

reliance on militarism and martial rhetoric, both at home and abroad, describing a transnational feedback loop that only recently shows faint signs of slowing.

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## Spying on Ecuador's Left: Perception and Misperception

Marc Becker. *The CIA in Ecuador*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. 317 pp. \$30.00 (paperback).

*The CIA in Ecuador's* title may put off some SHAFR members. Do we need a book on the CIA's interference in every Latin American country? And hasn't our scholarship moved beyond the "United States and ..." paradigm? Likewise puzzling is the book's publication in Duke's esteemed American Encounters/Global Interactions series edited by Gilbert Joseph and Penny Von Eschen. The title seems too narrow to fit well.

The author changes the calculus. Marc Becker may not be well known in SHAFR, but he is well respected among scholars of Cold War Latin America. He has written or co-authored more than a half-dozen books, among them *The FBI in Latin America*, which Duke also published.<sup>1</sup> His scholarship manifests deep area expertise and a keen sensitivity to indigenous dynamics, especially the nexus between the intersection of race and class and the evolution of political and social movements. The Duke series is a good fit after all.

In fact, the title is misleading and fails to do justice to the narrative and analysis. Becker's is not a book about the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). It is a book about Ecuador and the insights derived from the CIA's policing of it. This surveillance framework drives Becker's criticism of a variation on American orientalism—and the historiography of the "Cold War and the surveillance state," which he describes as "traditional, conservative, [and] patriarchal" (254n20). A central claim is that charged with exposing communists committed to subverting Ecuador's political, economic, and social institutions, intelligence collectors proved incapable of seeing what they observed. Becker tends to mount a metaphoric soap box, romanticizing the communists and other leftists and lambasting U.S. imperialists and their allies among Ecuador's elite. Yet when he writes that the CIA's "investigations were ultimately misguided as

1. Marc Becker, *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files* (Durham, NC, 2017).

they failed to comprehend the domestic roots of radical critiques of [Ecuador's] society," he is not wrong (2). He is also not wrong to exploit the records of the CIA and other intelligence gathering agencies, as he previously did by using the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as a source that enhances understandings of these radical critiques and the protest movements they engendered. Unfortunately, he places too much trust in them.

Becker's goal, then, differs dramatically from a "conventional" study of the CIA's reach. Although it concentrates on the 1950s, when U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower and the two Dulles brothers—Secretary of State John Foster and CIA Director Allen—oversaw what many identify as the agency's heyday, paramilitary and all other forms of covert action are absent. Indeed, judging from his notes and bibliography, Becker appears unfamiliar with much of the CIA historiography. He writes in one endnote that "Most critical studies [of the CIA] as well as dissident case officers who left the agency generally do not question United States policy objectives but argue instead for a more effective intelligence agency that would enhance an imperial project" (253n17). He cites no support for this dubious assertion.

This shortcoming is not fatal for his purposes. For Becker, the CIA is not so much an instrument of the U.S. state as it is a lens through which to view Ecuador's political left. His concern is not Washington's definition of U.S. national security interests but Ecuadorian activists' identification of their goals, opportunities, and challenges. In Becker's hands, the agency is an imperfect cipher.

Drawing on these CIA archives, all available online through the CIA's electronic reading room, Becker tells a straightforward story. He tells it, however, in such Manichean terms that readers, a majority of whom will sympathize with the story's outline, will lament its lack of nuance. Becker begins by recounting how the World War II defeat of fascism and Soviet-U.S. alliance provided an environment conducive to the flourishing of democracy and the advance of the peasant and working classes in Latin America. Having long stood against economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and social injustice, leftist organizations, communists above all (the *Partido Comunista de Ecuador*, the PCE, dates to 1925 and was legal until the 1960s), were ascendant. But the left's disunity over tactics, strategy, and ideology made it vulnerable to anticommunist, anti-progressive, and even "mainstream liberal" adversaries. Ecuador is a case study.

Because of the abnormal political stability that accompanied the peaceful transfer of power through elections, Ecuadorans call the 1950s the "democratic parentheses" (21). The perception of tranquility, however, was deceptive. CIA reports of the PCE's complicity in fomenting coups and other extraconstitutional efforts at regime change in Ecuador piled hyperbole on top of inaccuracy. Yet more unrest and turbulence characterized Ecuadorean politics than implied by the term "democratic parentheses." Threats of coups, riots, and other disturbances punctuated the period. But the PCE remained on the sidelines. "Of the different forces at play," Becker writes, "the communists acted in the most

rational and least opportunistic fashion.” Their “abstinence from coup plotting played to their benefit” (48). The Communists played the long game.

