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Debate

A Refutation of Lucero's Review of *Peoples of the Earth*

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Pity the book critic of an academic publication whose editor-in-chief ends up writing, to the author of the work reviewed, that he “regrets” a centerpiece argument used against it by their reviewer.

Pity, then, José Antonio Lucero, the author of a highly tendentious and factually inaccurate review of my *Peoples of the Earth; Ethnonationalism, Democracy and the Indigenous Challenge in “Latin” America* (Lexington Books, 2010).

A Contracorriente editor Greg Dawes expressed the statement of regret. It came in response to my complaint that in Lucero’s long and problematic review, I believed that “to be compared to former Vice President Cheney, when I was responsible for more than 5,000 blog items in favor of candidate Barack Obama (to the point that both the Clinton and McCain [campaigns] wrongly accused me of being ‘paid’ campaign staff), is not only laughable, but injurious to my reputation.”

In an October 25 reply, Dawes responded to the *ad hominem* effort to discredit *Peoples of the Earth*, writing in a sympathetic e-mail, “Needless to say I agree with your comments on being compared to...Cheney, and I regret the reviewer expressed his opinion in that way.”

The above showed the perils one faces in introducing new arguments, no matter how well founded, into a debate that is all-to-often the province of narrow gauge, self-appointed academic guardians.

In his review, Lucero, using factual inaccuracies, not only dismisses the relevance of *Peoples of the Earth* for “scholars of indigenous politics,” but also dismisses the work as being suitable merely “for those outside the field wanting to know whether indigenous politics will enhance or threaten democracy and security in the region”—as if one audience was necessarily antithetical to another.

He argues the book offers an “alarming message to readers about the dangers that accompany indigenous movements, dangers that are framed in the language of ethno-nationalism, failed states, and potential radicalization and manipulation by outside forces.”

Lucero warns, darkly, that, it “remains a horror story of ethno-nationalism that reveals the insecurities and imaginings of the non-indigenous North more than the realities and complexities of the indigenous South.” *Peoples of the Earth*, he charges, is a book both “misleading” and “dangerously irresponsible.”

To get to this alarmist point, however, he serves up a potent brew of misstatement, misrepresentation (of which the comparison to Cheney—an apologist for torture and for notorious multinational corporations—is just one example), and errors in fact.

Let’s start off with Lucero’s presentation of myself as the author.

A *Contracorriente* readers are told that “the only indication of Andersen’s work in the region is provided by the ‘About the Author’ section where readers are informed that he has a ‘long history working with, advocating the rights of, and reporting on Native Americans’ in the US, Mexico, Central America and South America (295).”

The reader is left with the impression that my own credentials are limited to just that, a statement that I claim a “long history,” but nothing to

back it up. In the space allotted by *A Contracorriente* to refute Lucero, I cannot hope to do more than point out a few highlights of nearly four decades of work in the area.

Not wanting to bore, let me just point out (as I do in *Peoples of the Earth*) that, as a professional staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, working for Senate Majority Whip Alan M. Cranston (D.-Calif.), I was the staff author of a bill, signed into law by President George H.W. Bush in 1992, that required coverage of the rights of indigenous peoples in the annual State Department human rights country reports. Twice I have provided written testimony on indigenous issues to the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1993, I was a founding board member of the Amazon Alliance for Indigenous and Traditional Peoples and later worked with Indian groups in Guatemala as a consultant for the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). In 1995, in La Paz, Bolivia, I produced an on-site study as a consultant for the Criminal Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, which provided for the creation of a rural police force that incorporated that country's indigenous peoples on their own terms, offering them the means and authorities for their physical and juridical security while protecting their lands and natural resources. In 2009, I served as lead consultant on native peoples to the Democracy Project of the Organization of American States (OAS), in addition to being the author of several scholarly works on indigenous issues.

None of that is acknowledged by Lucero, who also fails to mention where, in *Peoples of the Earth*, I do tie my own personal experiences with the topic(s) of the book (22, 116-117, 232). Not content to mislead by failure to represent, he goes so far as to begin his review by critically "examining" two distinguished academics (Robert Pastor and Walker Connor) who have publicly endorsed the work.

Lucero's dysphonic riffs do not end there, as important facts were rendered flat wrong in his review.

