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The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files by Marc Becker
(review)

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The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files. By Marc Becker (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017) 322 pp. \$94.95 cloth \$26.95 paper

This highly original and well-researched account of the Ecuadorian left in the mid-twentieth century relies on a largely untapped source base—documents and oral histories from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose agents placed suspected fascists and communists in Latin America under surveillance before, during, and after World War II.

Writing the social history of ordinary people and grassroots movements presents the well-known challenge that most of the enduring records about them are generated through their encounters with the state. Aside from marking moments such as birth, marriage, and death—along with the occasional tax, census, or property record—the most voluminous state archives are the observations contained in police files and court proceedings, which are an atypical and starkly framed representation of anyone’s life and activities. Historians therefore must apply various strategies to control for the fact that their subjects appear to them through a glass darkly, which is how a state sees.

For the Ecuadorian leftists that Becker studies, there is an additional layer of distortion produced by a particular evidentiary problem. His subjects “failed to preserve copies of periodicals they published—nor did libraries collect such ephemeral material. Militants often discarded their publications when their immediate political purpose passed, and they destroyed papers rather than risk facing persecution from military regimes” (5). Becker’s plight of having largely the state’s view of those who rebelled against it was made more complicated by the fact that the state in this case was not the government of Ecuador but the U.S. government. FBI agents and State Department officials suffered from a lack of local knowledge and language ability, the gumshoes even more than the diplomats. The men working for J. Edgar Hoover’s Bureau generally shared his paranoia about radical leftists, further coloring their perceptions. Nonetheless, Becker has made excellent use of the records that they produced, reading through their prejudiced or misinformed claims to establish the perspectives that blinded them to Ecuadorian realities, and sifting through facts that can be confirmed or refuted by other sources. The result is an interesting and detailed history of the mid-century Ecuadorian left.

The forty-five FBI agents sent to Ecuador as part of the wartime “Special Intelligence Service”—their arrival without the knowledge of the host governments being a clear violation of the Good Neighbor Policy’s non-intervention principle—had varying levels of talent and ability to see beyond their ideological blinders. Wade Knapp, for example, saw through rumors that Ecuador’s Communist Party (*Partido Comunista del Ecuador*, or PCE) posed a danger of Moscow-directed revolution, since it lacked militants or even the funds to publish pamphlets; he could see that poverty and inequality were the root cause of dissent. To call FBI reports “ethnographic evidence” is a stretch, however, since they obviously

fall short of ethnographic standards of expertise, sensitivity, and bias (6). Becker acknowledges these limitations while steadily performing necessary source criticism. He notes when “highly confidential” sources were, in fact, merely articles from the *New York Times* (10). He contrasts the Red Scare mentality of most FBI agents to the more sober and measured dispatches of professional diplomats like Allan Dawson, chief of the State Department’s Division of Latin American Affairs. Significantly, Becker finds that the agents were so in thrall to their own racism and sexism that they did not realize the importance of key indigenous or female activists.

The agents were also hamstrung by their obsession with communism rather than fascism as a threat, even during the Soviet–American alliance to fight Nazi Germany. Becker demonstrates that some Ecuadorian leftists were willing to work with the Allies against Nazi influence, and that the PCE was divided regionally—highland peasant leaders pitted against coastal labor organizers, and local activists unimpressed by ideologists in the capital. By reading against the grain and between the lines of the FBI’s surveillance reports and later oral histories conducted by the Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI, Becker is able to recount the diverging strategies that Ecuadorian leftists developed in pursuit of a more just society while under the mistrustful gaze of incipient Cold Warriors from the north.

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Sustaining Lake Superior: An Extraordinary Lake in a Changing World. By Nancy Langston (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017) 292 pp. \$35.00

In 1996, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) granted a corporation permission—without hearings or an environmental impact statement—to inject 550 million gallons of sulfuric acid into a Wisconsin mine as an attempt to extract copper. Anishinaabe activists blocked a train carrying the acid across their reservation and began legal proceedings to prevent this experiment in “solution mining” (157–158). This is one of many fascinating stories in *Sustaining Lake Superior*. This interdisciplinary history combines scientific studies with a deep knowledge of the lake’s history—from the glaciers that shaped the basin to Native American cultures and the fur trade that decimated the beaver population and dried out the land; the copper mining that by 1882 annually dumped 500,000 tons of stampings into the watershed; the iron mining and processing that discharged toxic waste, including mercury; and the logging that deforested the white pine, leaving waste that caught fire 1,435 times and burned 12 million acres in 1908 alone. After this devastation, the paper industry stripped the land of spruce and fir and polluted the air and water. Add pesticide and fertilizer runoff, including lead arsenates, and by 1950 Lake Superior was in severe crisis.