

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY**

# Politicized Identities and Social Movements

Marc Becker

Truman State University, US

[marc@yachana.org](mailto:marc@yachana.org)

---

This essay reviews the following works:

**Earth Politics: Religion, Decolonization, and Bolivia's Indigenous Intellectuals.** By Waskar Ari. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 262. \$25.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822356172.

**Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds.** By Marisol de la Cadena. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. Pp. xxvii + 349. \$26.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822359630.

**Governing Indigenous Territories: Enacting Sovereignty in the Ecuadorian Amazon.** By Juliet S. Erazo. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 237. \$23.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822354543.

**Singing for the Dead: The Politics of Indigenous Revival in Mexico.** By Paja Faudree. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii + 315. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822354314.

**Multiple Injustices: Indigenous Women, Law, and Political Struggle in Latin America.** By R. Aída Hernández Castillo. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 330. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780816532490.

**We Are the Face of OAXACA: Testimony and Social Movements.** By Lynn Stephen. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. Pp. vii + 344. \$25.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822355342.

**Politicized Ethnicity: A Comparative Perspective.** By Anke Weber, Wesley Hiers, and Anaïd Flesken. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. ix + 187. \$95.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781137359032.

---

The books under review in this essay broadly engage the issue of why and when ethnic identities sometimes become politicized, and how these identities relate to social movement mobilizations. A key question is whether ethnicity is an appropriate axis along which to organize for political change, and how ethnicity relates to other forms of identity (such as gender or sexual orientation) and larger structural factors (such as economic exploitation that can lead to class consciousness). Identities are complex, variant, dynamic, socially constructed, and ultimately exceedingly difficult to define. The field has moved well beyond debates in the 1960s of whether rural communities were comprised of peasants who suffered from economic exploitation or Indigenous peoples who faced racial discrimination, through the 1990s when the focus became more on understanding how race and class intersected in specific contexts, to a point now where we are studying how identities are consciously constructed to serve specific needs and purposes.

Massive anti-neoliberal mobilizations in the 1990s led to a wave of leftist electoral victories at the dawn of the twenty-first century. New political actors broadly aligned with social-movement interests began to implement agendas that favored marginalized populations. Furthermore, the entrance of social movement activists into political positions challenged assumptions that “new” social movements that emphasized identity politics necessarily represented a rejection of the “old” labor, political, and guerrilla movements that championed economic issues. As Judith Hellman convincingly argues, the divide between new and old movements never was that pronounced, with leftist labor movements never completely turning a blind eye

to issues of ethnic exclusion and racial discrimination, and Indigenous, gender, and other new movements often engaging in sophisticated intersectional analyses that required an understanding of class struggles.<sup>1</sup>

Academia purports to embrace the elusive goals of objectivity, but in reality we are all aware that the position and role of an observer often leads a researcher to espouse sympathy or a critique of a specific ideological perspective on a topic. In particular, the study of an impassioned issue such as identity construction does not happen in a vacuum, and little purpose exists to pretend that it does. The authors of these books write from an array of disciplines and epistemological assumptions, although as to be expected, given a focus on Indigenous peoples, anthropology is overrepresented. The authors exhibit a diverse range of ideological perspectives that highlight the nature of ongoing debates over the implications of politicizing ethnic identities. Many scholars are no longer willing to celebrate the embrace of ethnic identities in an unquestioning fashion. A result is constantly shifting perspectives and attitudes, both on the part of the protagonists as well as the investigators who observe them. Seemingly, the more we study the less we know.