For example, he wrote:

Especially suspicious is the argument that US models of recognition or adjudication of indigenous conflicts offer exportable kinds of best-practices. This is an idea that, to my knowledge, has never been made by any US or Latin American indigenous leader or advocate. Indeed, there are strong feelings in the opposite

direction. Even strong cases of tribal sovereignty like that of the Choctaw nation in the US, whose claims have been upheld by Supreme Court decisions and federal policies, provide little support for seeing the US as a model. Choctaw scholar Valerie Lambert suggests that even the legal victories of her people have been precarious and fraught with colonial contradictions. Indeed, Lambert concludes that those looking for indigenous models of sovereignty should look outside the United States. (Lambert 2007:169; italics mine)

Thus the reviewer offers the presumption of his omniscient knowledge, while dispatching an unpalatable mistake in the book.

Except that Lucero is absolutely *wrong*.

Navajo Courts and Navajo Common Law; A Tradition of Tribal Self-Governance (University of Minnesota Press) by Raymond D. Austin—for 16 years a justice on the Navajo Nation Supreme Court—amply refutes Lucero’s claim. As I pointed out, Austin maintains that the Navajo, the people with the largest tribal justice system in the world, are uniquely positioned to help native peoples around the globe as they seek to retain their cultures, languages and spiritual traditions.

“American Indians throughout the Americas and indigenous peoples everywhere need encouragement and help to resurrect their customary laws and long-standing methods of dispute resolution,” Austin wrote. “... Opportunities abound for peoples around the world to learn from each other, and this book is offered with that in mind” (202).

A Foreward by Robert A. Williams, Jr., another Native American scholar, endorses Austin's book as showing that, “the Navajo Nation courts are in the vanguard of a broad-based, transformative movement among tribes in the United States and among indigenous peoples throughout the world, intently focused on retrieving ancient tribal values, customs, and norms and using them to solve contemporary legal issues and problems.”

Similarly, in *Tribal Policing; Asserting Sovereignty, Seeking Justice* (University of Arizona Press), the associate professor of American Indian Law and Policy at the University of Arizona Eileen Luna-Firebaugh (who is both Choctaw and Cherokee) writes: “Tribal police assert tribal sovereignty in a very real way by developing appropriate laws and rules, holding wrongdoers accountable, and asserting tribal jurisdiction over

Indian land. ... Tribal policing, the heart of the tribal legal system, is the juncture of tribal sovereignty and justice" (3, 130).

Lucero's "suspicions" to the contrary, Native American models in the US (and in Canada, with the Inuit) for indigenous sovereignty and justice can and already do serve as examples, and not only for Latin America's indigenous peoples. As background, I cite (181-182) Fergus M. Bordewich's *Killing the White Man's Indian; Reinventing Native Americans at the End of the Twentieth Century*, published in 1996, in which he noted that U.S. Indian reservations were undergoing

a revolution ... (that) encompassed almost every aspect of Indian life, from the resuscitation of moribund tribal cultures and the resurgence of traditional religious, to the development of aggressive tribal governments determined to remake the entire relationship between Indians and the United States. In almost every respect, it ... was transforming tribes into powers to be reckoned with for a long time to come. For the first time in generations, Indians were shaping their own destinies largely beyond the control of whites.

I also cite (181) the reaction of a non-Indian Guatemalan ambassador to the United Nations, who after visiting the Meskwaki tribal settlement in Iowa in 2007, remarked, "It is an eye-opener to find indigenous peoples in a different state of social and political development."

And although coming too late to appear in *Peoples of the Earth*, it is useful to note a recent *National Public Radio* report. It told about how the United Auto Workers brokered the first union contract under tribal law, and how union officials came away thinking that, when it came to first contracts, tribal law was more progressive than federal labor law ("UAW Brokers First Union Contract Under Tribal Law," <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124625523>).

So much, then, for Lucero's argument (and his "suspicions") about whether US models can be positive and thus could serve as best practices for the recognition or adjudication of indigenous claims.

But let's move on.

Lucero also complains that *Peoples of the Earth* puts the study of indigenous movements "within the study of 'potential or real, inchoate or full blown' ethnic conflicts, the kinds that tore apart the Balkans. (...) The

problem with this framing is that (with very few exceptions) indigenous movements across the region have mobilized peacefully, within the norms of democratic civil society, and without irredentist ambitions.”

He then goes on to charge this author with citing “extreme voices of alarm, *critics with whom Andersen does not necessarily side*, but who nonetheless *index* the tensions that have arisen in response to indigenous movements” (Italics mine).

Lucero claims “very few exceptions” to peaceful Indian mobilization “within the norms of democratic civil society.”

Peoples of the Earth tallies an insurrection (Mexico); deadly clashes with police, and irredentism (Peru); coup attempts (Ecuador); claims for establishing separate nation-states (Nicaragua/perhaps Chile); political thuggery (Bolivia); and the claim by a Supreme Court that ethnic tensions over land had placed the country close to “civil war” (Brazil). Thus Lucero’s “very few” arguably appears unsupported by real-world experience.

