



Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall 2012, 615-620
www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Rice, Roberta. *The New Politics of Protest: Indigenous mobilization in Latin America's neoliberal era*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012.

Class, Ethnicity, Nationalism

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In June 1990, a massive Indigenous uprising shook Ecuador's white-mestizo dominant culture to the core. This historic development launched what I have termed a "generation of 1990" in which in a largely unprecedented manner subaltern actions influenced a series of academic studies.¹ My own work as a historian very much falls into this

¹ See, for example, Melina Selverston-Scher, *Ethnopolitics in Ecuador: Indigenous Rights and the Strengthening of Democracy* (Coral Gables, Fla, Boulder, CO: North-South Center Press at the University of Miami. Distributed by Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001); Amalia Pallares, *From Peasant Struggles to Indian Resistance: The Ecuadorian Andes in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002); Suzana Sawyer, *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador*, American encounters/global interactions (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004); José Antonio Lucero, *Struggles of Voice: The Politics*

tradition in a field that is otherwise occupied by anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists.² I traveled to Ecuador to undertake my dissertation research on the history of Indigenous movements quite influenced by those who were critical of the left's usurpation of Indigenous struggles for their own political purposes.³ My intent was to write a book about the evolution of Indigenous organizing efforts through a series of stages that emphasized a class analysis early in the twentieth century, through an embrace of ethnic identities in the 1960s, to finally an ethno-nationalist discourse in the 1980s. I have no idea who originated this tripartite construction, but it was and continues to be the dominant paradigm for understanding Indigenous movements in Ecuador and beyond. The problem I encountered, however, was that this neat schematic did not match the records I encountered in the archives. Early Indigenous organizations embraced their ethnic identities, and the most successful contemporary Indigenous movements did not ignore a class analysis of societal problems. Furthermore, I discovered that the discourse of Indigenous nationalities was not a recent innovation, but rather a construct of the Communist International in the 1920s and something that the Ecuadorian Communist Party kept alive throughout the twentieth century.⁴ I came to realize that the key audience for my work was not my fellow historians, but rather anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists who remained blissfully unaware of this early history. Political scientist Roberta Rice's book *The New Politics of Protest* indicates that the old paradigm has withstood my critique rather well. Despite the efforts of those of us who applaud interdisciplinary studies, the distance between epistemological assumptions that divide different disciplines remains as entrenched as ever.

As with many of our works, Rice begins her short book with the story of Ecuador's June 1990 uprising and from there moves to parallel

of *Indigenous Representation in the Andes*, Pitt Latin American series (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008); Robert Andolina, Nina Laurie, and Sarah A. Radcliffe, *Indigenous Development in the Andes: Culture, Power, and Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

² Marc Becker, *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements*, Latin American otherwise (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

³ See, for example, Ward Churchill, ed. *Marxism and Native Americans* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1983).

⁴ Marc Becker, "Indigenous Nationalities in Ecuadorian Marxist Thought," *A Contracorriente* 5, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 1-46.

movements in Bolivia, Peru, and Chile. She justifies the selection of these four case studies because “they provide a full range of variation on the dependent variable” of why and where social protests emerge against neoliberal reforms (13). All four are Andean countries with significant Indigenous populations. Yet, Rice states that while protests have been unified and national in scope in Ecuador and Bolivia, they remained divided and regional in Peru and Chile. Furthermore, she characterizes the protests as peaceful, well organized, and targeting the entire neoliberal model in Ecuador and Bolivia, while being more militant, spontaneous, and limited to targeting specific policies in Peru and Chile. The inclusion of both positive and negative examples of popular resistance to neoliberalism allows for the identification of factors that facilitate and inhibit social protest movements.

In examining when, where, and why social protests against neoliberalism have and have not emerged, Rice asks three interrelated questions: Why have Indigenous peoples mobilized in some contexts and not others, are there discernable patterns in these protests, and do these protests translate into significant political changes? In responding to these questions, Rice points to what she sees as two essential factors: the character of local political institutions, and historical patterns of incorporation of popular sectors into these institutions. She contends that the most powerful social movements are most likely to emerge in political contexts that are not limited by a strong presence of union, class-based, or leftist organizing traditions. Rice draws three conclusions from her study. First, weak institutions tend to translate into more social conflict and political protest. Second, mobilizing around ethnic identities develops as Indigenous peoples emerge out of the tutelage of the political left. Finally, neoliberal reforms demobilize labor unions and leftist political parties, opening up spaces for new actors.

