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Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador

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BOOK REVIEWS

Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador. Suzana Sawyer. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. xii + 294 pp., notes, glossary, bibliography, index. \$21.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8223-3272-8. [dukeupress.edu]

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Suzana Sawyer's *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador* is an innovative attempt to bring new objects of analysis into the anthropological domain. The book focuses on a series of events and relations in the early and mid-1990s that tied indigenous Quichua-speaking people of Amazonian Ecuador to the “neoliberal” agenda forwarded by the Ecuadorian state and multinational oil corporations. By exploring these articulations, Sawyer intends to provide insight into the machinations of power in the contemporary global order. At the same time, she warns us to remain aware of the paradoxical effects of globalization, which often lead to the protest and transgression of particularity rather than the docility and acquiescence of homogeneity. By examining these contemporary global concerns in a region more known for “traditional” ethnographic analysis, Sawyer hopes that her book will provoke discussion on what postcolonial fieldwork—and postcolonial ethnography—might be.

Sawyer is always present in the action, making her commitments explicit and her involvements transparent in the demonstrations and meetings that form her main objects of analysis. The majority of her research examines the political maneuvering of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (OPIP), a powerful ethnic federation in Amazonian Ecuador that represents Canelos Quichua, Achuar, and Shiwiar communities. Each chapter of the book focuses on a different political event—revolving around oil, land, and changing relations between the Ecuadorian nation(s) and state—in which OPIP and other indigenous organizations play major roles.

The “Opening” begins in the midst of a meeting between OPIP leaders and the multinational petroleum company ARCO. It serves as a good introduction to the book's three main players: “subaltern groups, transnational capitalism, and a neoliberal state” (p. 17). The historical, political, and economic background material set the stage for the first chapter, “Amazonian Imaginaries,” which follows indigenous protestors as they march from their lowland territories to the national capital of Quito to demand land rights and constitutional reform. Sawyer interprets this event as a larger instance of indigenous collective action aimed at reconfiguring the “material, political, and symbolic meanings

of territory, nationhood, and sovereignty in Ecuador” (p. 30). Chapter 2, on “Crude Excesses,” examines how ARCO sought to sow discord between Canelos Quichua communities and OPIP in order to pave the way for its operations, which were opposed by many indigenous people. Sawyer understands this process of breaking up indigenous collectivities into smaller, more pliable units as an instance of what Timothy Mitchell calls “enframing”: the rhetorical creation of a “neutral space” of interaction-among-equals as a means to divide, contain, and set constraints on collective subjects’ ability to negotiate with state and capital (pp. 59–60).

The next two chapters focus on engagements with the national politics of petroleum. Chapter 3, on “Neoliberal Ironies,” pays close attention to the 1994 “Seventh Round” of oil concession bidding in Quito, where indigenous people—and other citizens—protested the deregulation and liberalization of the oil sector to demand the maintenance of gasoline subsidies and the requirement of environmental impact studies for all oil operations. This chapter also follows OPIP leaders to a World Bank meeting in Washington, D.C., where they successfully lobby against new loans to Ecuador’s state oil company and also helped to stymie the concession licensing so that many oil blocks were never successfully bid on. Chapter 4, on “Corporate Antipolitics,” borrows James Ferguson’s concept of “antipolitics” to analyze how the state and corporations sought to position debate about the “environment” as a technical, rather than a political (or social or historical), question.

The last two substantive chapters of the book depart from questions of oil to look at the politics and economy of land in Ecuador. Conflicting relations to land and environment motivated debate on the government’s replacement of the 1964 Agrarian Reform Law with the 1994 Agrarian Development Law, which aimed to break up communal land holdings and secure private property in order to modernize Ecuador’s agricultural economy as an export-oriented production force. Chapter 5, on “Contested Terrain,” explores the 1994 “Mobilization for Life,” a ten-day stretch of national roadblocks that joined indigenous and nonindigenous *campesino* opposition to the new land laws. Sawyer’s main interest in this chapter is the analysis of how a law that strove to neutralize threatening cultural difference actually had the countereffect of providing “new terrain for political expression” (p. 181), joining indigenous people and colonists as a novel, “counter-hegemonic” coalitional force (p. 151). Chapter 6, on “Liberal Legal-Scapes,” provides a deeper discussion of the debate concerning the 1994 law. In an ideologically revealing move, Sawyer takes us into the heart of a two-week meeting in Quito’s Presidential Palace between state officials and national and regional indigenous leaders. In these discussions, we can see the discursive elaboration of competing visions of the Ecuadorian nation-state, with the “official” desire to make all citizens equal and autonomous, and the indigenous counterdrive to bring history and cultural difference into their self-portrayal as particular, collective actors with specific needs and rights concerning “territory” and “identity.” This analysis sets the stage for the final

section, “Closing: A Plurinational Space,” where Sawyer engages theories of ethnicity and nationalism to explain how indigenous evocations of “nationality” provided the ground for the eventual declaration of Ecuador as an officially “plurinational” country.

