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### **Reseña/Review**

Pedro Pitarch, Shannon Speed, and Xochitl Leyva Solano, eds. *Human Rights in the Maya Region: Global Politics, Cultural Contentions, and Moral Engagements* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

### **Rights as Resistance in Maya Communities**

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This edited volume does an impressive job of bringing together diverse commentary from some of the most learned scholars working on questions of human rights and resistance in the Maya region. While the chapters span two countries (Mexico and Guatemala), a wide range of ethno-linguistic communities, and a diversity of disciplines (with a strong emphasis on anthropology), they hang together remarkably well, such that the volume itself emerges as a true conversation between its contributors.

This is partly achieved thanks to the excellent opening and closing chapters that frame the book. The introduction, by Shannon Speed and

Xochitl Leyva Solano, does an outstanding job mapping not only the book's area of inquiry, but also the broader field of thinking to which it seeks to contribute. It lays out the three central questions of the volume: first, given that human rights are often understood as a Western discourse, how do they mesh with Maya concepts and practices?; second, what are the implications, for Maya communities, of the way human rights reconfigures their relation to the state?; and third, how are human rights appropriated by Maya communities for resistance? The concluding essay by Richard Wilson revisits the book's central themes, identifying commonalities and differences among the various analyses offered by contributors and exploring the implications of these for both study and struggle.

Sandwiched between these two chapters are eleven essays by top scholars in the field, exploring such issues as the distinctiveness of cultural rights (Rodolfo Stavenhagen); the politics and history of justice sector reform in postwar Guatemala (Rachel Sieder); the challenges of taking testimony from massacre survivors (Victoria Sanford); the occasional—or frequent—mismatch between international rights activists' frame for understanding conflict and the realities on the ground in specific indigenous communities (David Stoll); the role of liberation theology and the Catholic Church in promoting specific understandings of rights (Christine Kovic); and many others.

While many of the essays are thought-provoking and original, a few stood out as particularly so for me. Pedro Pitarch's brilliant chapter explores how the translation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into Tzeltal alters and adjusts the original text in an effort to make it comprehensible and relevant to Tzeltal communities. An article-by-article comparison of the original text with its Tzeltal rendering provides incredibly rich illustrations of what Pitarch rightly calls a "dialogue" between universal human rights in the Western, liberal tradition and Tzeltal understandings of respect rooted in mutual obligation. The point is not simply to document the foreignness of human rights for many Tzeltal people, but rather to explore the challenges that emerge in translating human rights, both its terms and concepts, in Maya cultures. Similarly, Irma Otzoy focuses on gender inequalities within indigenous practice, but

without recurring to a Western individualized rights framework. In other words, while she is wary of the way arguments about the complementarity of male and female in Maya culture may conceal or even reify deeply unequal practices that harm women, she still insists that indigenous culture has much to offer in terms of advocating equality without succumbing to universal paradigms. Like Pitarch's, Otzoy's analysis is rich with nuance, neither seeking to lambast nor lionize human rights, but rather to plumb the tensions and possibilities that emerge at the juncture of two different norm systems.

Speed and Leyva Solano, similarly, examine the way differently situated groups (EZLN communities, paramilitary-affiliated Chol communities, and ladino elites from San Cristóbal) understand and deploy discourses of human rights to serve particular political ends. In so doing, the authors provide a more nuanced analysis of human rights that speaks to a number of broader debates. Most importantly, they argue, such an understanding allows us to escape the paralysis of the relativism vs. universalism debates that have gripped anthropology in particular, but also the interdisciplinary field of human rights scholarship. The point is not that human rights were not originally introduced as a Western concept, nor that indigenous groups have their own unique and distinct human rights tradition, but rather that through a dialogic process involving multiple global and local actors, multiple interpretations of human rights have emerged. Indigenous groups have embraced the concept, but redeploy it today in a myriad of ways that reflect the diversity of subjectivities; to regard human rights as a top-down imposition, then, denies Mayas their agency and elides the rich complexity of meanings and purposes ascribed to the concept in Chiapas today.

Unfortunately, several of the essays are not particularly timely, in ways that may limit their relevance to some contemporary debates. For example, David Stoll's otherwise compelling essay says it "looks ahead" to the release of the UN's Truth Commission report, which, as of this writing, is over ten years old; Stener Ekern's essay, written in 2000, details problems in the justice sector in the 1990s, yet Rachel Sieder's contribution to this same volume illustrates that there have been many changes to that

system since that time. Indeed, human rights work has shifted importantly in the last decade. While these articles may be valuable as commentaries on particular historical moments, to what extent do they speak to ongoing questions in human rights? To provide a more concrete example, much of Stoll's critique of human rights groups stems from their historical insistence on understanding complex community relations in terms of a simplistic civil and political rights emphasis; he argues, for example, that such a framework leads human rights groups to artificially frame inter-communal conflicts as state violations of a particular community's rights. Certainly he is right that conflicts over land have loomed large in Guatemala, yet until recently mainstream human rights groups were reluctant to comment on issues other than civil and political rights. To some extent, however, this has changed with many human rights groups, including such mainstream outfits as Amnesty International, broadening their mandates to include social and economic rights over the course of the past 8-9 years. Amnesty even released a report on land tenure in Guatemala in 2006. My point here is not to argue that Stoll's arguments are no longer valid; they may indeed still tell us a great deal, but it would be useful to take into account these developments, which have changed the field of human rights in such dramatic ways in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

All of this said, any frustration this engenders stems from the fact that these arguments are so thought-provoking that I, in reading them, would like the dialogue to continue up to the present moment; a less compelling set of ideas would not have such an effect. All in all, the book contains many valuable insights from a diverse set of scholars and is highly recommended for anyone exploring the study of human rights, indigenous rights, postwar politics and social change in the Americas.