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BOOK REVIEW

The Practice of Autonomy by Indigenous Peoples

Guillermo Delgado-P.

Indigenous Peoples and Autonomy: Insights for a Global Age. Edited by Mario Blaser, Ravi de Costa, Deborah McGregor, and William D. Coleman. Vancouver, Toronto, UBC Press, 2010.

Autonomía a debate: Políticas de reconocimiento indígena y el Estado plurinacional en América Latina. Edited by Miguel González, Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, and Pablo Ortiz. Ecuador, FLACSO, GTZ, IWGIA, CIESAS, UNICH, 2010.

In this review, two recent volumes on contemporary regimes of autonomy on indigenous areas of the Americas are discussed. Providing meticulous examples, a total of 26 authors in these two collections focus on the legal, conceptual, effective, and nominal understandings of autonomy. In general, participant researchers analyze aspects of autonomy representing specific social movements, nation-states, and governments, bringing about tangible and recurrent examples of ongoing experiences of autonomy sanctioned by the state.

According to the authors, there is no single encompassing understanding of the term ‘autonomy,’ as there are several variants. Although the discussion has been largely dominated by juridical tenets, in most cases there exists juxtaposition between legal and specific mechanisms of self-government. Anthropologist Héctor Díaz-Polanco, a well-known scholar of autonomy, has suggested that ‘[w]hen we talk about autonomy we are referring to a legal-political term that presupposes: 1) territory; 2) the existence of autonomous governments; 3) self-government constitutionally sanctioned on a given territory that exercises own functions; and, 4) jurisdiction related to a given territory. These four points allow for a great diversity of possibilities’ (cited in Gutiérrez Chong 2008, 249).

These two separate but overlapping collections cover almost the totality of recent indigenous autonomy experiences in the Americas, featuring studies on Bolivia, Canada, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panamá. For comparative purposes, contributions on the Tórres Strait Islanders of Australia/New Guinea and the Saami People of Northern Scandinavia are also included. Historicizing the discussion about autonomy, the two volumes offer readers an excellent overview of current cases. Research can be read comparatively, in some areas establishing dialogues that allow for corresponding debates on the issue of autonomy. On the other hand, some cases highlight how ‘de facto’ autonomy

situations emerge as practices, helping to broaden the discussion on autonomy beyond the strictly juridical form with notions such as ‘indigenous linguistic sovereignty’ (Barker 2005). An important element, such as the availability of international instruments to favor indigenous peoples, must be mentioned as a factor that allows for autonomy to be implemented. International instruments assist indigenous peoples to assure, for example, rights to consultation, informed consent, linguistic accessibility or translation, and the recognition of collective rights, amidst others.

In an earlier edited volume, Mexican sociologist Natividad Gutiérrez Chong argued for the ‘creation, development, and enlargement of an institutional framework that would allow beneficiaries to follow up on their own [self government] achievements’ (2008, 15, 353). Setting an indirect dialogue with the Gutiérrez Chong book, the 26 articles offered in the two collections under review document the legalistic maneuvering that characterizes existing autonomy agreements, relating to them as elements that enhance the practice of democracy regarding ethnic minorities in Latin America.

Indigenous Peoples and Autonomy, the volume edited by Mario Blaser, Ravi de Costa, Deborah McGregor, and William D. Coleman, presents 10 essays that deepen the autonomy discussion and debate by registering the ups and downs of actual experiences. They set out to document emergent political cartographies with new subjectivities, a product of an unremitting process of ethnogenesis. Featuring the contributions of 14 scholars, the volume is divided into four parts entitled ‘Introduction,’ ‘Emergences,’ ‘Absences,’ and ‘Hope.’ The editors suggest that indigenous peoples ‘move beyond resistance and autonomy by defending and sustaining alternative ways of living in the world that contribute to alternative globalizations’ (20). By using the term ‘collective autonomy’ as a sociological reality, indigenous peoples foreground native systems (e.g., of knowledge or settlement) as a counter-hegemonic strategy against neo-colonizers, intruding landless peasants, and the contemporary corporate land grabbing led by global institutions (Ross 2014).