The main strength of *Crude Chronicles* is its elaboration of a central focus across a wide range of contexts and topics. Sawyer continuously returns to her key points, and by the end of the book her position is clear. Although many readers might not agree with her basic definitions, she is never unclear about what she means by her guiding terms: “globalization” is “the ever increasing and uneven production and consumption of capital, commodities, technologies, and imaginaries around the globe,” and “neoliberalism” is the “cluster of government policies that aim to privatize, liberalize, and deregulate the national economy so as to encourage foreign investment and intensify export production” (p. 7). The aims, uses, and effects of “neoliberal globalization,” as foisted upon a group of people who do not share its basic principles, are Sawyer’s main concerns. By following indigenous protest and critique, Sawyer provides a new standpoint to examine some of the current contemporary era’s most vexing questions: What happens to citizens when the state seeks to become a “fiscal manager” rather than a provider of social services? How do corporate actors seek to fill this vacuum, as transnational capitalists assume a more “pastoral” stance towards subject populations as their always partial providers of income, health care, and education? And, most generally, what happens to the relation between state, nation, and variously positioned citizen groups when “the free market” is expected to provide solutions to all of life’s problems? These are extremely important issues, and *Crude Chronicles* tackles them head on.

The central weakness of Sawyer’s book is that it only rarely takes us beyond boardrooms and indigenous political rhetoric to see how the “abstract, rational, and formalistic language of democracy, rights, and the liberal subject” (p. 8) is refashioning indigenous self-understandings. Sawyer is obviously inspired by poststructuralist and postcolonial thinking, portraying the key dynamics in terms of “subalterns,” “hegemony,” and “transgression.” She explicitly approves of a Foucauldian project, searching for the forms in which “governmentality”—“the conduct of conduct,” a phrase that reappears continuously throughout the book—operates productively at the most minute levels of practice. Consider the following passage:

In essence, then, transnational capital did more than simply employ indigenous bodies to be docile spectators and cheap labor. It simultaneously was engaged in a project to shape and to govern the capacities, choices, and wills of subjects to conform to a neoliberal reason. The liberal logic of capital accumulation that informed ARCO’s practices intruded ever more intensely into local people’s lives and shifted the terms of debate around identity, rights, and representation. This logic (regardless of how flawed) was profoundly positive—in the technical rather than the ethical sense. Through the creative alignment of interests,

objects, institutions, and bodies, ARCO produced (with the blessing of state agencies) new identities, dispositions, senses of knowing, and possibilities of being among indigenous peoples in Pastaza (p. 9).

This conclusion—that a “liberal logic” led to the production of new “identities, dispositions, senses of knowing, and possibilities of being” among Sawyer’s research population—would require an immense amount of detailed microanalysis to be substantiated. Yet, Sawyer provides only anecdotal evidence, suggesting that such a transformation *must* be the case, rather than how, when, and where it *is* the case. *Crude Chronicles* has very little “traditional” ethnography in it. Sawyer provides sparse data on real-time discourse and practice, aside from narratives of meetings and protest events. Narrative, too, can act as an “enframing” device, as the context-thin chronological reporting of an event or a discussion among culturally different actors eludes the varying interpretations and intentions structuring dialogue and interaction. We never follow the participants through the rest of their everyday lives, and we are left wondering if any of the political rhetoric has a larger social life. In their communities, around the cooking fire, hunting in the forest, speaking Quichua to their children and parents, do these actors really talk about “neoliberalism,” “globalization,” “imperialism,” “territory,” “plurinationality,” “culture,” “identity,” “nation,” “state,” or “environmental conservation”? Or, do the terms that they use to understand their lives show more continuity with other cultural repertoires, constructed in relation to other forces and historical epochs? Without an answer to these questions, can we really talk about neoliberalism’s production of new “possibilities of being”? Sawyer’s ethnography could be strengthened in this regard, and any reader would do well to consider her work alongside Norman E. Whitten, Jr.’s detailed ethnographic writing on Canelos Quichua culture and society, which deals with many of the same individuals, communities, organizations, and events focused on by Sawyer. As she tells us, cultural difference is never a static, simple, or bounded thing. Yet, failing to take cultural difference completely into account in the analysis of intercultural events only reinforces the “neutralizing” and “equalizing” neoliberal understandings that she critiques.

That basic misgiving aside, *Crude Chronicles* is an important and useful book, and it fills a void left in much of the anthropological writing on lowland South America. It would be a good addition to courses on globalization, neoliberal politics and economics, and contemporary Latin America. It would also be a great book to teach with other texts on indigenous Amazonia—a juxtaposition that would help students to imagine how contemporary political analysis could be joined with more fine-grained and open-ended ethnographic research. In this way, Sawyer’s book could help us to imagine what a truly adequate, nuanced, and politically responsible account of contemporary indigenous struggles might look like.