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Review/Reseña

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Guerrilla Auditors and the Politics of Transparency in Neoliberal Paraguay

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Guerrilla Auditors is a path-breaking sociological analysis of peasant land struggles in Paraguay following the collapse of the Stroessner regime in 1989. Based on ethnographic research and participant observation in Eastern Paraguay, especially in Tekojoja and other communities in the Department of Caaguazú, Hetherington documents the impact of the rapid extension of soybeans through the territory on peasants and their struggle to defend properties while navigating through Paraguay's convoluted legal system. Unlike guerrilla groups in Colombia or

Guatemala, who employed violence in an attempt to force changes in state policies, the guerrillas referred to in this study on Paraguay are peasants who engaged government officials and state bureaucracy mostly nonviolently in attempts to claim legal titles to their properties. The intricate analysis of the strategies peasants employed to navigate Paraguay's political situation reveals a system to sway official policies that is in the end perhaps even more complicated than methods employed by violent guerrilla forces. The book is also an analysis of ways in which rural thinking about property and information conflict with bureaucratic reform projects promoted by international experts. One of the book's main argument is that during the transitional years between the dictatorship and the defeat of the new social democratic party Encuentro Nacional in 1993, two types of political subjects became important in Paraguay: the peasants (*campesinos*) and the "new democrats," those students and urban professionals who, tired of the former regime, saw themselves as sole leaders of the political transition. While not the only political actors during this time, these groups were the most politically active leaders throughout the Paraguayan transition. With a firm command of both urban and rural conditions, official and peasant dynamics, the author also provides an insightful analysis of the legal system for bureaucratic documentation in Paraguay. Hetherington's analysis clarifies the complicated ways that bureaucracy functions in much of Latin America: this book will be extremely helpful to anyone wishing to research government archives or study state bureaucracies in Asunción and throughout the Southern Cone.

Author Kregg Hetherington is a social anthropologist who teaches in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. His broader work focuses on environmental politics, bureaucracy and international development in Latin America and examines how environmental knowledge becomes politicized during moments of rapid social change and on the frontier between expert and lay forms of knowledge. Organized into five chapters with an introduction and epilogue, *Guerrilla Auditors* begins by situating the study within the sociological literature and introducing the country and time period. The depository of documents from the former Stroessner

regime, known as the “archive of terror,” took on a life of its own during Paraguay’s transition to democracy and the new age of so-called political transparency because it was soon overwhelmed by claims filed by victims of the regime. The failed coup attempt by General Lino Oviedo in March 1998 helped to link political events in the capital with rural peasants because it showed them it was possible to win their demands by taking the government to the brink of collapse, and also that the political system took advantage of peasant organizational force when convenient, but otherwise increasingly marginalized their rural political potential when necessary. The other peasant reality of this time period was the rapid extension of soy production throughout eastern Paraguay. By 2004, the forests had been razed and replaced by soybeans; the nation had become the world’s fourth-largest soybean producer and as the single export commodity, soy accounted for almost 11 percent of GDP. The rapid extension of soy through rural Eastern Paraguay, farmed mainly by Brazilian migrants, displaced the underemployed peasants, slashed their wages, destroyed their landscape and totally altered the countryside. Blaming the rapid changes on “neoliberal hegemony,” peasant organizers described this process as an accelerated project of dispossession, displacement and death.

The second chapter focuses on land tenure systems in rural Paraguay, *latifundia*, and especially on the peasant struggles for land. Land distribution in Paraguay is one of the worst in Latin America, with 2.8% of beneficiaries holding 74% of the land. Peasants easily linked current takeovers of land by soybean farmers to the violence they had endured under the dictatorship, and saw their ongoing struggle for land as a continuation of abuses between the earlier rule and present loss of land. Their term for ill-gotten land, *tierra malhabida*, best expresses the *campesinos’* sense of rural injustice and diminishes the significance of the national move to democracy by removing the significance of its central historical moment. Throughout the book, Hetherington contextualizes his analysis of Paraguay within broader trends in the post-Cold War world. As such, the duplicity of the “rule of law” that peasants in Paraguay have faced is a trend common to the decline of traditional radical politics in favor of the pursuit of rights and law-based strategies to progressive projects. The

celebration of the rule of law tends to confine progressive ethics, in this analysis, to a kind of legal positivism that views law as the will of the sovereign and thus separate from the actual making of the law itself. The net effect is the exclusion of peasants from the legal process and the formal obfuscation of their attempts to recover land and land titles. Thus, for the new democrats in Paraguay, the political transition was about establishing the rule of law while decentering sovereignty from the dictator to the public sphere. By relegating the injustice of ill-gotten land to the past dictatorship, the new rulers tried to forge a path to a more transparent, procedural democratic future. As Hetherington shows, the past serves the new democrats as a convenient and safe depository for the very concept of injustice, a strategy which allows them to obfuscate and ignore current peasant land demands. This is sociological analysis at a high level.