Lucero does admit that in my book I do not side with the region’s MREs (morally repugnant elites). However I do see their concerns, and those of others who are not indigenous but also do not belong to those elites either, as worth “indexing.”

Why? Because important sectors of non-Indian citizens have issued their own often undemocratic threats, and out of concern for regional democracy and security, the latter an essential foundation for the former to flourish. I added:

In response to centuries of discrimination, some radicalized native peoples are channeling legitimate demands for effective political participation, cultural integrity and access to resources through ethno-sectarian appeals to a racially based nationalist counter-reaction ... The threat posed to the rule of law can only get worse if the security challenges implicit in this undercurrent are ignored. (14)

I then cited University of California, San Diego, political scientist Philip G. Roeder, who observed:

The changing configuration of nation-states provides the building blocks with which diplomats must seek to build peace and security even in the face of transnational forces such as terrorism. Nation-state crises have been extraordinarily destabilizing. ... [I]n recent decades projects

to create new nation-states have been the single most common agenda of terrorists.

This loops back to Lucero's claim that somehow my "strategy" (please note he accuses me, *a la Cheney*, of employing a "strategy" rather than using an "argument") "bears a very close resemblance to a position associated with...Cheney: the 'one percent' argument. Roughly, the idea here is that we don't need to know how likely an event actually is, we only need to know that the outcome is so bad that simply a one percent possibility of it coming to pass is reason enough for us to treat it as an actual threat."

Lucero goes on to punctuate his criticism, twice, with an ersatz alarm—"It could happen!"—that seems to credit *Peoples of the Earth* with a quasi-conspiratorial bent that it does not have, rather than to substantively address the argument offered in the book. That is, that refusal to honor the just demands of indigenous peoples risks seeing them radicalized and allying with anti-American (and anti-North) groups, including but not limited to radical Islamic organizations.

While not making any predictions—no Cheney-esque alarms here—I point out that radical Islam (not al Qaeda, as Lucero seems to try to pigeonhole me with) has made inroads in Chiapas and in Venezuela, and that Bolivia's Evo Morales' is finding common cause with the brown-shirted theocracy of Ahmadinejad's Iran. (Just as Lucero's piece hit the press the Bolivian president declared: "We are in need of Iran's cooperation in all fields" (See: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2010-10/28/c_13578644.htm).

Others of Lucero's red flags seem more like red herring, too.

Lucero complains that "important volumes" from the literature did not make it into the book's well-stocked bibliography. However, he neglects to note that of the eight authors whose works he criticizes as being absent, *five* of them are represented as the authors of other works that *were* cited. And, although he admits that the book's six country case studies "have a take away message that resonates with the findings of other scholars," he complains that these "provide uneven and often ambivalent support for the claims outlined in the first part of the book."

In other words—rather than the hysterical “*It could happen!*” that Lucero claims to have unmasked—a balanced and fair array of national conditions is indeed offered.

Lucero’s claim that there is “not a single interview with any indigenous person from any country in the region” is untrue. What is more, other primary sources used include tribal Web sites, Indian political declarations, indigenous academic and literary publications, and Native American media (such as *Pukara* and *Indian Country Today*).

In Walker Connor’s seminal *Ethnonationalism; The Quest for Understanding* (1994), the renowned theorist of ethnonationalism, used—to my count—exactly two personal interactions in his own book. Similarly, *Peoples of the Earth* is not journalism, nor does it claim an exposition of field research.

Some very selectively picked cherries also accompany Lucero’s red herrings. Using contemporary (circa 1982) quotes from people in Lima about Sendero Luminoso being an Andean indigenous movement, he implies that I—who lived there and was one of the first non-Peruvian journalists to cover the beginnings of the bloody conflict from its epicenter in Ayacucho—agreed.

Rather the quotes Lucero objected to were offered as proof of the disconnect between people living in the Peruvian capital and what actually happened in the highlands. However, no mainstream academic with whom I am familiar would deny that, particularly at the beginning, “The guerrillas’ social base included mostly Quechua-speaking Indians whose struggle was linked to long-time class cleavages, centuries of exploitation, and a history of resistance to non-Indian religious and military institutions” (116).

In fact, the Marxist origins of Sendero’s guerrilla leadership, and those of the Zapatistas in Mexico, like those of the Guatemalan guerrillas, do—despite Lucero’s churlish protestations to the contrary—represent non-Indian elite leadership claiming to speak in the name of indigenous peoples. And they also placed those peoples’ lives at risk.

To paraphrase Lucero, Damn, it *did* happen!