*Politicized Ethnicity: A Comparative Perspective* is a relatively short co-authored text by political scientist Anke Weber, sociologist Wesley Hiers, and research associate Anaïd Flesken. Of the books under review in this essay, the authors are the most skeptical of the positive consequences of the politicization of ethnic identities. The authors ask why some politicians chose to base their campaigns and policies on ethnic identities, and what the consequences are of deciding to do so. The book offers a comparative analysis of the five countries of Kenya, Tanzania, Bolivia, Peru, and the United States in an attempt to understand how and why ethnic identities become politicized. For those reading from a Latin American perspective, this broader geographic and cultural framing can prove to be most useful. The authors examine a range of factors, including long-term issues such as the legacy of colonial administrative structures, and shorter-term factors such as access to resources, language policies, and the actions of political leaders, to explain varying types and levels of the politicization of ethnic identities. They develop a theoretical framework to understand how ethnic identities are transferred into socially salient factors used for political mobilizations. They argue that “politicization is a relational, dynamic process in which structure and agency intertwine” (Weber, Hiers, and Flesken, 2). Furthermore, long-term factors contribute to the politicization, but in the short term political entrepreneurs can exploit ethnicity to mobilize populations. Finally, these authors contend that nation-building policies can reduce ethnic politicization and contribute to more inclusive and peaceful societies—ultimately a very admirable goal.

R. Aída Hernández Castillo is a cultural and legal anthropologist, and she openly identifies herself as a feminist and activist. Her book *Multiple Injustices: Indigenous Women, Law, and Political Struggle in Latin America* contains reflections from her lengthy and intimate involvement with Indigenous women in rural communities. The book, in essence, is a response to “disparaging remarks from the positivist academy and skepticism from anti-academic activists” (Hernández Castillo, 33). She defends her alliance and collaboration with social movements, and contends that research helps develop critical thinking skills and advances struggles for social justice. Rather than engaging in extractive methodologies that purport to embrace “scientific neutrality” but in reality only reinforce an unjust status quo, activist anthropologists work to recover local knowledge as they openly question neoliberal policies. Hernández Castillo is deliberately transparent as to where she positions herself as an observer of the formation of ethnic identities.

Following a similar political trajectory as Hernández Castillo, anthropologist Lynn Stephen has spent a quarter century working in Oaxaca, Mexico. Her book *We Are the Face of Oaxaca* is an expression of that long-term commitment to research in the state. The impetus for the book emerges out of the 2006 popular protests against governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz’s government. Teachers organized into the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE, National Council of Education Workers) merged forces with the Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca “Ricardo Flores Magón” (CIPO-RFM, Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca “Ricardo Flores Magón”) and other social organizations to create the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO, Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca). For a time, those protests captured the attention of activists and scholars alike. Few scholars are better qualified than is Stephen to write about the arc of social protest that led to the formation of APPO, and its eventual unraveling. A book such as *We Are the Face of Oaxaca* would lose its bearing and purpose were it not for the author’s overt political engagement. As a result, we gain a much deeper and more intimate understanding of the mobilizations in Oaxaca.

<sup>1</sup> 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, Latin American Perspectives series, no. 16 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 165–183.

Similar to Stephen, Paja Faudree is also an anthropologist who studies ethnic politics in Oaxaca, although the methodology she employs is a textual analysis of the Mazatec language. Through a community-based study of singing and writing, she offers new perspectives on ethnic renewal and ethnic politics. *Singing for the Dead* in particular examines the interface between music and language, and how local conflicts center on who controls cultural narratives and thereby represents a community's core beliefs and values. Faudree acknowledges the tensions inherent in such revival movements, including the negotiation between local communities and federal governments and debates over who has the right to represent the Mazatec identity to a broader public. *Singing for the Dead* is conceptualized and written along the lines of a standard ethnography, with the author's role as a political agent less overtly expressed than by either Stephen or Hernández Castillo. In terms of research methodology and epistemological assumptions, Faudree's book represents a point most distant from that of Weber, Hiers, and Flesken that directly engages the theme of the politicization of ethnic identities.

Anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena's book *Earth Beings* is based on a decade of fieldwork around Cuzco in the Peruvian Andes with two local leaders, Mariano and Nazario Turpo. Mariano was a key participant in Peru's land reform program in the 1960s that largely ended exploitative labor relations on haciendas. When Mariano died of old age in 2004, his son Nazario picked up his mantle until he was killed in a traffic accident in 2007. Through ethnographic research with Mariano and Nazario, de la Cadena traces political changes in the Andes from the liberal 1950s through the neoliberal multiculturalism of the 2000s. Rather than directly expressing her own political agenda, de la Cadena channels liberationist aspirations through the life stories of these two activists.

De la Cadena's book is subtitled "Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds," but anthropologist Juliet Erazo more directly engages environmental issues in her book *Governing Indigenous Territories* than do any of the others under discussion in this review essay. Erazo examines the efforts since the 1960s of the people in the community of Rukullakta in the Ecuadorian Amazon to attain sovereign control over their territory. Gaining legal title as a collective organization rather than as individuals or families represented an enormous accomplishment. Erazo demonstrates how the titling process generated new expectations, obligations, and subjectivities.

Similar to Faudree, the political intent of Erazo's work is understated, but its methodological implications for the study of the politicization of ethnicity are broad reaching. Particularly in the Andes (and especially in Ecuador), a disciplinary divide has separated anthropologists who study eastern forest peoples, with a focus on their culture and cosmology, from historians, political scientists, sociologists, and others often remain in the highlands and emphasize themes of politics and economics. Erazo's work excels at bridging those divides as she seamlessly and adeptly crosses disciplinary boundaries (anthropology, geography, political science, sociology, and history, among others). She presents new material based on both an investigation into local organizational archives and extensive participant-observation research, and embraces new methodological approaches that present new models for scholarship in the field. The result is a well-written and well-organized book that engages the theoretical and ethnographic literature while also probing analytical concepts in a comprehensive fashion that successfully extends conversations concerning ethnic studies, social movements, civil rights, the environment, and other related issues.

Waskar Ari, the only historian among the authors under review in this essay, steps back from the present, but the issues he engages are still very much under debate both in academia and beyond. In *Earth Politics*, Ari examines four Indigenous activist-intellectuals in Bolivia who drew on colonial legislation regarding administration of Indigenous populations to mobilize for their rights in the twentieth century. These activists (Toribio Miranda, Gregorio Titiriku, Melitón Gallardo, and Andrés Jach'aqullu) were leaders of what was called the Alcaldes Mayores Particulares (AMP). The AMP drew on a nineteenth-century tradition of opposition to liberal reforms that deprived *ayllus* (Indigenous communities) of their lands, and the organization contributed to subsequent Katarista ideas that emerged in the 1970s of rejecting internal colonialism and embracing an Aymara nationalism. Ari celebrates these historic leaders as a continuation of an independent and autonomous Indigenous tradition that he would like to see continue into the future.

Erazo, in contrast, repeatedly probes and challenges what we think we know about Indigenous communities, organizational structures, and cosmologies. She breaks from essentialized notions of unchanging communities that were not influenced by their surrounding environment, and avoids traps including the celebrations of a "noble savage" that traditionally have plagued the field. Instead, she examines how these interactions led to challenges and tensions that determined decisions and directions that the community took. In the process, Erazo circumvents largely useless debates that have long sought to divide rural communities into "peasant" and "Indigenous" spheres. Erazo challenges interpretations of an innately

communal identity among Indigenous peoples and interrogates how leaders constructed and presented such identities to forward specific political agendas. She complicates common assumptions that tensions necessarily emerged in disagreements between modernists and traditionalists in communities. The result is a book that significantly expands our understandings of Indigenous lives, communities, and organizational structures.

Focused through her work in Oaxaca, Faudree urges researchers to look beyond the explicitly or narrowly political to understand ideas about the nation that are expressed in oblique and hidden ways. Embodied in linguistic expressions are demands for autonomy and recognition. Faudree recounts how those in the Sierra Mazatec have reversed decades of cultural and linguistic erosion to revive use of their language and reinvent customs. While broadly this can be understood to be an outcome of civil society with explicitly political ramifications, it is also important to understand that it is largely the result of an intellectual production rather than emerging out of the vindications of a mass movement.

