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Debate

A Reply to Andersen

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Reading Martin Edwin Andersen's vexed response in late December, it is clear that I should not be expecting any holiday cards from the Andersen household. Yet, before this exchange generates even more heat than light, I want to be clear that I have absolutely no personal ill will toward Andersen, nor am I interested in "ad hominem attacks." Indeed, I barely know Andersen; our paths have crossed only briefly. Moreover, I congratulate him on his professional achievements. I would, however, remind Andersen that my review was about his book, not his biography, not his work in Washington DC, and certainly not his 5,000 blog items. Taking *Peoples of the Earth* (*POTE* hereafter) seriously as an academic work, I examined its methods, evidence, and argument in order to assess what the book contributes to the empirical and theoretical understanding of indigenous politics in Latin America. Though the book has its merits, my review suggested that the book has significant empirical and theoretical

weaknesses. Empirically, it contributes little *new* information to the large and growing literature on indigenous politics; theoretically, it uses the literature on ethno-nationalism to frame a comparative history of indigenous politics in the language and categories of national security threats, a move which has disturbing implications. Andersen's puzzling pleas for pity notwithstanding, I stand by those critiques, though I would like to take this opportunity to clarify where we agree and disagree.

It may surprise Andersen to recall that I agree with much of what is written in *POTE*. Indeed, I acknowledged that several chapters of *POTE* "make clear" that Indigenous people "have been excluded by the political projects of elites throughout the hemisphere and that their claims for recognition and collective rights are legitimate and important ones." Andersen joins a wave of scholarly works in criticizing exclusionary political orders and the effects of colonial legacies. These kinds of critiques have been made compellingly by a host of scholarly works in anthropology, history and political science. Indeed, these points are made by the very works Andersen cites to support his own claims on this score (which explains my astonishment at Professor Connor's claim, in support of *POTE*, about the "near total absence" of work on indigenous people).

Additionally, despite the energy he expends in demonstrating that native peoples in the Global North have important experiences to share with native peoples in the Global South, I do not disagree. What I found problematic in his book was the curious unidirectional flow of those experiences, from North to South, as if Native peoples in the North are not also looking to the Andes and even Chiapas for inspiration and insight (not blueprints). Moreover, the notion that native peoples in any part of the world see their own experiences as the kind of "best practices" celebrated by development practitioners who search for models to replicate across the globe misunderstands the ways in which native peoples have already been networking and producing new forms of local-global knowledge. Thus, I agree that Indigenous political agendas are important to contemporary politics and I also agree that indigenous politics involves the transnational dissemination of native knowledge.

Where I have a serious disagreement is with the more original argument of *POTE*, namely the claim that the literature on ethno-nationalism offers a useful framework for understanding the potential security threats associated with the “Indigenous challenge.” The main concern I raised was about the question of evidence. There is especially thin support for the unsettling warnings in the book of the “beginnings of...irredentist, ethno-nationalism, a powerfully parochial movement of the sort that has wreaked havoc in the Balkans” (*POTE* 31). Andersen confirms in his reply that this is not a work supported by original field research, but one based on secondary sources, newspaper accounts, and Internet sources. While such “experience-distant” materials (to borrow Clifford Geertz’s expression) are of course fair game for scholarly analysis, they can often contribute to an analytical trap described well by Eric Wolf, the danger of reification:

Concepts like "nation," "society," and "culture" name bits, and threaten to turn names into things. Only by understanding these names as bundles of relationships, and by placing them back into the field from which they have been abstracted, can we hope to avoid misleading inferences and to increase our share of understanding (Wolf 1982: 3).

I think that this problem is especially acute in the literature on “ethno-nationalism” as “ethnic conflict” becomes something of a cookie-cutter concept, taken across the globe, with each instance having the potential to take on a limited number of shapes: ethnic violence, rebellion, irredentism and civil war. In times of the “war on terror,” radical Islamism is added to the list. But as Wolf warns, without understanding local connections—the kind of understanding that comes through engaged primary field or archival research—the danger of misleading reification is significant. The most troubling example I discuss in my review is the case of Chiapas, Mexico, where Andersen suggests that there is reason to worry that militant Islam is on its way in.

This brings us to the comparison that bothers Andersen the most, the comparison I suggest between his kind of arguments and those made by former Vice President Cheney. Once again, for the record, I never accused Andersen of being like Cheney in any of the morally reprehensible ways that Andersen lists (e.g. endorsing torture). I only suggested that Andersen

was making a Cheney-esque kind of argument: if the outcome is bad enough, we don't have to worry about how likely it is to actually happen. As I explained in my review, Andersen comes very close to this kind of argument in discussing the threat of "militant Islam" in Chiapas. He does not dispute the fact that the very article in the *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* that Andersen cites in support for his claims of emerging links between Chiapas and extremist outside groups in fact argues that "no concrete evidence has surfaced to date substantiating such claims" (Zambellis 2006). There are certainly security threats in Mexico, especially ones linked to drug violence in the north where I grew up, but there is no evidence that this has anything to do with a small group of Spanish Murabitan missionaries who sought, and failed, to connect with Subcomandante Marcos.

