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The FBI in Latin America: the Ecuador files

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competition with (and acknowledgement of) non-European ritual power, though some will wish their use as documentary sources was perhaps more clearly problematized. Typical of this publisher's work, this is a gorgeous book, skillfully edited, although sometimes the inventive prose – “knowledge hustlers” (p. 100), for instance – is less revealing on second pass.

Despite the broad subtitle, this is a book about the seventeenth-century Hispanic Caribbean almost exclusively, and wavers somewhat when considering the larger region. Neither Barbados nor Bermuda “changed hands during the 1600s” (p. 27) in the sense implied here, for example, nor did other spaces on his list. Some readers will wonder what Gómez would make of the Scots-Irishman Hans Sloane, institutionally trained across Europe, whose patient histories taken in 1680s Jamaica and published in 1707 also proposed the universalism of bodies that Gómez attributes to *Caribeños* healers (p. 187). Like many of the Spanish officials in this book, Sloane chose to be treated by a female healing practitioner from the African diaspora. Still, despite his subsequent prestigious London career, and his influence on tropical bioprospecting, Sloane's position did not compel change among his medical contemporaries, who took ideological comfort in their certainty of bodily and geographic difference. Here, then, too lays Gómez's argument about the incommensurability of institutionalized ways of knowing and local Caribbean experiential practice, particularly in the face of expanding imperial political economies in the eighteenth century. Though it is not directly his subject, Gómez's book speaks in valuable ways to Schiebinger's engagement with the concept of agnatology, or “culturally-induced ignorances”, in particular knowledge and practice which did not transfer from colonial to imperial spaces (Schiebinger 2004, 3). Barriers lay not just in intentionality of imperial power, but, as Gómez's work compellingly shows, also in the difficulty of transferring experiences formed in the dense and mutable cultural and environmental context of the early modern Greater Caribbean.

Reference

Schiebinger, Londa. 2004. *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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The FBI in Latin America: the Ecuador files, by Marc Becker, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2017, 322 pp., US\$26.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780822369080

During World War II, J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) established a Special Intelligence Service (SIS) that operated across Latin America, with agents throughout the region gathering information on subversive activities and perceived threats to US interests. At a moment of global crisis, the FBI sought to claim for itself a leading role in the overseas intelligence operations of the United States. The Bureau lost out on such a role with the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency after the end of the war, and the story of the SIS was largely forgotten, but, as Marc Becker's new study shows, the extensive records left behind by the FBI's missions around the region reveal much, both about US strategic concerns and about the politics and social conditions of Latin American nations during the war years. Becker notes that, while the effectiveness of the SIS might initially have been limited by the fact that its first recruits were men with little training and no familiarity with the region, it came to be regarded by the State Department and other parts of the bureaucracy as a valuable resource. A key point is that

the concerns and priorities of the FBI were not straightforwardly those of the US government as a whole. At a time when the Allied war effort was directed against the forces of fascism, with the Soviet Union as a key partner, SIS agents in many Latin American countries were spending at least as much time and energy monitoring the activities of leftist and anti-fascist leaders and organizations as they did reporting on pro-Axis activists and interests, reflecting the long-standing and visceral anticommunism of the Bureau's director. The book thus serves as a useful reminder that, when assessing official documents as historical sources, the distinctive viewpoints and biases of individual agencies and bureaucratic actors must be borne in mind.

Becker's study opens with a helpful overview of the background, structure, and operations of the SIS, but the book is also a history of the Ecuadorian Left during the early to mid-1940s, drawing largely on FBI intelligence reports as a method of highlighting their value as sources. Although the war years witnessed significant upheaval in Ecuador – including *La Gloriosa* of May 1944, a popular revolt that briefly gave rise to hopes for a more inclusive and progressive regime – there has been little historical scholarship on the tumultuous politics of this period. Indeed, while Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough (1992) suggested in their path-breaking work that the Ecuadorian case appeared to fit a pattern seen throughout much of the region during that conjuncture (in which political liberalization and partial democratization in 1944–1946 were followed by the containment or reversal of the democratic advance by 1947–1948, with restrictions falling particularly heavily on the Left), they noted that much basic research on events there remained to be done. As the author of several previous volumes on the history and politics of Ecuador, Becker is well-placed to help fill this persistent gap in the historiography, and his analysis of the role of the Left in, and its fate after, *La Gloriosa* is at least as important a contribution made by this study as the insights it provides into the workings of the FBI's intelligence service. His account serves to confirm that, as in Central America and elsewhere around the same time, Ecuador's euphoric moment of political opening was short-lived, and he concludes that the Left's internal divisions and focus on electoral politics rather than the mobilization and organization of the masses left it vulnerable when the populist José María Velasco Ibarra moved to consolidate power and marginalize communists and other leftists after the end of World War II.

The FBI in Latin America is thus a valuable addition to the historical literature on US–Latin American relations at mid-century and on modern Ecuador. To be sure, one of the premises underlying the study – that intelligence reports generated by “imperial” actors can, if handled cautiously and interpreted appropriately, be vital resources in elucidating the history of the targets of their surveillance – will not sound revolutionary to the many historians of Latin America who have long relied on the relatively accessible and reasonably well-preserved archival records of powers such as the United States in order to gain insight into the region's past. Nonetheless, Becker has helpfully demonstrated the importance of a particular set of sources, while shedding light on both the FBI's brief foray into foreign intelligence work and a pivotal moment in Ecuador's twentieth-century history.

Reference

Bethell, L., and I. Roxborough. (1992). *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944–1948*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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