The contributors to the volume ‘place emphasis on pluriversalism rather than universalism, on dialogue, negotiation, and coexistence between contrasting visions and projects that are replacing the universal imposition of [one] modernity’ (21). Authors are invited to think in a *pluri-theoretical* way ‘to investigate the relationship between globalization and the process of securing and building autonomy’ (viii). Rather than claiming essential definitions of indigeneity, or circling the debate to refer to strictly legal concepts, Blaser et al. privilege the commonalities that indigenous peoples share as new subjectivities, for example, regarding their perception of an ontologized cosmos that opposes capitalism’s entropic de-ontologization of nature, exposed in devastating global warming trends.

The volume opens up a trend of transnational and global dialogues of people that claim concepts of indigeneity and places them in mutual conversation in the context of autonomy. The contributions are inspired by the collaborative research initiative that is collectively articulated in the introduction by the editors Mario Blaser, Ravi de Costa, Deborah McGregor, and William D. Coleman. As a long-term project of intellectual production to be shared with larger audiences, the aim is ‘to produce an integrated corpus of outstanding research that provides an in-depth study of the

varying relationships between globalization and autonomy' (ix). But the meaning of autonomy in this volume is subverted, de-framed from its separatist, legalistic concept and expanded via relationality (8–10), as 'Indigenous struggles allow all peoples to imagine different kinds of globalization' (8). Such diverse worlds 'are conceived as being a matter of location rather than discreet essences. Diversity (of locations) is a precondition for the very existence of the web of life' (9). The volume focuses on two main visions or projects: the first is dominant and genealogically related to modernity; the second seeks to bring relationality back to the forefront of human values and practices in the *socionature*. Both, in turn, 'enrich our understanding of the dialectics of globalization and autonomy' (10).

The volume contains two section subdivisions – 'countering absences' (179, 195) and 'fostering emergences' (49, 80, 107, 130, 148) – that invite indigenous intellectuals who think about their own materials. Why? Because indigenous peoples (1) have something to say in debates about whether the globalizing process is inserted within the issue of coloniality, therefore establishing either continuity with the past or, instead, offering a distinct rupture; (2) have played the autonomy game and worked within nation-states and the global arena to define what is meant by autonomy; and (3) have developed global collaborative arrangements among themselves that articulate a discourse of an alternative globalization. So, Cree people from Canada (Richard J. 'Dick' Preston; Harvey A. Feit) get a chance to hear Mapuche people from Chile (Pablo Marimán Queménado), and both are able to access the experience of Chiapas Zapatista 'de facto autonomy' (Alex Khasnabish), along Saämi People of Northern Scandinavia (Kristina Maud Bergeron) that nurture a dialogue with Tórres Strait islanders that litigate in Australian Federal Courts (Colin Scott and Monica Mulrennan). All learn in a tangible way the meaning of 'autonomy' as it relates to their particular circumstances. But 'playing the autonomy game required Indigenous Peoples to act as translators of their own cultures and cosmologies and the governmental rationalities that dominate in any given situation' (19).

These types of dialogues have been fostered before, during, and after the Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the late 1970s, as demonstrated by Sylvia Escárcega-Z. (2012, 204–255). In a sense, the renewed and extensive dialogues between indigenous peoples all over the world are encouraged by the availability of international instruments such as the long overdue United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, finally adopted by the UN General Assembly in September of 2007, as discussed in both volumes (Kuppe 2010, 96–99; de Costa 2010, 240–249). For the record, it should be noted that four countries worked tirelessly to intransigently thwart and postpone such a declaration: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. But the winds of history are irrevocable; indigenous peoples represent a population of about 370 million in the world, and their views cannot avoid a critique of neoliberal globalization as a reference to the 'continuity of modernity/coloniality from the arrival of European settlers to the present' (Blaser et al. 2010).