Much like Faudree, Ari also examines the role that organic intellectuals play in ethnic revival, with leaders wishing to purify ethnic expressions. The Bolivian leaders were known as *alcaldes mayores*, which draws on colonial terminology for local Indigenous leadership. The activists added “Particulares” to the name of their group to indicate their rejection of government-supported education that they saw as contributing to an internal colonization of Indigenous communities. Instead, they advocated for a return to the colonial policy of maintaining two separate and parallel republics, one for Indigenous peoples and another for those of European descent. The AMP became known for their advocacy of worshipping Aymara gods and advocating for the creation of a separate Aymara republic called Qullasuyu. If Weber, Hiers, and Flesken advocate for pluralism and inclusivity, Ari favors separation and exclusion.

Ari does not hesitate to criticize (as he rightly should) the dominant power structures when they attempted to exclude Indigenous peoples from “white” spaces, such as the main plaza in Bolivia’s capital city of La Paz. But rather than responding to this discrimination and oppression with calls for separation, a better policy would be to pursue the goals of the neo-Zapatistas, whom Hernández Castillo studies in Chiapas, Mexico, who attempted to create a world in which space exists for everyone. More than any other author under consideration here, Hernández Castillo engages in explicitly political discussions as she draws on the concepts of neoliberal multiculturalism that Charles Hale popularized as a critique of governments that allow for ethnic expressions even as they undermine community livelihoods.<sup>2</sup> Hernández Castillo reflects on her involvement as she accompanied the organizational experiences and struggles of Indigenous women in Mexico, Guatemala, and Colombia. She analyzes the contradictions of the individual empowerment and market citizenship of neoliberal governance, even while those officials employ legal strategies to criminalize social protest and dissent. While neoliberal governance widens the gap between individual and collective rights, Hernández Castillo (229) charts the organizational trajectory of activists who demand “the recognition of the collective rights of their peoples as a necessary condition for the full exercise of their rights as women.” Her work is an expression of intersectionality, as struggles for land and territory also entail struggles for culture, and opposition to violence toward women also requires a critique of neocolonialism and racism.

Rather than critiquing social movement strategies, Stephen dedicates much of her book to a more theoretically informed reflection on the relationship between oral testimonies, rights claiming, and identity formation. She points to the critical role that oral narratives can play in the creation of political and ethnic identities. The book begins with a quote from Fidelia Vásquez, who testified on a local radio station that activists had occupied in August 2006 to broadcast their demands. Throughout the book, Stephen (1) repeatedly returns to her observation, “We are women who don’t usually have a voice because we are brown, we are short, we are fat, and they think that we don’t represent the people, but we do. We are the face of Oaxaca.” In a nutshell, that is the perspective that Stephen brings to the book, along with her understanding of how hybrid urban Indigenous identities were created in Oaxaca.

As an anthropologist, Stephen inserts herself directly into the story. She recounts posting videos of protests to YouTube and collecting material to assist in political asylum claims. This is a classic example of engaged activist-scholar research, though Stephen does not use that term. Instead, embracing terminology that Hernández Castillo also employs, she frames her study as “ethnographic collaborative research.” Stephen was one of the instigators in the “Otros Saberes” (other knowledges) project of the Latin American

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Hale, “Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, no. 3 (August 2002): 485–524.



Studies Association (LASA), which encouraged collaboration between Western researchers and Indigenous informants. Her book provides an excellent example of the positive results of such an approach.

