Review of Native and National in Brazil (American Historical Review)

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As Rath notes, Mexican demilitarization is not entirely mythical. All of Mexico’s presidents since 1946 have been civilians; there have been no serious coups or rebellions since Plutarco Elias Calles created the official National Revolutionary Party (later PRI) in 1929; and the military’s share of the federal budget shrank dramatically following the 1910 Revolution. These are major achievements, especially when compared with the militarization of most of Latin America from the 1930s through the 1980s.

"Demilitarization," however, glosses over the very real power struggles that took place between the national leadership and ambitious army officers. The victorious Sonorans (1920–1934) attempted to both downsize and discipline the caudillo-ridden army that they inherited following the revolution. The Cárdenas administration that followed tried to promote a new version of revolutionary nationalist citizenship in the armed forces. Cardenistas opened the officer corps to enlisted men, encouraged the creation of a peasant militia armed and trained by the army, and founded radical boarding schools for army children that were described as “true laboratories of socialism” (p. 56). Rath cites a range of sources to suggest that military resistance to these and other Cardenista initiatives was widespread and may have forced Cárdenas to moderate his positions later in his term.

Indeed, despite the enduring and self-serving myth of “demilitarization,” army officers were deeply involved in politics through the early 1950s. In 1948, military disaffection with Mexico’s first civilian president since the 1910s, Miguel Aleman (1946–1952), was so great that many observers expected a coup that summer. The frustrated presidential bid of General Miguel Héctor Guzmán in 1952 attracted many active officers and veterans groups. The civilians survived these challenges largely because the PRI “traded national obedience for impunity, provincial and operational autonomy, and the perks of systematic corruption” (p. 3). As long as army officers agreed to do the PRI’s dirty work, they were free to engage in land speculation and logging, create private monopolies that supplied military equipment, smuggle contraband goods, protect alcohol monopolies, and possibly participate in the drug trade. Rath illustrates this point with a fascinating look at the Avilacamachista cacique in the state of Puebla, where two of the president’s brothers (the notorious Maximo, who was also a general; and Rafael, a colonel) combined bare-knuckled political power with economic opportunities.

Mexico’s ruling party may have succeeded in selling the myth of “demilitarization” to the public, but it struggled to impose its vision on the many veterans’ groups that jockeyed for power and attention. In the 1920s, the army equated revolutionary military service with Constitutionism, thereby excluding former Zapastas. In the 1930s, as the official party promoted the idea that the revolution had been a unifying national experience that transcended factionalism, the army’s more restrictive definition of military service seemed out of step. In 1939, the Cardenistas granted veteran status to members from all factions, with the exception of those who had taken up arms against Francisco Madero. Several hundred veterans who had participated as soldiers, spies, and messengers were also recognized as veterans. Even so, Rath notes that “the idea of gathering all the veterans together in a single, neatly choreographed organization proved a chimera” (p. 162).

Some historians will be disappointed that Rath did not carry his research into the 1960s and 1970s, when the “Mexican Miracle” ground to a halt and the ruling party increasingly turned to repression to keep workers, peasants, students, and professionals in line. Mexico’s “Dirty War” never reached the levels of savagery seen elsewhere in Latin America, but many questions remain even after former president Vicente Fox released an 800-page report in 2006 admitting government responsibility for the Tlatelolco and Corpus Christi massacres of 1968 and 1971, respectively, as well as the brutal counterinsurgency campaign waged in Guerrero. In the context of the army’s role in Mexico’s current and remarkably violent drug war, more scholars will likely be drawn to the topic of military-state relations after 1920. They will find in Rath’s book an extremely capable foundational text.

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In this engaging interdisciplinary book, Tracy Devine Guzmán examines how mainstream Brazilian society has represented “Indians” from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, and how indigenous peoples have sought to decolonize those representations and define their own identity. Present-day clashes between the Brazilian government and indigenous groups over the construction of major hydroelectric projects in the Amazon give impetus to Guzmán’s work. Five hundred years after Europeans “discovered” Brazil, and after one hundred years of government “protection,” Brazil’s indigenous peoples continue to combat real and symbolic violence rationalized by national development.

Key terms should be clarified at the outset, since they are deceptively similar and may be understood differently elsewhere. For Guzmán, “Indian” and “Indianness” refer to essentializing and Orientalist constructions, whereas “indigenous” and “Native” connote self-identification. “Indigenist” refers to state apparatus, “Indianist” refers to nineteenth-century romanticism, and “indigeneity” refers to the lived experience of indigenous people.