Indigenous Peoples and Autonomy highlights alternative modes of thinking and re-centers indigenous peoples contributions to understand the *polysemic* meaning of autonomy, as in the case of 'autonomous media' (Alex Khasnabis; Rebecca

Tobobondung), or 'alternative thinking' such as bringing to the forefront the autonomous forms of the *Ayllu* in Aymara culture (Marcelo Fernández Osco). As Harvey Feit illustrates in his discussion of the Cree practices of 'co-governance' and 'collective autonomy' in Quebec, 'Indigenous Peoples can often sustain or gain degrees of autonomy peacefully only insofar as they can find ways to restructure relationships with non-Native societies' (Blaser et al. 2010, 23). For his part, Erich Fox Tree reflects on 'sustaining and enriching Indigenous languages through the use of modern theories of linguistics' (ibid.). Thinking that linguistic autonomous forms challenge erasure by default, as well as top-down state policies of assimilation, by reifying linguistic dendrograms offered to illustrate the complexity of Mayan languages (a total of 22), Mayan linguists inadvertently could provide bases to eliminate indigenous language variability closely related to land or territory occupancy, or the imposition of cadastral systems that answer to the interests of the state (82). By discussing linguistic assertiveness, Fox Tree makes us aware of de facto variants of cultural autonomy. A comprehensive afterword by Ravi de Costa critically summons such achievements through the international instruments available to indigenous peoples.

Autonomía a debate, the second collection reviewed here, opens with a comprehensive introduction by editors Miguel González, Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, and Pablo Ortíz. The volume features 16 contributions, organized into six parts corresponding to (1) Indigenous Autonomy in Latin America; (2) Autonomy Regimes in Latin America; (3) Autonomies, Constituent Assemblies, and Plurinational States; (4) Autonomies as Processes; (5) Political Representation and Autonomy; and (6) Autonomic Struggles in Globalized Contexts. This volume originated in a workshop in 2008 in Ecuador with the purpose of analyzing 'a diversity of modes that implemented indigenous and multiethnic territorial autonomies in Latin America' (González and Burguete Cal y Mayor 2010, 9). Nicaragua (1987), Colombia (1991), and Venezuela (1999) are considered the first to legally adopt or acknowledge demands articulated by indigenous peoples in the rewriting of their constitutions, long after the classic case of the Kuna of Panama and their recognition by the state in 1972, although the Kuna won an armed struggle to be able to retain Kuna jurisdiction of their *Comarcas* within Panama after 1925 (Osvaldo Jordán Ramos).

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the exhaustion of the tension between the East-West paradigms in Latin America created space for a process of 're-democratization,' accompanied by the emergence of social movements with a strong ethnic agenda that disrupted the dominance of former class-based forms of analysis. The social movements that engendered and formalized processes of ethno-genesis, accompanied by gender/feminist and environmental agendas, promoted demands and articulated platforms to explore and realize plans for autonomous politics that could contest privatizing models brought about by neoliberalism. Inevitably, such demands overlapped with top-down neoliberal policies that recommended state decentralization, granting different regions the adoption of forms of self-government aligned with the state's decentralization project, and opening access to decision-making spheres by traditionally marginalized nominal citizens. Miguel González et al. argue that autonomy regimes

emerged as a 'modality the State adopted in order to reconstitute its political legitimacy under crisis' (35).