Although most social scientists today would theoretically acknowledge, as Weber, Hiers, and Flesken (3) state, that ethnic identities are not “based on ancient, fundamental categories and hence fixed, but are instead socially constructed and thus changeable and contingent,” it is surprising how common in the literature it is for scholars in their writings to hold unquestionably to ethnicity as if it were a tangible reality. A consistent theme that runs throughout Ari’s book *Earth Politics* is that of Indigenous activists who rediscovered their ethnic heritage and returned to their traditional dress and religion. Toribio Miranda, for example, claimed the use of traditional dress as a religious duty. This book, perhaps inadvertently, makes it apparent just how superficial external ethnic markers can be. Depending on how one dressed and presented oneself, the same person could alternatively be seen as a mestizo, *cholo*, *chullpa* (all intermediary categories between Indigenous and European), or Indigenous person. While holding on to tradition and identity in and of itself is valuable, and under no circumstances should anyone ever face discrimination for doing so, historically ethnicity has not proven to be a strong basis on which to build a powerful and sustainable movement for political change because ethnic positioning does little to address the underlying factors of class oppression, which does have concrete material ramifications.

Unlike Ari, Hernández Castillo pushes back against what she considers to be essentialist or purist notions of what it means to be Indigenous. At the same time, she remains quite critical of Marxist critiques of identity politics as a form of false consciousness. She condemns the paternalistic actions of outside agitators who come into a community with the notion that they can awaken the conscience of the oppressed, a shortcoming that was also present among liberation theologians in the Catholic Church. Although she does not explicitly develop it as such, a contrast exists here between activists who come in with their answers and ethnocentric assumptions that do not match local realities, and collaborative research that works on a more horizontal level to highlight and enhance community concerns.

Considering Hernández Castillo’s approach to collaborative research, it is quite stunning to read a story of her interactions with a Mixtec woman who does not share her ideological assumptions. The woman is dressed in a huipil and to Hernández Castillo appears to be a “priestess.” When Hernández Castillo begins to quiz her over cosmology and ritual, instead the (unnamed) woman responds with a call for more grassroots work and better ideological reflections in order to develop clearer ideas for how to realize political change. Rather than ceremony or prayers, she contended, they needed better organization. Hernández Castillo (73) admits to being “petrified” with her response, as the woman broke her stereotypes about Indigenous perspectives on politics. Indeed, the woman came out of a long trajectory in left-wing militancy, including earlier participation in the Community Party and Lucio Cabañas’s guerrilla movement in Guerrero. For her, there was no contradiction between Marxism and her ethnic identity, and in fact her grounding in the Indigenous women’s movement emerged out of an explicit criticism of capitalism.

De la Cadena’s work with two local leaders, Mariano and Nazario Turpo, outside Cuzco in the Peruvian Andes similarly reflects contrasting attitudes toward political engagement. De la Cadena interrogates a series of terms to identify Mariano and Nazario, but all of them are complicated labels and some they explicitly reject. To outsiders they may appear to be shamans, but the term that best characterizes their role in the community is *yachaq*, a Quechua term that means “one who knows.” That knowledge can reference metaphysical aspects, such as reading fortunes in coca leaves, but especially in Mariano’s case the term also has connotations of being a political leader who advocated for the interests of his community. Particularly in the 1960s, outsiders like Richard Patch and Aníbal Quijano seemingly were blind to the presence of Indigenous leaders, even as they were politically sympathetic to their struggles. Subsequent political leaders, such as Evo Morales in neighboring Bolivia, explicitly assumed an ethnic persona to campaign for office, which eventually made it impossible to ignore Indigenous leadership. De la Cadena, however, argues that Indigenous leaders were always present, and the emergence of Indigenous intellectuals assisted in highlighting their contributions.

Rather than engaging in political struggles, Mariano’s son Nazario began to work as an “Andean shaman” for a tourist agency in Cuzco, and eventually as a consultant on the Quechua exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC. Subsequently both Mariano and Nazario have been presented as renowned shamans, which is not how they would have necessarily identified themselves. “Shaman,” of course, is not a word indigenous to the Andes but comes from Siberia. Nazario initially did not know the word, and only later came to embrace it to enhance his interactions with New Age tourists who traveled to Machu Picchu in search of spiritual enlightenment. De la Cadena presents a sensitive discussion of the commodification of Indigenous knowledge, even as she understands the pressures of survival strategies.