The PCE and CIA followed this script repeatedly. No matter how conservatively the PCE behaved, choosing the ballot over the bullet, the CIA attributed to it malignant intent. Further, no matter how circumstantial or non-existent the evidence, the CIA linked the party’s operations to “Moscow gold”: Soviet financing. Becker cites CIA reporting that reveals the deep divisions within the PCE that seriously weakened its effectiveness. The party struggled just to survive. Yet this reporting did not lead to a relaxation of surveillance or alter estimates of the severity of the threat posed by the PCE’s subversive agenda. Becker writes that the volume of CIA reporting diminished after 1952. He speculates that the drop-off may reflect what archives the agency has released. A more likely explanation is that Eisenhower perceived bigger and more urgent fish to fry.

Consistent with his purposes, Becker provides more insight on Ecuador than he does on the CIA—and for that matter other U.S. institutions. Still, he comes up short because of his laser-like focus on the PCE and the left. He addresses Ecuador’s power structure only in passing. Even agrarian and urban workers and the indigenous communities receive short shrift. Becker is a social historian who provides too little social history.

The book’s most serious defects, nevertheless, are methodological. Becker warrants praise for his imaginative use of CIA reporting to drill down into the PCE and other leftist organizations. Yet there is a disconnect between his assessments of the reliability of that reporting and the conclusions he draws from it. Further, while he frequently contrasts CIA reporting with that from the State Department’s embassy and intelligence arm, he does not explain the differences. Part of the answer may lay with the proximity of the observer to the subject. Becker documents CIA penetration of PCE meetings and congresses, for example, although he does not explain how (HUMINT? SIGINT?). The agency evidently intercepted written communications, but did it “turn” assets or otherwise recruit informers? Perspective is another plausible contributor to the discrepancies. State and CIA did not necessarily see the world in the same way.

In addition, Becker reveals more divergence among the reports, whether internal or external to the CIA, than his argument allows. What is more, even as he exposes the ideological blinders worn by CIA case officers who conducted surveillance in Ecuador, he highlights the many occasions when he judges their reports correct. This begs the question of whether Becker evaluates the accuracy of this reporting based on its alignment with his preconceptions or ideological preferences.

*The CIA in Ecuador* relies on unreliable sources to uncover the history of Ecuador’s PCE and other leftist organizations and movements. That’s a resourceful strategy, albeit one plagued with inherent flaws. Becker chastises CIA case officers for their anticommunist prejudices yet trusts them to tell the

story of Ecuador's communists. That story is well worth reading, but carefully and critically.

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## Dreams of Global Feminism

Lucy Delap. *Feminisms: A Global History*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 394 pp. \$27.50 (paperback).

Women's history is traditionally written from local or national perspectives. In recent years, however, women's and feminist historians have increasingly incorporated regional, transnational, and international approaches into their research. Lucy Delap's *Feminisms: A Global History* provides a useful synthesis of some of this newer scholarship. By adopting a global approach, Delap offers readers "alternative starting points and new thinkers" because "[t]hese perspectives help challenge the assumed priority of European feminisms," which have dominated much of the existing historical literature (16). Delap demonstrates that the fight for "gender justice" has long been global and "cannot be located only within single nation states, regions or empires" (26, 18). Ultimately, Delap argues for a "useable history" that "must be non-doctrinaire and open-ended, shaped but not determined by the encounter between past and present" (23). While the book suffers from problems typical of synthetic studies, *Feminisms* is nevertheless an ambitious and readable book that contributes to the internationalization of feminist history.

Delap explains usefully that feminism is not monolithic. There have been many feminisms across time and space, and the "meaning of feminism has continued to evolve" (12). Despite the great variety of feminisms, common threads unite feminist thinkers and activists from different times and places. In one form or another, all feminists have fought for "gender justice," and "one of the overarching feminist dreams has been of a movement that could span all women" (26, 13). Yet, Delap asserts that there is "a central paradox of feminism: as a movement, feminism insists on women's inclusion in all areas of social and political life and demands the radical transformation of those exclusionary structures; but feminism has its own forms of marginalization and has struggled to extend its boundaries to all women on equal terms" (5). Thus, Delap's book traces not only the global feminist struggle against gender inequality and