The case of Chiapas emerges again in Andersen's insistence on comparing the Shining Path with the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional. Andersen suggests that both guerilla armies are examples of non-indigenous Marxists relegating "Indians" to a "lower tier," pretending to speak in their name, and putting them in danger (POTE p. 118; Andersen "A Refutation"). Without wanting to romanticize the Zapatistas in any way (as they, like all political actors, are hardly beyond critique), to suggest that Abimael Guzmán and Subcomandante Marcos are similar kinds of figures or that their organizations are similar kinds of Marxist guerrilla movements is to lack a fundamental understanding of the contrast between a Maoist army in Peru dedicated to extreme violence ("rivers of blood" is what Guzmán called for) mostly against indigenous people, and the EZLN, which the *New York Times* dubbed a "post-modern revolution" made up mostly by Mayan men and women and that waged most of its battles in the media and Internet rather than in the jungles of Chiapas. Whatever one thinks of Marcos, one cannot reduce the EZLN to its most famous spokesman.

But what about Bolivia's or Venezuela's links to Iran, Andersen asks? Surely that must be something policy-makers in Washington should worry about. I have no doubt that they already are. But these are complex geo-political questions that have less to do with the specter of ethno-nationalism and much more to do with the short-comings of US policy in

the region and the changing dynamics of South-South relations that involve not just Iran but also India, Russia, China, and Brazil. Our understanding of what happens in southern Mexico or anywhere else in Latin America is undermined, not enhanced, by long-distance alarmism.

Andersen says that I am wrong to say that he does not include interviews with indigenous people, but to be clear, of the *cited* interviews in his references, I cannot find one with an indigenous person in Latin America. In his reply, he does not cite any, but rather argues that he has other sources of data, from Tribal websites, indigenous declarations, and other sources. I don't discount the importance of those sources, but I do find it strange that someone who has worked in Latin America, as a journalist and advocate, could not find a way to include original interview materials that might confirm what his Internet sources suggest.

Additionally, Andersen claims that I am blind to the places in his book where he ties his "own personal experiences with the topic(s) of the book (22, 116-117, 232)." Those pages include references to Andersen's conversation with Frank Dobyns in 1975 about Peru (22), and references to articles Andersen wrote on Sendero Luminoso in the early 1980s (116-117, 232). These references, however, say little about the coming ethno-nationalist dangers that Andersen claims might be on Peru's horizon in the name of Ollanta Humala. For those, we must again rely on experience-distant sources like editorials in Argentine newspapers. While Andersen stands by his "well-stocked bibliography," I simply suggest that he could have stocked it a bit better with, say, this Peruvian presidential candidate's own speeches. Let me again say that this point has nothing to do with whether or not one should support the nationalism of Ollanta Humala (I do not), but rather about the choices that a scholar makes about the sources for his understanding of that nationalism. I think Andersen could have done better in his book. That is not a personal attack, it is my professional assessment of this scholarly work.

Andersen says I misunderstand and misrepresent him. I don't think I do. He warns that if indigenous people and their demands are not integrated within the democratic system, they will be pushed toward radical, anti-systemic ways. This is an old and familiar argument, perhaps

made most famous by the US political scientist Samuel Huntington. Like Huntington's work, Andersen has a perhaps unintentional conservative bias: social protest is a sign of trouble, dissent must be safely channeled for the sake of political order and US interests. I hope Andersen will not mind the comparison, as Huntington was an active participant in Democratic Party activities and an influential voice in academic and policy circles. However, he had some notoriously bad ideas like his notion during the Vietnam War that bombing might actually speed-up rural-to-urban migration, thus having a beneficial impact on the processes of modernization. Andersen is, of course, not advocating this kind of "forced-draft urbanization" theory and is instead arguing for increased attention to the rural indigenous countryside. Nevertheless, by focusing so much attention on the potential dangers that resemble those of the Balkans or radical Islam, Andersen risks moving the conversation over Indigenous peoples from one about democracy or human rights to one about ethno-nationalism, terrorism and security. Again, following Eric Wolf, the danger is not just academic, as in the process of reification, indigenous people become "irredentist" threats and Latin American communities become "ungoverned spaces." As Wolf noted in his critique of Huntington, "Names thus become things, and things marked with an X can become targets of war" (Wolf 1982: 7). During times when the language of "terror" threatens to subsume all challenges to political order, we must be on guard for dangerous reifications that rip complex relationships from their context and place them within a grid of security threats. This may not be what Andersen intends, but in my view, this is one of his book's implications.

Works Cited

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