

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Suzana Sawyer. *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. xiv + 312 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3283-1; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3272-5.

Reviewed by Marc Becker (Division of Social Science, Truman State University)

Published on H-LatAm (December, 2004)

Based on anthropological field research in the Ecuadorian Amazon in the 1990s, Suzana Sawyer recounts how a grassroots organization, the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (OPIP), challenged multinational corporations that sought to drill for oil in their territory. OPIP organized a successful march in 1992 to denounce publicly petroleum policies, built alliances with peasants to challenge changes in a 1994 agrarian reform law, and inserted themselves into discussions on constructions of national identities in the 1998 constituent assembly.

Sawyer provides rich ethnographic data on how subalterns organize social movements, and the inevitable conflicts that emerge out of these efforts. In particular, the second chapter examines a conflict over oil giant ARCOs attempt to drill for oil at Villano, and their efforts to establish a parallel Indigenous organization (DICIP) to undermine the more radical actions of OPIP. In the process, she analyzes conflicts between communities, the problem of building unity in a movement, questions of representation, and OPIPs ambivalent relations with ARCO. Sawyer concludes that nothing is inevitable about building a political opposition to neoliberal economic policies that it had to be produced and that Indigenous identity was anything but stable (p. 87). A subsequent chapter delves deeply into questions of representation, including battles over who gains the rights to represents whose interests, as identities are constantly shifting (p. 133).

Chapter five presents a detailed day-by-day description and analysis of the 1994 ten-day “Mobilization for Life,” one of the largest and most significant Indigenous uprisings in recent Ecuadorian history. In this uprising,

Indigenous activists in Ecuador reached across deep regional divides to organize on a national level in a way that is uncommon in Ecuador's fragmented society. Sawyer provides an excellent analysis of how Indigenous concerns with neoliberal economic policies extended across the country.

Through this narrative, Sawyer presents a damning critique of neoliberal policies as played out in a third-world dependent economy. Ecuador has become one of the leading exporters of crude oil to the United States, and this dependency on petroleum has wrecked extensive social and environmental damage on the Amazon. She illustrates the harmful consequences of privatization and other neoliberal reforms on already marginalized populations. At the same time, she illustrates how growing Indigenous protests underscore the weakness of state structures and the limits of their hegemonic influence (p. 209).

This study provides an excellent example of politically engaged research in which Sawyer does not present herself as a neutral observer, but as an activist deeply committed to the rights of Indigenous peoples. Implicitly and perhaps inadvertently, this book underscores the fact that social movements only succeed when they build successful alliances with outside supporters.

As a historian, one methodological quibble I would have with how the book is structured is that it is limited primarily to events that Sawyer directly observed during her field research. It does not examine earlier events that led to the politicization of ethnic identities in Ecuador, nor does it take into account subsequent developments. A final section briefly touches on ongoing discussions over plurinationalism, as well as divisions and problems

with corruption in OPIP as a result of the Bucaram presidency. There is a lot more that could, and perhaps needs, to be said about the roots and current state of Indigenous organizing in Ecuador. The result is a rather narrow slice of a story that is largely lifted out of a broader historical context. Fortunately, however, Sawyer was in the field during an exciting and critically important period of political mobilization when OPIP was at its height. I predict that future historians will find the detail and direct observations as an incredibly useful primary source to understand developments in late-twentieth century Ecuador, a

critical point in time in the history of Indigenous peoples across the Americas, when they inserted themselves into the public sphere.

This does not mean that historians should wait fifty years to read this book. It is well written, easy to read, surprisingly free of jargon, and will be a seminal work to anyone desiring a more profound understanding of how Indigenous movements in Ecuador in the 1990s became a model for social movement organizations. It is a solid contribution to our understandings of current historical developments.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Marc Becker. Review of Sawyer, Suzana, *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. December, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10072>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.