The late Donna Lee Van Cott (2001, 33–35) found that the recognition of politico-territorial autonomy regimes occurred within the framework of a larger regime bargain. That is, when the political elites of over-centralized states faced serious grassroots challenges that would hinder their ability to control the sovereignty of their territories, they opted to reform and restructure constitutional tenets expressed in the re-writing of new constitutions, answering to the pressures posed by ethnic social movements challenging them. For the first time, indigenous autonomy claimants pressed to fully participate as subjects of right in their respective nation-states. According to the meticulous researcher Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, the dwindling of *Indigenismo* and *Mestizaje* needs to be recognized as challenges to the state's assimilationist policy, which were remnants of 'internal colonialism' that inscribed 'autonomy' on indigenous peoples' demands. Miguel González asserts that 'autonomous regimes in Latin America do not constitute a norm but an exception ... [because] elites considered it a menace to territorial integrity and state sovereignty' (36–37). Another early case that precipitated the issue of autonomy stemmed from the ethnic demands the Miskitu, Rama, and Sumo of Nicaragua submitted in 1980s, in the context of the ongoing Sandinista Revolution of 1979 (Juliet Hooker). The situation called for an early articulation of a transnational social movement of indigenous peoples that pressed the Sandinistas to respect the ethnic-territorial claims of the Miskitu within the social transformations of Nicaragua at the time. This period was unfortunately manipulated by the Iran–Contra affair, financed by the Reagan administration, which remains today a tragic Cold War leftover. Then, suddenly, the 'ethnic question' became 'the national-ethnic question,' as Héctor Díaz Polanco (2008, 245) observed.

As these two volumes highlight, the term 'autonomy' has varying degrees of difference, tones, and hues, depending on the region. González and Burguete Cal y Mayor refer to autonomy as a 'polysemic,' 'multicolor image' (2010, 9), since the concept has to do with different proposals regarding social justice, the defense of natural resources, linguistic recognition, cultural diversity, territorial possession, immemorial or ancestral territorial rights, etc. Thus, autonomy is problematized beyond what Ramón Máiz (in Gutiérrez Chong 2008, 18) suggests as being 'not only administration but also self-government and shared governance.' Miguel González agrees with Máiz's concept of autonomy: 'a formal legal-political regime of territorial self-government in which the State recognizes individual as well as collective rights of Indigenous Peoples or Afro-descendants, so that they can exercise their rights to self-determination' (38). The neologism *Afro-descendientes* is introduced as a belated example of legal recognition via changes in Ecuador's constitution, which acknowledges Afro-descendants' collective rights to 'their ancestral territories' for the first time (Jhon Antón Sánchez). Of course, before this neologism acquired currency, ethnicity referred almost exclusively to indigenous peoples of Latin America. Afro-descendants broaden the issue, as the late Helen I. Safa demonstrated (2005, 307–329).

Ethnic social movements waved the flags of autonomy, as neo-regionalization regarding the management of lands, natural resources, and self-determination became an answer to the new engine of neoliberalism's attempt to privatize the means of production as it suggested shrinking the centralized state. Privatization meant the dismantling of a benefactor and bureaucratic state that, up to then, entertained the concept of agrarian reform to redistribute lands to landless peasants. But the option of privatization expressed in the redrawing of cadastral systems undermined the status of self-sufficient indigenous communities, which were actual occupants of such territories and interacted with capitalism on their own terms throughout the Americas. Neoliberalism opened the possibilities of land acquisition by others than the peasants that demanded it. For native peoples, privatization thus implied dispossession – probably the worst of such cases is represented in the complex utilization of land and territory by the Mayas of Guatemala, the only nation-state that has not abandoned its colonial relationship with indigenous peoples. This represents an 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003) in globalization that attempts to commoditize areas that have escaped the full regulation of capitalism.

Although 'autonomy' acquired a stronger presence after 1980s, the term illustrated the context of European discussions, such as the autonomous regions of Spain, which soon enough strengthened the Miskitu demands in Nicaragua, an example that trickled down to the rest of Latin America as a contesting subproduct of the neoliberal agenda. When contestation intensified through the emergent indigenous movements of the Americas, autonomy received its initial concrete formulation in the Zapatista demands submitted to the government of Mexico, which reflected the influence of the early autonomy claims foregrounded by the indigenous peoples' campaigns against the 'celebration' of the 1992 Columbus Quincentennial. The elimination of Article 27 provoked the Zapatista Rebellion of 1 January 1994, and it best expressed the bottom-up reaction against privatization implied in the signing of NAFTA: full depeasantization and neoliberal dispossession. According to Mariana Mora in her contribution, the Mexican State has worked hard to separate 'autonomy' from the grassroots organization's historical trajectories of social change and mobilization. One of the reasons autonomy became part of the social movements agenda, and specifically the Zapatista one, is that social movements reinstated it as a demand.