Turpo, and subsequently his children, traveled to Cuzco to work with tourists during times when they could not gain sufficient income from their agricultural lifestyles. Even so, de la Cadena echoes common critiques of the failure of tourism to solve structural problems of persistent poverty and inequality in the Andes. In fact, Turpo's death was a result of neoliberal policies that marketed Andean culture to an international audience even as it abandoned local development, directly leading to compromised infrastructure and economic systems that resulted in the accident that claimed his life.

The title of anthropologist de la Cadena's book *Earth Beings* mirrors that of historian Ari's *Earth Politics*, but the two books adopt significantly different disciplinary perspectives and epistemological assumptions. The books discuss Indigenous identities in the two neighboring countries of Peru and Bolivia, and both authors are originally from their respective countries although they both now work at research universities in the United States (de la Cadena at the University of California, Davis, and Ari at the University of Nebraska). But that is where the similarities end. De la Cadena is a cosmopolitan from the capital city of Lima, and although she has studied Quechua she still relies on translators to communicate with her largely monolingual Quechua informants. Ari, on the other hand, identifies as Aymara and speaks the language. De la Cadena repeatedly expresses a certain amount of nostalgia for Peru's leftist tradition, even though she does not identify as having been politically active. Ari, on the other hand, embodies a strong antagonism to the political left. "Earth beings" is a reference to Andean cosmology, whereas "earth politics" alludes to economic policies. Even though de la Cadena purports to examine the supernatural, ultimately her book says more about political struggles than does Ari, who emphasizes the spiritual aspects of his protagonists, even though their book titles would imply the reverse.

The research methodologies of de la Cadena and Ari also contrast, though not necessarily in ways that one would necessarily assume. Perhaps ironically, anthropologist de la Cadena's relationship with her initial informant Mariano Turpo began with a box of more than four hundred documents from the 1920s through 1970s that recorded the political struggles in which he was involved. Mariano expressed little interest in the documents and complained how limited and partial they were in understanding political struggles. Rather than read the documents for their historicity, as she assumes a historian would, she interrogates the archive for what she labels its "ontological complexity" (123). In contrast, Ari (as well as Erazo in her book) similarly gained access to private archives that he expertly exploits in recovering hidden stories, yet he reads the documents through a more orthodox historiographic lens to corroborate information gleaned from conversations with community members.

Even though de la Cadena does not exploit Mariano's archive for what it can reveal about a hidden or forgotten history, she does include a short but significant discussion of how the documents initially were drafted. A nonliterate population's reliance on the written word to advance their political interests is an issue that has long intrigued many scholars and raises the issue of the roles of intermediaries in their drafting. But, as de la Cadena notes, educated outsiders alone could not have created these written documents. The scribes relied on oral texts for their substance, and those testimonies were central to their construction. What we see, then, is the development of partnerships in conceptualizing and executing the documents. Turpo told de la Cadena that a local communist party member named Camilo Rosas was "someone who frequently typed and gave advice about the contents of the legal documents" (144). Rather than an exploitative relationship, these outsiders sometimes were political allies who sought to advance community concerns. Even when Turpo traveled to Lima to petition government officials, he enjoyed the support of sympathetic supporters. De la Cadena points to the constant conversations that took place "between lettered and a-lettered worlds" that bridged divides even as governments sought to separate them into discrete units (145). Underlying the entire book is an interrogation of the power of literacy.

Weber, Hiers, and Flesken (15) justifiably ask why some forms of identity (such as ethnicity, nationality, and religion) become politicized, while others (such as occupation or marital status) are less likely to be so. Structural factors shed light on what identities become salient. Even as the formation of identities is a long-term process, their activation for political purposes is based on more immediate needs driven by political factors. In short, human decisions related to political expediency result in the politicization and revitalization of ethnic identities. An acknowledged shortcoming in Weber, Hiers, and Flesken's study is why ethnic rather than class differences are made salient. Rather than a marginal issue, however, this should be a key consideration as the class structure of society is directly relevant to who benefits and who loses in how a community is structured. Furthermore, given the complicated interplay of racial markers and class status, it is not always readily apparent that what the authors interpret as ethnic expressions are in part a gloss for class-based demands. Those with extensive ethnographic study of ethnicities may find these shortcomings of a political science methodology frustrating.

