collection and local notions of “visiting,” that had their own expectations and etiquette. When one visits, one does not write things down. When Gustafson went off to his room to write things down, his host sent his young son to sit with him (129). And yet, as he acknowledges, there are Guarani ways of knowing that exceeded Gustafson’s grasp in the book. The kind of knowledge Guarani embodied and practiced on a daily basis often resisted his attempts to capture it through often solitary fieldwork. This points to a tension between the words of the Guarani scribe, who had tasked Gustafson with the job of “systematizing knowledge” (i.e. writing it down) and the discomfort of inserting that “written-down” knowledge into the framework of conventional western models of schooling, which in the Guarani language is rendered *yembo*, literally “being made to speak.” As Gustafson explains:

Sitting in a school 'being made to speak' by a teacher differed from sitting in the forest speaking with spirit masters, contesting or acknowledging a leader's authority during an assembly, engaging in a multivoiced story production around the house fire, conversing with an *ipaye* shaman about one's illness, or generating beautiful weaving designs after dreaming of snakes and ancestors. (129)

This realization helps Gustafson gain some perspective on the contradictions and limitations of government-sanctioned, NGO-directed Indigenous education. It also points to ethnographic paths not taken in the book.

One wonders what more attention to those multivoiced stories of forests, spirit masters, and snake-dream weavings would have revealed about decolonizing strategies beyond the EIB networks and movement strategies so ably explored here. Following Guarani scribes, activists, and NGO professional tells Gustafson a lot, but we get less of a sense of what he learned from the shamans and spirit-masters he also encountered along the way. This is not a complaint about this book, but rather recognition of the inherent partialness of all our investigations and the costs that come with an empirical and analytical gaze on the contact zone between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, which follow the horizon of existing practice and provide limited glimpses of what might yet be.

Conclusions

Gustafson's book closes with perhaps an appropriate dose of pessimism. This is perhaps one final lesson for graduate student readers: be clear about your own positionality and hopes (as Gustafson is in his support of EIB), but be open to the all too real possibility that those hopes may be poor guides to the present. As he concludes his fieldwork in 2006, he finds that the policy and NGO infrastructure for EIB have been steadily dismantled over the years (206-208). Funds from outside have dried up and Guarani scribes find themselves no longer in educational reform offices but rather working as contract laborers for textbooks companies from Spain (a cruel colonial irony if there ever was one). Gustafson also tells of a memorable encounter with various critics of EIB and Guarani social movements, these critics included rabidly anti-Indigenous local karai school teachers (who wondered aloud about the biological inferiority of

Aymaras) and a MAS loyalist, nicknamed “Che Guevara” for both his explicit dress that emulated the fallen Marxist rebel and his socialist beliefs. During the conversation, fueled by many bottles of beer, a critique of Guarani politics and EIB policies drew strength from a convergence of growing regionalism that resists impositions from La Paz and an old-fashioned leftism that saw Indigenous particularism as a threat to socialist consciousness and struggle. Emblematic of the present moment, this encounter illustrates the perhaps paradoxical ways in which the victory of Evo Morales had produced a variegated field of possibilities: an energized anti-Indigenous regionalist reaction and a resurgent socialism that is unsure of where decolonization fits into nationalist and anti-imperial visions that resemble models coming from Cuba and Venezuela.

As I write this review, Bolivians are dealing with the aftermath of a bloody encounter between government forces and Indigenous marchers, opposed to the building of a road that runs through Indigenous lands. Evo Morales had not listened to the Indigenous protests, as he saw the road as a key part of his revolutionary and modernizing plan for the nation. Headlines of police repression, the death of an infant during the clash, and the resignation of two (so far) of his own ministers, forced President Morales to apologize and call for a referendum on the new road. A recent report on the encounter reminds readers that it was not that long ago that a frustrated President Morales declared that “I never considered myself to be the first indigenous president, but the first trade-unionist president” (*The Economist*, October 10, 2011). All this signals trouble for the goals of decolonization that Guarani scribes and Gustafson embrace, but the troubles, as this book shows, are not new. With the election of Morales in 2005 came calls of a new age of transformation, a time of *pachakuti*; yet there also came the realization that a nationalist and socialist vision from La Paz could often eclipse Indigenous concerns from places like Guarani country. As Gustafson wrote, “interculturalism and decolonization may thrive in this new space of pachakuti, or in fact they may wither away as the minimal conditions for interlinguistic and interethnic engagement collapse” (278). As an Indigenous president represses Indigenous protest, one worries that those minimal conditions may already be in real decay.

References

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