

Indigenous Movements in Ecuador

by
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I first arrived in Ecuador in June 1990 in the immediate aftermath of a massive Indigenous uprising. I had come to Ecuador as part of a study abroad program with Oregon State University soon after finishing a master thesis on José Carlos Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist theory (subsequently published as Becker, 1993). I planned to continue my graduate studies on Mariátegui, but before doing so I thought I should at least spend some time in his home country of Peru. In 1990, the Shining Path insurgency was at its height and the international news was full of stories of car bombings and the murders of foreign tourists. Given that situation, I did not want to travel to the country without some sort of local guide. Considering the level of fear, whether perceived or real, all of the study abroad programs had pulled out of Peru, with many of them decamping to neighboring Ecuador. From the distance of Kansas, I thought what could be the difference between Peru and Ecuador and thanks to funding from a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowship decided to go to Ecuador instead.

The timing was precocious. My thesis project was on an examination of Mariátegui's influence on the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions. Several months earlier, I had woken up on the morning of February 26, 1990 to the news that the Sandinistas had unexpectedly lost the elections in Nicaragua. With that electoral defeat together with the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of socialist governments, the possibilities for the types of revolutionary changes that Mariátegui envisioned seemed to be evaporating before my very eyes. What I was attempting to argue in my thesis no longer seemed relevant. It was a very discouraging time for a young leftist such as myself.

But in Ecuador I found people on the streets making a revolution largely along the lines of what Mariátegui had envisioned more than half a century earlier. The Amauta famously thought that because of their communal traditions, Indigenous communities were particularly well suited to lead the creation of a new revolutionary society built up from the bottom and the left. Mariátegui (1971: 29) famously quipped, "the Indian proletariat awaits its Lenin." With the leadership of the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), that prediction appeared to be coming true. My experiences in Ecuador fundamentally altered my intellectual trajectory. Along with others (Brysk, 2000; Selverston, 2001; Pallares, 2002; Sawyer, 2004; Lucero, 2008) that I term the "generation of 1990," activists on the streets determined the future direction of my (and other's) academic work.

I discarded my plans to write my dissertation on Mariátegui and instead began working in earnest on the history of Indigenous movements in Ecuador.

At the time and on the eve of the 1992 quincentennial of Christopher Columbus's ill-fated trans-Atlantic voyage, the dominant narrative was that the 1990 uprising was a continuation of five hundred years of Indigenous resistance. A common assumption was that Indigenous movements had evolved from a class-based analysis under the tutelage of the communist party at the beginning of the twentieth century through the emergence of ethnic identities under the guidance of the Catholic Church in the 1960s and finally culminating with an independent ethno-nationalist discourse that Indigenous leaders had developed at the end of the century. A subsequent year-long and very rewarding internship with the South and Meso-American Indigenous Rights Center (SAIIC), funded with a generous Social Science Research Council (SSRC)-MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for Peace and Security in a Changing World, further reified that narrative in my mind.

When I returned to Ecuador to conduct archival research for my dissertation, the documentation I uncovered slowly deconstructed that narrative. Instead, I discovered that the discourse of Indigenous nationalities was hardly a new one but rather something that the Communist International had innovated in the 1920s. Furthermore, in the 1940s rural Indigenous activists who were also members of the Partido Comunista Ecuatoriano (PCE, Ecuadorian Communist Party) formed what they called the Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios (FEI, Ecuadorian Federation of Indians). A recognition of racial discrimination and ethnic identities was hardly an innovation but long a part of leftist organizing strategies. Rather than class versus ethnicity, I found a movement that drew on multiple modes of analysis along the lines of what is currently in vogue as intersectionality. It took me eighteen years, but after extensive edits and revisions I finally published the results of this research (see Becker, 2008).

Much of my subsequent academic work has been to examine interactions between the classic triad of race, class, and gender within leftist and popular movements. A large part of this project was to counter all too common assumptions of an anti-Indigenous, racist left and an anti-leftist Indigenous world. I followed the trajectory of the formation of the ethnic political party Pachakutik in 1995 and the election of Rafael Correa in 2007 with a series of essays that I published in *Latin American Perspectives* and eventually assembled into a book as part of the Critical Currents in Latin American Perspectives series (see Becker, 2011). Even so, I found it increasingly discouraging as my contemporaries seemed determined to disprove my thesis of the presence of a powerful leftist Indigenous movement, with Correa's allies resorting to openly racist language and some of those within Indigenous movements in Ecuador who I had long supported becoming so disenchanted with those attacks that they opted to support rightwing political candidates instead. I even failed in my repeated campaigns to convince LAP editors to have the basic human decency to capitalize "Indigenous" in recognition of an embrace of their chosen identity (even with all of the complications of semantics and its colonial legacies).

In the face of increasing divisions within and between segments of the left and Indigenous movements, I chickened out and turned my attention back to the archives. Over the course of the past decade, I have used my training in social history to take a deep dive into police records to use political surveillance to recover the history of the political left and broader popular movements

across the twentieth century. This includes the role of the FBI in Latin America during the second world war (Becker, 2017a) and the CIA at the dawn of the cold war (Becker, 2021b). Currently I am extending this project into an examination of Philip Agee's (1975) famous exposé of the role of the CIA in Latin America in the 1960s. That project has thrown me down rabbit holes that include explorations of Ecuador's labor history and Ecuadorian-Cuban relations in the midst of escalating tensions between Cuba and the United States. In the meantime, I also wrote a textbook on revolutions in Latin American as part of the Latin American Perspectives in the Classroom series (Becker, 2017b), that has now been reissued in a second, expanded edition (Becker, 2021a). Following in the tradition of Howard Zinn (1980), my goal as a scholar-activist is to contribute to a deeper understanding of popular—and in particular Indigenous—movements.

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