Review of Native and National in Brazil (Bulletin of Latin American Research)

Tracy Devine Guzmán, University of Miami

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/tracydevineguzman/25/

*Native and National in Brazil* charts the evolution of indigenous peoples’ position within the national imaginary, their changing relationships to the state and its projects, as well as to ideas of ‘the nation,’ Brazil and Brazilianness. Synthetic analysis of diverse materials and fields of cultural production – from the fine arts and popular culture to scientific, political and policy discourse -- reveals consistent disjunctures between indigenous peoples’ lived experience and orientalising ideas of Indians and Indian-ness that are created, re-produced and transformed in various hegemonic representational projects. Guzmán paints ‘the big picture’ of Brazil’s complex relationship to its indigenous peoples – situating this history in relation to discourses on race, modernity, multiculturalism, democracy and citizenship, and the regional context – while never losing sight of the impacts of dominant discourses, policy and practice on native lives and lived experience. Revealing the complex, ambiguous and ever-changing relationships between Brazil’s native peoples, the state and national identity from the nineteenth century to the present, Guzmán makes significant contributions to Brazilian and Latin American studies and scholarship on indigeneity.

The tension between lived experience (indigeneity, for Guzmán) and the representation of Indians and Indian-ness is, according to Guzmán, a foundational element in Brazilian nationalism: Indians are at once essential to Brazilian identity and the nation but simultaneously excluded, even now with constitutionally guaranteed citizenship. Guzmán proposes that contemporary indigenous efforts to de-colonise the hegemonic
representational apparatus alter, if even in small ways, fundamental conceptions of citizenship, democracy and sovereignty. The introduction and Chapter 1 lay out the basic argument; subsequent chapters juxtapose fascinating historic and contemporary materials in engaging analyses.

In Chapter 2, Guzmán explores nineteenth and early twentieth-century literary and artistic movements to expose foundational fictional manipulations of the Indian figure and reveal ways that these served evolving nationalist projects. Gomes’s opera, Il Guarani, positioned an idealised Brazilian native at the centre of developing nationalist ideologies, which served post-independence nation-building efforts, the nationalist agenda of racial mixing and Vargas’s campaign to consolidate ‘Brazilian culture.’ Subsequently, reacting against the nineteenth-century aesthetic of European imitation, modernists inverted the indigenous image and instead celebrated the consuming ‘Cannibal’. By juxtaposing accounts of native experiences in the Paraguayan War, underway as Gomes penned Il Guarani, Guzmán highlights the chasm between literary inventions and contemporary Indians’ lived experience of colonialism.

In Chapter 3, Guzmán proposes that a politics of ‘anti-imperialistic imperialism’ has consistently guided indigenous policy and practice from the early twentieth century to the present. State indigenism manages indigenous peoples through colonising discourses of ‘protection’, ‘security’, ‘development’ and especially education, which transform Indians into ‘modern’ and ‘national subjects’ who are then displayed as embodiments of an idealised, modern nation – or infantilised, as in a recent security campaign.

Chapter 4 considers the ‘Indian question’ in the context of mid-twentieth century debates about race and national identity. Analysis centres on a fascinating, highly publicised debate regarding a proposed marriage between a ‘white’ sertanista (backlands explorer) and a Kalapalo teenager. The ‘Diacuí case’ awakened nineteenth-century romantic fictions among the urban public but pitted the state’s Indian Agency, guided by preservationist ideologies that dictated proscribing the marriage, against Vargas’s assimilationist agenda. Highlighting fact that Diacuí’s voice and wishes were absent from public and political debate, Guzmán underscores the fact that indigenous peoples have historically had little control over their representation in the national arena and in its political processes. Guzmán reiterates this point throughout the book.

Chapter 5 turns directly to the contemporary context and Brazil’s indigenous movement, considering ways in which some indigenous intellectuals and leaders – mostly from urban contexts, and including a number of women – are taking steps to assume control of representational processes and, as Marcos Terena exemplifies, entering into formal politics. Readers seeking to understand more deeply the cultural principles and ideologies that inform these projects and contemporary efforts at self-representation should look to a number of anthropological studies that focus specifically on these issues.

Guzmán’s argument that Indians’ increasing self-representation and advocacy poses fundamental challenges to notions of citizenship, national identity and sovereignty, specifically what it means to be both ‘native’ (distinctive) and ‘national’ (included within the national polity), will be of broad interest to scholars of Brazil and Latin America, and of indigeneity. This theoretically sophisticated, data-rich and eloquently written book is a ‘must read’ for anyone with interests in these issues.

Laura R. Graham

University of Iowa