Rice openly acknowledges her personal, professional, and intellectual debts to the prolific work of Donna Lee Van Cott. Rice’s work reflects many of the strengths, but unfortunately also the same shortcomings, of Van Cott’s innovative studies. Both scholars root their studies in extensive ethnographic research that includes both personal interviews and participant observation that gives their work an empirical grounding sometimes missing in the field. Nevertheless,

Rice's theory, language, and academic framing are largely confined to a political science audience, and those who find a heavy reliance on models and their potential for predicting behavior patterns useful. Many of us in the humanities rather than the social sciences, however, find such an approach to be overly optimistic in its ability to determine the notoriously voluntaristic nature of the actions of the humans who inhabit this planet.

My primary issue, however, with both Rice's work as well as that of Van Cott and many other political scientists who work in the field of Indigenous movements is the deeply conservative nature of their writings. I doubt that most of these scholars recognize this orientation, or would identify themselves politically as such. In part, my objection is due to a limited time horizon of their studies that leads to a misunderstanding of how recent Indigenous movements emerged out of a much longer tradition of leftist organizing efforts. More importantly, however, I identify this political orientation as a tendency of political scientists to emphasize the role of institutions over other concerns such as social justice. By no means does Rice embrace institutions to the degree of others in the field, but my quibble with her analysis is how she interprets challenges to these institutions. Anti-neoliberal protests, and more broadly challenges to capitalism, can acquire either reactionary or progressive aspects, in the sense of either desiring to move back to an earlier world or forward to imagining a new and different world. Rice's linking of anti-austerity protests with identity politics ignores a much broader historical and social context of struggles rooted in a class analysis, and focusing on movements that allegedly limit their demands to ethnic issues misses their much more radical challenges to structural and economic injustices. More limited protests of ethnic exclusion do not present a challenge to established institutions, and hence can more easily and comfortably be celebrated.

Rice positions her work as "historical-institutionalist" that falls within the tradition of New Social Movements (NSMs). In the 1990s sociologists began to write of NSMs to distinguish them from older movements that were typically rooted in traditional political parties, labor unions, or guerrilla insurgencies. Leftist scholars challenged an implicitly conservative ideological agenda in much of the research on NSMs, including an apparent desire to dismiss social class as a tool of

analysis. While the old movements were rooted in marxist understandings of class struggle, NSMs embraced the more limited goals of identity politics. Many scholars, including political scientist Judith Adler Hellman, challenged what they interpreted as an artificial division between old and new movements.⁵ These scholars recognized that “old social movements” had not entirely ignored identity politics, and “new” movements had not discarded a class-consciousness. Rather than solely engaging in class struggles or embracing the limited goals of identity politics, both the old and new movements repeatedly crossed these imaginary boundaries in order to transform hegemonic structures. A further problem of much of the research emerging out of NSM is a superficial understanding and use of historical methodologies (historiography and the past, as E.H. Carr notes, are not the same thing⁶).

A problem for many of us who write about contemporary politics is that on-the-ground events quickly outpace slow publishing schedules. By the time our research makes its way into print, it can be hopelessly outdated. That is also an unavoidable problem with this book. It was not that long ago that the key issue facing social movements was whether it was best to pursue their struggles for social justice in the realm of street protests or through electoral party politics (a third avenue of armed struggle has largely been off the table for quite some time now). With a dramatic shift leftward in many South American governments, however, we are now largely living within a post-neoliberal period. The issues Rice examines in this book have now been largely displaced by intense and growing tensions between social movements and these new left governments, particularly around their neo-extractivist policies. In fact, the case studies that form the basis of Rice’s work (Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile) are where these tensions have been most intense, as evidenced in an article by Uruguayan journalist and critic Raúl Zibechi in *NACLA Report on the Americas*.⁷

Even with these shortcomings, Rice’s book is an important and

⁵ Judith Adler Hellman, “The Riddle of New Social Movements: Who They Are and What They Do,” in *Capital, Power, and Inequality in Latin America*, ed. Sandor Halebsky and Richard L. Harris (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 165-183.

⁶ Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Knopf, 1962).

⁷ Raúl Zibechi, “Latin America: A New Cycle of Social Struggles,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 37-40, 49.

original contribution to the study of subaltern challenges to neoliberal economic systems. While many studies of resistance focus on successful examples, her work is a model for comparing effective strategies with those that have been less potent in their political outcomes. In these ways, her work opens up avenues for future study of Indigenous mobilizations in Latin America.