Guzmán opens with a troubling example of what Philip J. Deloria calls “Playing Indian” in his book by that title (1998), forcefully demonstrating that demean-
ing stereotypes continue to predominate in the popular imaginary. Defyly demonstrating how “multicultural” entertainment often reinforces rather than questions exploitation, Guzmán shows how Indianess sells. Native Brazilians seeking to represent themselves and their interests must first rise above persistent colonialist ideas and images (p. 9).

Using an interdisciplinary analytic lens, Guzmán contradicts perceptions about “Indians” with indigenous peoples’ autochthonous ways of being, knowing, and remembering. The concept of Brazilianness as social, ethnic, and cultural mestizaje (mixing), conceived as a revision of exclusionary nineteenth-century ideas, offers no place for self-identifying indigenous people because it requires “Indians without indigeneity” (p. 24). But Guzmán argues that despite the “double bind” of having to work as part of the system in order to change it, indigenous people today actively “project themselves tenaciously into the future as differentiated peoples—Brazilian, but also irreducibly indigenous” (pp. 24, 196).

The book contains five chapters, with an introduction and epilogue. Chapter one juxtaposes self-renderings of Native peoples to state policy and legislation. Guzmán asserts that indigenous Brazilians who challenge “the evolutionary logic of traditional indigenist discourse” and mainstream notions of the Brazilian race are forcing two shifts (p. 28). First, in terms of phenomenology, the movement is to establish a non-essentialist politics of identity that accommodates individual and collective Native self-identification. Second, the move is to create social concepts and bureaucratic rules that recognize legal differentiation and autonomy for Native peoples within the modern Brazilian nation-state. Chapter two addresses the 1850s–1930s, when territorial exploration, commercial expansion, and mainstream culture established “violent displacement” of the Indian as the root of nation-building (p. 62). Chapter three spans the 1930s–2000s and explores state indigenist policy in the Amazon, including how the rhetoric of education to “improve” Indians became central to dominant ideas about economic growth and modernity. Chapter four considers the controversial case of a marriage between an employee of the Indian Protection Service and a Kalapalo teenager in the 1950s. For Guzmán, the experience of the bride, Daciá Kalapalo Aiute, demonstrates the triple exploitation of Native women “as objects for barter between indigenous and nonindigenous men, as victims of sexual and other forms of violence, and, in keeping with the hemispheric myth of what Deloria calls the ‘wilderness marriage,’ as suffering mothers of the romanticized mestiza nation” (pp. 29–30). Chapter five chronicles the last twenty-five years, in a significant development, Guzmán asserts that women have joined the forefront of the Brazilian indigenous movement. In this same period, Guzmán identifies the emergence of a “Native critique of sovereignty” (p. 159). This alternative vision of sovereignty would recognize indigenous ways of being, knowing, and remembering, while destabilizing dominant assumptions about indigenous people in society, politics, and government.

Guzmán works with an impressive array of sources, including classic Brazilian texts, interdisciplinary scholarship, governmental archival material, and work by indigenous activists and scholars. The meager endnotes and bibliography will certainly facilitate further research. An excellent selection of captioned illustrations encourages readers to consider them as historical evidence. Guzmán’s timeline logically commences with the genesis of the “Indian Question” at independence in 1822: How do Indians fit into newly sovereign Brazil? However, readers may have difficulty following the chronological analysis within and across the chapters. Some concise treatment of the development of post-independence governmental agencies (e.g., the Indian Protection Service and the National Indian Foundation) and major legislation would have assisted the reader in tracking dominant versus indigenous discourses over time. Significantly, Guzmán endeavors to conceptualize issues on a national scale over almost two hundred years, distinguishing her approach from studies of Brazilian “frontiers” and regional studies. She shows that indigeneity is not a pigment of the past and motivates the reader to rethink established understandings of Brazil’s past (and present) by considering and valuing indigeneity. Her discussion will contribute to regional, national, and global debates about land rights, energy, environmental protection, trade, democracy, and human rights.

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EUROPE: ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL


Near the end of Brent Shaw’s fascinating study of harvest and harvesting in the Roman world, we read that a heavily armed killer drone that was developed for the United States Air Force is called “The Reaper” (p. 227). At this point in the book, the reader understands the many layers of meaning and the thousands of years of tradition this small fact incorporates, even in a modern society that has lost its close connection to the land. As the subtitle indicates, the book addresses the economic realities of harvesting, in particular the labor involved, as well as a wide spectrum of metaphors related to the harvest, not only in the Roman world, but also in the ancient Near East and in later Europe. Shaw demonstrates that such metaphors derived their potency from the centrality of harvesting in preindustrial societies.

The focus of the book is late Roman Africa: the world of the so-called Maktar Harvester, an anonymous entrepreneur whose grave inscription celebrates his rise from harvester and foreman to local magnate. It is also