

**Review / Reseña**

Alvarenga Ventuolo, Patricia. *Diálogos Antropológicos y cambio histórico en Guatemala. Aproximaciones al mundo indígena desde el indigenismo hasta la intelectualidad maya*. Guatemala: F&G editores, 2024. 308 pp.

**Ileana Rodríguez**

Ohio State University

This book is an excellent and thoroughly researched study of the intense labor carried on by North Atlantic anthropologists to grasp the nature of indigenous societies in twentieth-century Guatemala. As a discipline, anthropology takes the risk of trying to trace the paths that provide specific knowledge about these societies, and openly reveals the conceptual tools used to decipher them. The book also tells the story of group formations given that North Atlantic scholars were instrumental in the formation of both Ladino and indigenous Guatemalan scholars. Moreover, it is the study of state institutions whose directors, acting as state agents, tried hard to come to terms with the multicultural nature of the society under investigation. Plus, it is an in-depth rerun of the rich debates between these scholars. The point of this analytical study is to highlight how, despite all the scholars' well-meaning intentions, they remained beholden to their own ideological disciplinary formation that blinded them to the concreteness of the societies they were trying to plot. Only Maya scholars could unearth the logic of their own cultures, deeply inserted in the politics of domination. Alvarenga underlines, with precision and fairness, generative arguments on all sides, introducing us to weighty debates on identities and subjectivities that new multicultural approaches provide. The

book invites us to enjoy the specificities of such rich debates. And finally, it constitutes a paramount example of interdisciplinary research, one that amalgamates the artifacts and methods of history with those of anthropology, resulting in a magnificent sample of what viewing one discipline from another yields. Thus, transdisciplinary studies are possible only when and if scholars understand the organizing principles, genealogies, and world views present in each field, always respectful of the rich and serious work and complexities they have achieved.

The all-encompassing concept and organizing category orienting North Atlantic scholars is indigenism. Indigenism, the politics of which had been tried in the United States and Mexico, consists essentially in perceiving different cultures as a problem for nation-building. The method for solving this problem is contained in the multiple artifacts used to divest aboriginal peoples of their own culture. The strategy to achieve this goal is first to gather data, to know who they are through what they do, and then turn that same data against them. No wonder they failed. For indigenous communities, words like modernization, progress, nation and state were threatening signifiers. This vocabulary meant trouble for their specific ways of life. Indigenism certainly came down upon them as a weapon, dismantling their cultural heritage and trying to turn them into what they were not. Therefore, for them, assimilation is a dirty word.

Anthropologists and their assistants came into their communities to investigate, diagram, identify, and gather information to construct the data bank that proves their hypothesis right. The guidelines provided to assistants were ecology, living space, furniture, clothing, agriculture, industry, social organization, socio-political and religious structures, health, supernatural world, the individual life cycle, and other miscellaneous things. Assistants were to treat them kindly, paternalistically speaking. Data gathering was used to serve their own particular institutional and scholarly purposes. Indigenous communities resisted the attempt. They did not want to be acculturated to the mainstream values and mores of the dominant Ladino society that had oppressed them. They did not think of themselves as passive, traditional, living in an eternal past, residual, backward and conservative. This type of casting turned all these proscribed, nasty terms into their opposite, giving rise—during the Maya renaissance—to a counteroffensive that Ladino intellectuals discussed, using the concepts of essentialism and purism. Perhaps we could consider indigenous essentialism as a temporary generative strategy as Gayatri Spivak suggested for feminism.

Throughout the study we employ a gamut of conflictive propositions manifested in the works of anthropologists. Clearly, in Alvarenga's analysis, indigenism constituted a prison house of language which kept both the indigenous and anthropologists locked up. The four iron concepts organizing the data were modernity, nation, state, and progress. These concepts did not properly fit the logic of indigenous communities. Alvarenga recognizes the North Atlantic's good liberal intentions and serious work but highlights how they missed the important point of their endeavors: not being able to see that their object of study was indeed a historical subject kept subjugated by a dominant system of thought. In so doing, they became prisoners of their own system. Those concepts marked the impossibility of grasping one form of culture from the point of view of epistemes, whose purpose was to subjugate them. Subalternity and heterogeneity are two generative concepts stating the instrumental impossibility of using the tools of heavy dominant epistemes to grasp the worlds they intended to subjugate and overpower. The most poetic phrase grasping that impossibility is Cesar Vallejo's poem "Solía escribir con su dedo grande en el aire", which pointed to the deaf exchange between oral and written cultures, between languages, between social classes, between gender identities: "Solía escribir con su dedo grande en el aire / Papel de viento... / Pluma de carne..." (467)<sup>1</sup>

Assimilation and acculturation were always the guidelines for a history of knowledge attempting an "understanding" of an immense indigenous population that overwhelmed power. During the large period of conquest, religious orders were in charge of this task. Capturing their souls was the logic used. After independence, the State took over this task and entrusted it to anthropologists. Indigenism was the name given to this policy during the modern period. The modern State was overwhelmed by the presence not of minorities, but of a large majority of the population conceived and historically treated as ballast, not as peoples but as objects. But *rara avis* indeed they were not.

