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# New Languages of the State: Indigenous Resurgence and the Politics of Knowledge in Bolivia

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*New Languages of the State: Indigenous Resurgence and the Politics of Knowledge in Bolivia.* **Bret Gustafson.** Duke University Press, 2009. Narrating Native Histories Series. xx + 331 pp., maps, figures, notes references, index. \$84.95 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-8223-4546-6

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In this work, Gustafson provides a strikingly original analysis of the struggle of the Guarani for legitimacy and power within the developing Bolivian state. The work is at one level a study of the process of school reform, detailing efforts to institute a bilingual and intercultural educational system in Guarani schools. More generally, it explores Guarani engagement with the politics of knowledge as it shapes both indigeneity and the Bolivian state.

The role of education in the politics of Latin American *state* building has attracted anthropologists since Paulo Freire, where education was considered either an instrument of imposing conformity or a tool to transform the world. Bret Gustafson, in *New Languages of the State: Indigenous Resistance and the Politics of Knowledge in Bolivia*, joins recent work in Andean studies that challenges any facile understanding of education as either a tool of domination or of resistance. Here, the state and ethnic minorities struggle over educational reforms that both reinforce and contradict the status quo.

This work focuses on the ethnic politics of Guarani language in a state that is predominantly indigenous-language speaking. The Guarani, however, are by any definition a minority, comprising less than one percent of the population of Bolivia. They have been ignored by the state apparatus and isolated from the Quechua and Aymara majority. Entering the educational struggles within and between the Guarani, the Bolivian indigenous community and the state, this author provides an ethnography of an extremely complex and subtle dialogue of indigeneity, knowledge and power.

The study engages two historical processes that converge at the end of the twentieth century. First, in the late 1980s, the state began an aggressive campaign of neoliberal reforms that advocated interculturalism. Market-oriented policy reforms were accompanied by an elite-led rethinking of state education. Bilingual interculturalism became central to the project of state transformation. After decades of struggling for inclusion, teacher unions and indigenous schooling projects found the opening to convert their ideas and experiments into state policy. Public school education, and specifically bilingual curricular reforms, became a critical tool in legitimizing ethnic minorities' place in the national dialogue.

The last twenty years has seen a second critical process in Bolivian indigeneity, that being the resurgence of Guarani ethnic identity and power. Centuries of state violence and economic domination had distanced the Guarani from the conceptual and social arenas of power. In a movement that Gustafson suggests finds its antecedents in violent Guarani uprisings of the 19th centuries, Guarani activists in the 1980s opened a dialogue about educational reform with the rapidly expanding state infrastructure. The Guarani entered into a process of indigenous resurgence as an ethnic minority in a multicultural state.

Gustafson traces this "collision and convergence" of state policy and Guarani ethnic resurgence through the national project of *educación intercultural bilingüe (EIB)*, specifically the translation of texts and teaching materials from Spanish to Guarani. Working alongside Guarani translators in the development of Guarani curricula, Gustafson is introduced to the interplay of

ideas and attitudes that shape the materials. Envisioned here through Gramsci's frame of "organic intellectuals", Guarani translators seek to assert control over the message of the texts as the state shifts its own rhetoric from reinforcing the status quo of coloniality to espousing a new ideology of neoliberal nation-building. Gustafson's follows the process of educational reform over a decade, as the state first fosters indigenous independence in the work, then asserts ever-greater control, eventually moving translators from the field to the capital city to work in state offices and finally contracting the work to a private, corporate entity.

More than simply a story of dyadic relationship between an ethnic minority and the nation-state, Gustafson explores the rise to power of Bolivia's indigenous majority, which is dominated by Aymara and Quechua speakers who feel little in common with the small Guarani population. Although there is a long tradition of Quechua and Aymara education in Bolivia, the Guarani have only recently attracted the attention of neoliberal reformers. The Guarani are forced to negotiate a balance between joining with the indigenous coalition, without being overwhelmed by the project of the dominant, highland ethnic groups.

In rejecting the dichotomy between indigeneity and the state, he argues that we must also transcend the notion that the Guarani simply use educational reform to defend an ideology of exclusion. Guarani activists often sought legitimacy as an ethnic minority by articulating with the developing neo-liberal movement within the state. The Guarani educational reform agency chose to work within the system to strengthen their position within this developing inter-cultural movement.

Gustafson provides a nuanced and complex picture of the shifting positions and processes of both subaltern and dominant groups. He argues that Guarani activists' attempts to manage this changing topography of statehood forces them to shift strategies, at times rejecting the overtures of state incorporation, and at other times reaching out to state structures to achieve a place in the multiethnic, pluricultural state. But it would be an error to suggest that the diverse Guarani actors and agencies are unified over two decades of educational reform. Gustafson succeeds in capturing the diverse voices and movements within the Guarani ethnic resurgence. In a society where indigenous movements have often drawn considerable energy from the politicized ideologies of highland miners, the Guarani must seek their own language of engagement with state power. As the state changes its intentions and attentions, the Guarani repeatedly reposition themselves to the best advantage.