Stephen draws on Partha Chatterjee's book *The Politics of the Governed* to contrast political and civil society. Capitalists organized as "civil society" in opposition to APPO's disruptions of the smooth operations of their businesses. "Political society," in contrast, embodied the demands of poor Indigenous peoples and the urban working class as they strategically unified their movements in the face of repression and violence. That movement embraced diverse and hybrid identities that included Indigenous, youth, women, gay and lesbian, poor, and working class aspects. APPO was organized on a decentralized and horizontal level, and despite approaching the 2006 protests from that perspective Stephen also acknowledges the inherent shortcomings of such a strategy. In the end, emphasizing local autonomy rather than a unified ideology proved to be one of APPO's biggest weaknesses and contributed to the movement's unraveling.

In a short conclusion, Stephen (277) turns from her examination of oral testimonies to ask, "Did the social movement of 2006 succeed? Did it fail? Or are we asking the wrong question?" Once again, she references Vásquez's words about short, fat, brown women as the face of Oaxaca to point to the movement's lasting legacy. While APPO did not survive as a strategically powerful and unified movement, it did give birth to new political subjects. In particular, youth turned to artwork to express their political sentiments, and women occupied radio and television stations to express their views. In the process, they created a new gendered discourse of dignity and human rights that engages issues of who is empowered to speak and decide who governs society. For an anthropologist, the categories of culture and politics mean something rather distinct than they might for a political scientist.

For Hernández Castillo (23), the struggle is not over and perhaps never will be over. "The hegemony of the state," she writes, "is always an unfinished process." Neoliberal policies seek "to decentralize and strengthen civil society," but their results are contradictory. Furthermore, the Indigenous women's movements that she has accompanied for a quarter century are marked by an internal heterogeneity. In particular, given distinct histories the various movements have positioned themselves differently in terms of their attitudes toward feminist discourses. Similarly, different movements take varying positions on the meanings of culture and tradition, and their critiques of racist and neocolonial perspectives on progress and modernity are also not unified.

Faudree also frames her study as one of social movements, but as a linguistic anthropologist her core interests lie in the relationship of song to ethnic revitalization. She presents a Day of the Dead song contest that leads to the popularization of the Mazatec language as a success story of ethnic revival that embraces literacy in a native language. But rather than demanding profound structural changes, the contest remained more on the level of folklore. That embrace of tradition also led to the creation of a nativist organization called the Mazatec Indigenous Church, which reflected deep divides in the community. Faudree claims that the church is influenced by liberationist views, but they have more to do with shamans and the use of psychedelic mushrooms than the overtly politicizing character of liberation theology. In fact, the "politics" that emerges out of this discussion has less to do with confrontations with racial discrimination or economic exploitation than internal community feuds. Faudree engages the question of what an authentic Indigenous identity is, a question and a quest that is inherently fraught with conflict and contestation. Attempting to frame those divisions in terms of social movements highlights just how compromised and problematic that concept has become.

While the other authors under review in this essay largely embrace in an uncritical fashion the politicization or revitalization of ethnic identities as a positive development, Weber, Hiers, and Flesken assume a much more critical and skeptical attitude. They start their book with the claim, "Ethnic diversity is widely seen as an impediment to economic prosperity and stable democracy" (1). Whereas earlier studies associate ethnic diversity with political instability, low growth rates, higher levels of corruption, low quality of governance, and increased risk of violent conflict, these authors contend that it is not merely the presence of ethnic diversity that leads to those outcomes but rather the politicization of those identities. Weber, Hiers, and Flesken selected samples reflecting real-world heterogeneity to understand under which conditions ethnicity emerges as politically salient. The authors present the African (Kenya and Tanzania) and South American (Bolivia and Peru) case studies in pairs to interrogate why politicians in neighboring countries with similar histories and social conditions have engaged ethnic mobilizations in dramatically different fashions. Their study raises the question of why ethnicity becomes so politicized in Kenya and Bolivia, but less so in Tanzania and Peru.