Ironically, the aims of neoliberalism triggered the need to rearticulate the nation and modernize the state, critiquing its centralist tradition by assuring the recognition of ethnic minorities and originary peoples. New discourses of top-down multiculturalism, thought to be of participatory nature (re-democratization), were urgently offered to patch up centuries of the marginalization of native peoples, historic minorities, or historic nationalities. With the availability and popularizing of the ILO Article 169, based on a previous document that was known as ILO Article 157, ethnic communities were now demanding a different relation to the nation-state that, in its efforts to deal with their pressing demands, entertained the approval and recognition of collective land tenures, facilitating the viability of autonomous regimes or regions such as the implementation of *resguardos* in the case of Colombia (Astrid Ulloa), and the 'multiethnic regional autonomies' in areas populated by Andean indigenous peoples who continued to administer *Ayllu*

systems (the *Ayllu* is a pre-Columbian Andean communal territorial holding that also acknowledges networks of kin-related social organization), as the work of Marcelo Fernández Osco shows.

Of all of these cases, the Mayas of Guatemala constitute the only ones to have been unable to articulate autonomous demands. Although the Mayas and their supporters have adopted 'autonomy,' Santiago Bastos argues that in the last three decades the term has been 'variable and diverse' given the sociopolitical convulsion and tragedy Guatemala has experienced throughout the second part of the 20th century and well into the 21st century. In fact, Guatemala continues to be a centralized state, and its territorial and ethnic complexity (26 ethnicities) does not seem to coalesce, disrupting in consequence the emergence of solid Mayan autonomy proposals. Bastos' contribution resonates with the article by Erich Fox Tree (in Blaser et al. 2010, 80–106).

Two nation-states have adopted autonomous regimes head on: Bolivia and Ecuador. In both cases, autonomy has entailed the rewriting of the constitution and the adoption of the term 'plurinational' as new component whose purpose is to recognize equality for all. However, once autonomous regimes are in place, the sudden shift from centralization to neo-regionalization entails technical and organizational difficulties in the ability to carry out the implementation of autonomy itself. There are gaps between the letter of intent and the actual implementation of autonomous forms, as Franklin Yacelga (2008, 225–242) demonstrated for Ecuador. The studies of Pablo Ospina Peralta, Jhon Antón Sánchez, Pablo Ortíz, and Dolores Figueroa on Ecuador set important discussions, as each foreground detailed historical narratives relevant to the relation legal-practical autonomy and self-government. In Ecuador, autonomy thus acquires a different angle, as Ospina Peralta suggests. There, implementing plurinationality might first require a step back to be able to advance two steps, later. Why? Because the issues of autonomy are further complicated by gender/sex struggles that, despite formal recognition, are uphill battles when dealing with the participation of ethnic minority women. Kichwa gender representation in Ecuador, compared to Miskitu women (of Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanhi Asla Takanka) in Nicaragua, is interpreted by Figueroa as responding to entrenched male practices that bolster vertical decision-making processes that end up marginalizing women. Figueroa thinks that autonomous regimes could qualitatively be enriched by women's participation. This chapter engages Mariana Mora's concept of 'the emergence of new subjectivities,' outside the control or expectation of the state (293).