The great methodological observation coming out of this study is that "the Indigenous" has been used as a general concept significantly positioning research in relation to power. From dominant epistemes, "the Indigenous" always marks a sense of impossibility. The task to grasp or get hold of "it"—as blood and flesh peoples—is due to fail, because the subject cannot be searched out retrospectively, that is, it cannot

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<sup>1</sup> Vallejo, César. 1970. *Poesía Completa*. Barcelona: Seix Barral.

be slid over from logic into history. Bibliographies on the subject amply substantiate this hypothesis. In the studies Alvarenga submits for consideration, “the Indigenous” is defined as lacking, constituted as intractable and resistant, a figure whose residence lies outside the authorized categories of the discipline, thus remaining pure externality. The guidelines given to personnel going into the communities to gather data fleshes out this sense of outsidership: “The Indigenous” is not intelligible to the representational techniques of anthropology since it is *ab ovo* projected as an ontology beyond reason and understanding. Alvarenga demonstrates that such a way of posing the question is a dominance trap. Scholars believe they can reach what power cannot, that is, grasp “the Indigenous” in itself as a total externality to power, freed from the distortions produced by it. That is not possible. “The Indigenous” is essential to the social and political life of power and must be understood as an abstraction used to identify the intractable that emerges within a system of dominance, something which the dominant discourse cannot appropriate fully, an otherness that resists being contained. “The Indigenous,” a radical incommensurability and recalcitrant presence, constitutes the indelible traces of the system of knowledge dominance and power limits. “The Indigenous” is an intimidation, a counterhegemonic possibility, not an inviolable otherness but a clog in a system, breaking the functioning of power from within, contradictions and dislocations in its discourse and the rich possibilities of an imminent criticism. Here resides the problem, as demonstrated by the Maya scholars who take over the field at the end of the twentieth century. By subverting the previous categories, they amply display that, as a problem, the Indigenous spreads over the entire Ladino society, which also amply partakes of the Indigenous.

At the end of the twentieth century, a group of Maya scholars begin to take an active part in the debate. They locate themselves within the parameters of the culture, and narrate the cultural markers from the inside, tracing their own road and internal logic. One of the first key points to make was to emphasize the indigenous communities’ capacity to survive. Their strategies to adapt to extermination projects are multiple, and the impenetrable defense of their cultural and symbolic universe contradicts all the previous identity marks put forth by anthropology. The all-powerful character of the dominant culture is highlighted, and indigenous societies are properly situated diachronically, questioning the erosion of their symbolic universe. Historically considered, these cultures are tied to their pre-Hispanic heritage and show that ladinization is not the only road forward. Great strides are made to reinvent and transform memory, considering tradition as a dynamic and continuous phenomenon

susceptible to different interpretations depending on the situation. Figuring out how social actors located themselves historically determined each of their resistance strategies, questioning the power of theory over history. Class, for example, was not the best tool for understanding the weft and warp between the K'iche' elite and the rest of indigenous populations, nor could allegiance to Castillo Armas and Ubico be considered a rightist deviation. They resisted the expansion of the State through education, guaranteeing the indigenous people a place without giving up. Key to it was exploring the construction of power in the communities and its relation to the invention of memory, carefully gauging collective remembrance by the users to fend off state intellectual disfiguration of myths and firming up communal cohesion.

This monumental turn was made possible not only by and through the steady formation of Maya intellectuals by North Atlantic anthropologists but also by the impressive formation of the Maya movement during the armed conflict. This defied the ideas of parochial indigenous worlds incapable of seeing beyond their own communities and remaining rigidly tied to clientelist relations to state power. Who would doubt that the dynamics of these spaces come from the crystallization of forms of everyday interactions, of solid social relationships at the heart of the collectivity as well as with the surrounding world. Maya scholars placed knowledge face to face with a dramatic transformation of a dynamic universe, where the integrating subjects were not only victors but actors themselves, despite or in response to limiting experiencing. No passive otherness could have the capacity to face horror. A new generation of North Atlantic and Maya anthropologists began to interact amongst themselves. If at the beginning the role of indigenous people was as research assistants, language interpreters and mediators, simple peons in data gathering as they saw themselves after reflecting on the moment, with their training abroad they obtained the tools to enter the field that was their own culture. Many of them became leading intellectuals, no longer excluded from the debates and now truly interlocutors. Two sides of the hydra emerged from these interlocutions: Ladino culture countered by arguing against essentialism and purity, arguments used against the eminence of the scholars involved. I say to this what Gayatri Spivak argued for feminism: essentialism can be seen as a strategy.

The last chapter of the book reviews some private correspondence between the anthropologists and examines some of the field diaries, plus establishes a comparison between Guatemalan and Costa Rican anthropologists. I want to underscore two points, One, that in the private sphere, we can read about their particular way of approaching the communities and the acknowledgement of the

difficulties they encountered doing field work. Here, the insensitivity towards the subjects is exposed. To the reader, this self-exposure proves the point of the research, and we feel content to witness the “got you” point. Yet, at the same times, grief arises from witnessing the lack of sensitivity, manipulation and disdain these scholars felt for the people whose knowledge they wanted to obtain. In contrast we also partake in a turn in the sensibility, the necessity of making field work an area of subjective interaction and respect. The fact that emotions came to play out in doing field research, and that affect could be expressed between the subjects in question, satisfies a scholar like me in knowing that in some cases, the two subjects under consideration could live together and partake of the experience, both learning from each other to the point of being called friends.

A book review’s burden is to offer a general idea of the key points, debates, bibliographies used to write it. The richness of the text, the weighty research, the honorability with which the debate is presented, the inclination to be fair and recognize points of contents at the most unconscious levels of the research is to be lauded, as is the justice with which the subjects under study have been treated by Patricia Alvarenga in this magnificent book.

### **Works Cited**

Vallejo, César. 2005. *Poesía Completa*. Ed. Antonio Merino. Madrid: Ediciones Akal.