In Chapter Three, Hetherington analyzes and defines privatization in greater depth and engages the tensions between the two rural groups that have dominated eastern Paraguay: the peasants and the indigenous people who often struggled with them over land. With background on the dictatorship's March to the East in the 1970s, through which Stroessner opened up forested land to peasant settlement and development projects, the author analyzes the distinctions between both groups and explains why peasant goals eventually came to conflict with the transitional goals and narratives pushed by the New Democrats. The elite commonly identified peasant claims to land as "precarious" and "clandestine" to diminish their stakes and evoke the elite belief that the poor are incapable of legitimately holding full rights to land ownership. Though throughout this analysis the author shows his firm command of both legal and rural conditions in Paraguay, he could have further developed the results of the long struggle between peasants and indigenous people over land that developed, especially during the 1980s. Another dimension of this drama that could be further explored would be tensions between peasants and foreign settlers, both Brazilian and especially the Mennonites, who bought up huge tracts of land and came to dominate agricultural production in Eastern Paraguay.

The struggle for land ownership moves back to the capital in Chapter Four with an analysis of the peasant activists, whom the author has called 'guerrilla auditors' because of their aggressive strategies for engaging the legal processes to secure land tenure. The peasants engaged in legal struggles needed two key weapons to fight their battles in the capital: first, a corresponding file number for their suit and then secondly, a clientelistic relationship with someone on the staff of the government office in question. The bureaucratic process thus commonly involves an economy of favors, most of them related to moving papers from file to file to further along the claim, but rarely producing the desired solution to the legal question involved. Hetherington's explanation of the internal machination of *gestoría* politics was insightful and to the point; it summarizes so clearly how legal procedures in Paraguay (and often in other Latin American nations) take place. What is important in this process is not the content of the documents, land titles and files, but rather the physical documents themselves: the papers thus become in and of themselves the political problem of which the new democrats wished to rid the nation, yet to which they contributed themselves as they played their part in their longstanding political culture.

Throughout his analysis, Hetherington frequently shows the continuities between current political morass and the former regime. Following the coup, the new democrats tried to assert their sovereignty of the public sphere over the state apparatus by creating a new economy of representation around the government. They intended these new policies of transparency to solve earlier practices of the gift economy that had sustained both regime and elite corruption. The new democrats, though, had not counted on the importance that the peasants still placed on the documents that the former dictator Stroessner had given to them, especially land titles. Armed with the documentation, the *campesinos* tried to push for the continuation and strengthening of land reform. The dictator's political organization, the Colorado Party, tried to play both sides at once but ultimately failed.

The final chapter uses one specific peasant property, the much-contested Finca 13, to illustrate the legal problem of land ownership and

market value in eastern Paraguay. Following a meeting between peasants and a politician at a huge squatter settlement named after war hero Mariscal López, in a populist spectacle the president of the Rural Welfare Institute gave the author's peasant activist friend a large binder full of documents copied from a public archive as a good-will token. Virtually worthless as far as its content was concerned, the meaning of the gift lay rather in the granting itself and what the gift represented. For the land to be trans-actable once more following the conflict in question, the government needed to remove it from the market by political decree and then launder it back through the folk process that peasants call in hybrid Guaraní and Spanish "orerealidad," by giving it back to the peasants as land reform. Only once titled to the peasants in this manner could the land reenter the market and be saleable. Through this "populist spectacle," the author asserts, "the binder of administrative documents evoked the openness of the process, the symmetry of giver and receiver, and the capacity of the receiver to double-check the oral claims of the giver against a written record" (218). The audit function in question was not just about extending recognition, the author makes clear, but about encouraging the recipient of the gift to examine the government and its beneficence, fulfilling thus the new form of doing government under the new democratic way. Rather than saying "I see you and therefore you are good," Hetherington explains, the audit function under the new political format makes clear that "You see me, and therefore I am good." The concluding analysis of transparency as a populist political strategy is critical to understanding the anthropology of post-Cold War development certainly in Paraguay, but also throughout Latin America in general. Finally, the epilogue is a well-written examination of the new situation that transparency politics in Paraguay faced after 2008, when the Colorado Party lost the executive for the first time in sixty-one years.

While the sociological analysis in this book might prove challenging for undergraduate audiences, with instruction it should be accessible to graduate students and certainly to scholars of the Southern Cone and specifically Paraguayan politics. The subject is specific to peasants and politics in recent Paraguayan history, but the author's comfortable prose

makes this well-written book accessible to readers who may not be familiar with this specific country, rural Latin America, and the intricacies of politics in the Southern Cone. I wish that this analysis of Paraguay's legal system had been available twenty years ago; it would have significantly improved my own understanding and navigation of government documents and offices in the Asunción archives. I recommend this book as a path breaking contribution to the sociological literature about Paraguayan politics and peasants.