The prolific Xavier Albó offers a detailed and corresponding view of how the Bolivian state has advanced in effectively implementing levels of autonomy, which seem to accomplish a true modernization/democratization of the state that recognizes plurinationality, guaranteeing that all citizens participate in the administration of their territories, municipalities, and autonomous spaces. For Bolivia, Albó suggests that once the new constitution had been approved in 2009, the concept 'autonomy of Originary Nations and Indigenous-Peasant Peoples' must be understood as one that allows for the 'indigenous collective property' to constitute the bases for the implementation of autonomous forms of self-government. Constitutional changes are expected to be realized by the very 'Originary Indigenous-Peasant peoples'

(*indígena originario campesino/a[s]*, or IOCs) who, following an initial vote to make it effective, must implement their own autonomous regime to guarantee that – as a collective and as a community – they are able and capable of self-governance. This is effective in at least eleven *municipios* with high rates of indigenous populations, as well as in the TCO (*Tierras Comunitarias de Origen*) and TIOCs (*Territorios Indígenas Comunitarios de Origen*).

Of all these cases, the Mapuche discussion about autonomy in Chile, similar to the Maya case of Guatemala, is the one that is dissonant. According to Christian Martínez Neira, the Mapuche situation is still at an early stage of debates, as it is controversial but not impossible. Having been affected by agrarian reforms (under Frei and Allende) and counter-agrarian reforms (under Pinochet), class alliances were established at different moments of time allowing the Mapuche to brandish autonomous proposals with a double dimension: one, outward linking Mapuches to Chilean society at large, and the other one, inward. Alliances, however, played a detrimental role in postponing Mapuche demands, which were overshadowed by struggles over re-democratization. The state, by instituting Comisión Especial de Pueblos Indígenas (a sort of Bureau of Indian Affairs) and later Corporación Nacional de Desarrollo Indígena (a development corporation for indigenous peoples) gave the impression that Mapuche demands would be answered. The probabilities that Mapuche organizations have in establishing autonomy in their agenda confront a not so-hidden racialized anti-Mapuche policy from the part of the state, which dilutes, ignores, or represses Mapuche autonomic demands. At times, understandably, the Mapuche resort to radicalism and physical confrontation (as in the case of *Comunidades en Conflicto Arauco Malleco*), because neoliberal Chile hampers and criminalizes Mapuche ethnic demands as much as possible. Yet Mapuche resistance, although scattered and intermittent, has been persistent and relentless, as shown in the outstanding intellectual autonomy they are able to wield.

In sum, the two edited volumes provide the reader with an excellent overview of the autonomy debate by showing existing Latin American practices. Editors and scholars participating in these volumes, each on their own, are aware of, and establish, clear dialogues with peers that have advanced the debate on autonomic issues in Canada, New Zealand, and Spain. Such cases allow for the observation of entanglements that emerge in the practice of autonomy. The articles are generated in the context of territorial state administrative needs pertaining transformations triggered by neoliberalism, re-democratization, and globalization, at least in the region of Latin America. At times, autonomy in this situation means a contesting strategy from the part of 'ethnic minorities,' which in some cases constitute majorities like the case of Bolivia, Peru, and Guatemala. It is no coincidence that 'plurinationality,' the concept of adopted by constitutions in Ecuador and Bolivia, has allowed for a more realistic state's administrative approaches than the previous denial (via assimilationist *Mestizaje* or *Indigenismo*) of ethnic/territorial complexity. In places like Guatemala or Chile, the debate is simply hampered and, in other situations such as in Peru or Brazil, not even mentioned. What is also articulated in these two edited contributions is the fact that 'autonomy' acquires a myriad of meanings, including one that pertains to linguistic sovereignty against the assimilative monolinguality offered by the nation-state.

Implementing autonomy or autonomous forms, likewise, remains in the field of the not fully achieved, or the partially realized, since the substantial examples that exist would be the matter of appraisal and future research. Meanwhile, autonomy continues to stay on the agenda of the indigenous and *Afro-descendiente* social movements, but also on some of the non-Indigenous anti-centralist, neoliberal privatizing prefectures, *departamentos*, or municipalities that are, uncritically and desperately, eager to adopt autonomy as secession, an excuse to trigger development projects without realizing the ecocidal trends they intensify. What remains lingering in the air regarding autonomy as a strategy of indigenous peoples pertains, hopefully, to a better administration of space, territory, and resources that could regulate not the blinding rush to exploit but rather the regeneration of the pluriverse.

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