Their research design begins in Africa with the high politicization of ethnicity in Kenya compared to a relatively low level of politicization in Tanzania as providing the most probable case to illustrate their argument regarding the logic and decree of ethnic politicization. They then apply that model to a different geographic area (South America) with a similar pair of neighboring countries (Bolivia and Peru) with

differing levels of ethnic mobilization. Finally, they challenge their analysis by testing their theoretical framework against the “hard case” of the United States where their conclusions seem unlikely to hold. In the case of Bolivia and Peru, they conclude, given that the two countries share a similar history, that structural factors do not necessarily lead to the politicization of ethnicity. Indigenous movements and parties, and in particular the election of Evo Morales, led to the recent ethnic politicization in Bolivia, whereas in Peru no similar leaders or movements arose to exploit the presence of those identities for political purposes. The comparison between the two countries is forced, and a similar history of colonial structures defining “Indigenous” identity as counterpoised to a European one (Mark Thurner’s “two republics”)<sup>3</sup> emerges as more apparent than clear differences that would explain contrasting expressions of ethnic identity. Ultimately, and unfortunately, the methodology Weber, Hiers, and Flesken employ sheds little light on the persistent and perplexing question of why such dissimilar forms of social protest and political expression have emerged in recent decades in the neighboring South American countries.

The rather trite but not entirely inaccurate cliché notes that the more things change the more they stay the same. Decades of research provide us with a more complex rather than clearer picture of how ethnic identities become politicized, but that is not necessarily a negative development. Theoretically, scholars commonly call for intersectionality, including an understanding of how race, class, and gender intersect with each other (in addition to other identities including disability, age, and geography). As these works illustrate, putting that intersectionality into practice remains much more difficult than theoretical reflections would seem to imply. A particular author’s focus of study often says as much, if not more, about that person’s interests and perspectives than it does about the specific topic under consideration.

Weber, Hiers, and Flesken provide us with a theoretical framework for understanding the politicization of ethnicity, as well as how these developments appear from a broader comparative context. Authors like Faudree contribute rich ethnographic descriptions, while Erazo and de la Cadena interrogate how ethnicity intersects with environmental and other factors. Hernández Castillo and Stephen help us understand the real-life ramifications of political engagement. Ari shows us how key underlying issues and debates over how activists have constructed ethnic identities have had certain continuities over time. Together, all of these different parts contribute to a fuller and better understanding of ethnicity, even though a complete picture of what ethnicity means and how it functions remains frustrating elusive. Rather than representing the emergence of a new, accepted consensus, the role of ethnicity and other forms of identity in social movement processes is a theme that will continue to be debated for the foreseeable future.

### Author Information

Marc Becker is professor of Latin American history at Truman State University. His research focuses on the history of the Latin American left. Among his publications are *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files* (Duke University Press, 2017), *Twentieth-Century Latin American Revolutions* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), *Pachakutik: Indigenous Movements and Electoral Politics in Ecuador* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador’s Modern Indigenous Movements* (Duke University Press, 2008), and *Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist Theory* (Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1993).

---

<sup>3</sup> Mark Thurner, *From Two Republics to One Divided: Contradictions of Postcolonial Nationmaking in Andean Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).



**How to cite this article:** Becker, Marc. 2018. Politicized Identities and Social Movements. *Latin American Research Review* 53(1), pp. 202–210. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.225>

**Submitted:** 20 June 2017

**Accepted:** 25 July 2017

**Published:** 28 March 2018

**Copyright:** © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**LARR**

*Latin American Research Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

**OPEN ACCESS** 