The work makes a major contribution in rethinking the means of writing historical ethnography. Gustafson's considers this analysis of the historical processes of confrontation between the Guarani and both the coloniality and nation-building of the state a "multiscalar processual ethnography." The narrative moves from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, using the Guarani violent resistance of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to give meaning to the work of contemporary Guarani activists in both the eyes of both the Guarani and the larger mestizo population. On one hand, he effectively documents the shifting state of Bolivian politics, as they lurch between neoliberal impulses and multi-cultural inclusiveness. On the other, Gustafson succeeds in inserting the anthropologist's own perspective, with his conflicted role and relationships.

The result would be overwhelming if it were not for the skilled writing that Gustafson brings to the task. As his text shifts between observation, anecdote and analysis, the reader has the feeling of standing at his elbow in the field. The reader not only sees the anthropologist as the scribe for the Guarani narrative, but watches the process as it unfolds over two decades, with the author's continual struggle to remain both accurate in his conceptualization and relevant in his

efforts to aid the process. We accompany him as he repeatedly shifts his critical lens, just as the Guarani shift their methods and their message.

Two overarching messages are clear in this work: one conceptual and one methodological. First, Gustafson forces us to rethink our understanding of neo-liberalism as a force of assimilation. Gustafson challenges the idea that that neoliberal reforms are simply a tool for state control. In the Bolivian case, EIB plays a mediating and moderating role. In Gustafson's (2009:229) words, "Bilingual and *intercultural* posit a palatable notion of citizenship through difference, while *education* offers a counterpart against specters of potential violence and the project of the neoliberal state; the state may not be interested in or capable of asserting a singular set of powers and interests."

Second, Gustafson makes clear that anthropologists need new forms of ethnography to explore and represent the increasingly complex forces of modern states. One cannot help but be struck by the shifting frame confronting Gustafson in this research. Neither the state nor the Guarani can be understood as monolithic entities and the identities of both are in flux. As the various sectors articulate, it creates a constantly changing set of negotiations from multiple loci of action, experience and memory.

This work stands among the best of contemporary cultural critiques in anthropology. The work contextualizes the Guarani within the multifaceted ethnic politics of Bolivia, and the shifting winds of neo-liberal reform that swept through Latin America. It provides a careful and nuanced analysis of social conflict situated in the changing institutional relationships and the changing politics of ethnic identity.

Moreover, the ethnographer is embedded in the shifting political and ethnic relations over the years of the research process. We come to see the anthropologist's perspective, itself as a narrative that is privileged by historical processes. The subtle and nuanced writing communicates this with a sense of immediacy that one rarely finds, and which carries the reader into the historical frame of reference. This is a wonderful example of an ethnography that has taken advantage of and benefited from our critique of the objectifying lens of the ethnographic process. In doing so, however, Gustafson takes the opportunity to raise critical questions about the anthropological project in which we are engaged.

Gustafson contextualizes IEB and its actors within the historical shifts from an education of coloniality to that of state neo-liberal pluricultural inclusion. He convincingly explores the conflicting and competing demands within the agency and the vagaries that define the outcomes. This attention to the unique history of Guarani scribes, however, leaves the reader wondering about all the other individual agencies working parallel in Aymara, Quechua, and Spanish language schools, and even the other Guarani institutions. Do we achieve an understanding of the larger historical processes, do we have a better insight as to what constitutes the state and Guarani resurgence, or are we simply more aware of what it isn't?

As the Guarani continue their struggle for identity and power in the contemporary Bolivian state, the reader is called upon to question the degree to which the work is the product of the historical process that it so powerfully analyzes. As a product of that historical process, wouldn't it become a part of the historical struggle in which the Guarani are engaged? If so, does it engage that political struggle? Recognizing this "dilemma of engagement", Gustafson questions whether anthropologists can satisfy demands of others to allow access to the system of knowledge creation that we engage in.

Gustafson has "tried to go beyond the normative stance that exaggerates the power and reason of good governance or the noble suffering of 'good' social movements" (p. 278). But as

Gustafson effectively avoids privileging the standard criticism of the state and makes us aware of the contested process by which the state is recreated through the struggle of the subaltern, does this force us, anthropologists, back into another, more subtle and nuanced neutrality? Has neutrality become the new objectivity? By so carefully analyzing the modicum of power that the Guarani have in this struggle, do we do nothing to use our privileged position in the context to join forces with them in their struggle? Despite Gustafson's best efforts, I fear that the reflexive stance of the anthropologist is as a recorder of rather than an actor in the politics in which he is embedded.

This work provides new understandings of Guarani society and the Bolivian state, as well as their effect on each other. Well researched, thoughtful, and masterfully written, its importance extends beyond indigenous studies or Latin America, raising critical questions and setting a high standard for future ethnographies of the state.