

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the Ecuadorian State

Marc Becker

Truman State University, Kirksville, Missouri, US
Email: marc@yachana.org

This essay reviews the following works:

Health in the Highlands: Indigenous Healing and Scientific Medicine in Guatemala and Ecuador. By David Carey Jr. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. Pp. viii + 384. \$34.95 paperback, \$85.00 hardcover, \$34.95 e-book. ISBN: 9780520344792.

Conjuring the State: Public Health Encounters in Highland Ecuador, 1910–1945. By A. Kim Clark. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023. Pp. 200. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780822947820.

La última guerra del Siglo de las Luces: Revolución Liberal y republicanismismo popular en Ecuador. By Valeria Coronel. Quito: FLACSO Ecuador, 2022. Pp. xiv + 419. \$18.00 paperback, \$12.00 e-book. ISBN: 9789978676202.

Global Governance of the Environment, Indigenous Peoples and the Rights of Nature: Extractive Industries in the Ecuadorian Amazon. By Linda Etchart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Pp. xxxv + 270. \$109.99 paperback, \$109.99 hardcover, \$84.99 e-book. ISBN: 9783030815219.

In the Shadow of Tungurahua: Disaster Politics in Highland Ecuador. By A. J. Faas. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023. Pp. ix + 246. \$34.95 paperback, \$120.00 hardcover, \$34.95 e-book. ISBN: 9781978831568.

A Feast of Flowers: Race, Labor, and Postcolonial Capitalism in Ecuador. By Christopher Krupa. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. Pp. 328. \$39.95 paperback, \$99.95 hardcover, \$39.95 e-book. ISBN: 9780812225129.

Transforming Ethnicity: Youth and Migration in the Southern Ecuadorian Andes. By Jorge Daniel Vásquez. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Pp. xix + 105. \$44.99 hardcover, \$34.99 e-book. ISBN: 9783031300967.

Extractivism and Universality: Inside an Uprising in the Amazon. By Japhy Wilson. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2023. Pp. x + 132. \$128.00 hardcover, \$42.36 e-book. ISBN: 9781032386126.

Ronald Reagan famously quipped, “The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: ‘I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.’” This statement channeled the conservative political creed on which he campaigned for the presidency that the government is not the solution; it is the problem. This argument in favor of limited government intervention in economic and social affairs contends that government

intercession leads only to inefficiency, excessive bureaucracy, and infringement on individual liberties. Conservatives and libertarians point to examples of government failures, corruption, and mismanagement as evidence that government is the problem, not the solution. In contrast, others maintain that government agencies play a crucial role in addressing societal problems, such as providing public services (education, health care, infrastructure), regulating industries to protect consumers and the environment, ensuring social safety nets, and promoting equality and social justice. Such a belief in the positive role of government presents officials as providing essential services, addressing public needs, protecting citizens, and ensuring the smooth functioning of society. Opponents, of course, point instead to examples of government overreach, inefficient bureaucracy, excessive regulations, and intrusions into personal lives. All these problems contribute to a lack of trust in government institutions.

As the books under review in this essay demonstrate, government actions and policies can have a significant impact on people's lives, and the effectiveness of government programs varies widely. Individuals' political beliefs and personal experiences with government services and interactions also influence their views on the proper role of government in society. A landmark essay on any study of government structures is Philip Abrams's famous "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State."¹ (For the purposes of this essay, let's leave aside a common academic problem of essentializing "the state" and semantic differences between the interrelated concepts of government policies and state structures.) Originally written in 1977 and published in the first issue of the *Journal of Historical Sociology* in 1988, Abrams explores the challenges and complexities that the study of the state entails. He highlights the multifaceted nature of the state as a subject of study and underscores the importance of recognizing its complexity, historical context, and the social relations that underlie it. Rather than a concrete, tangible entity, Abrams suggests that the state should be understood as a social relation. Rather than a static entity, he encourages us to understand the state as a dynamic social institution that evolves over time and is influenced by various factors. This elusiveness makes studying the state a complex endeavor. To help address these problems, Abrams encourages scholars to approach the study of the state with an open and interdisciplinary perspective, taking into account the challenges and nuances involved in that endeavor. The eight books under review in this essay provide diverse disciplinary and ideological perspectives on what at times can be a very contentious issue.

The creation of the Ministerio de Previsión Social y Trabajo (MPST, Ministry of Social Welfare and Labor) in the aftermath of the Revolución Juliana (July Revolution) was one of the most important developments in government administration of social problems during the twentieth century in Ecuador. The Revolución Juliana marked a significant turning point in Ecuadorian history and politics with far-reaching consequences for the country. On July 9, 1925, a cadre of young, progressive, modernizing military officers staged a coup that brought an entrenched sequence of liberal constitutional civilian governments to an end. The military leaders had become disillusioned with what they condemned as a corrupt and opportunistic coastal liberal oligarchy who were unable to bring about any real changes to address long-standing social problems. In power, they introduced a series of modernizing social reforms, including progressive labor legislation that set a minimum wage, an eight-hour workday, one day of rest a week, and a federal retirement fund. The MPST provided a legal avenue for subalterns to agitate for their rights. Strongly influenced by the then-recent reforms innovated in Mexico through that revolutionary process, the MPST was designed to assimilate Indigenous and other marginalized peoples into their concept of a unified national state. Rather than a radical

¹ Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (March 1988): 58–89.

alteration of social relations, the goal was to stabilize a potentially explosive situation. A century later, the promises and limitations of state-centered reforms that emerged out of the Revolución Juliana continue to echo throughout Ecuadorian society. The revolution reshaped the country's political landscape and set the stage for subsequent developments as it reflected the complex and often turbulent history of political transitions and reforms in the country. Consciously or not, those persistent issues emerge in one way or another in all of the works under consideration in this essay.

More than any other scholar, the historian Valeria Coronel has plumbed the depths of the MPST archives to understand the ramifications of these state-centered reforms. *La última guerra del Siglo de las Luces* is the first of a two-volume work that hinges on the creation of the MPST.² In the book, Coronel provides a detailed analysis of factors that led up to the Revolución Juliana and contributed to the nature of reforms that it inspired. A key precursor to the events in the 1920s was the Liberal Revolution, which Eloy Alfaro had led thirty years earlier, in 1895. Coronel examines the different social forces that emerged in the wake of Alfaro's revolutionary campaign and the political hotbed that germinated after the triumph of the revolution. The political climate of those years was marked by liberal promises of greater participation and fulfillment of rights for the population. In particular, the rural peasantry, Indigenous communities, and poor urban neighborhoods demanded access to land, better living conditions, and the right to political participation in decision-making processes that had very real impacts on their lived experiences. Once in power, tensions emerged within radical liberalism between ruling elite sectors and popular collectives throughout the country as the Radical Liberal Party fought to maintain its hegemony among different classes in the midst of growing tensions with the commercial and financial oligarchy. Coronel excels in her discussion of how popular republicanism took shape in this context of competing discourses and strategies as different parties defended their interests during the establishment of these liberal state structures that quickly gained hegemonic control over the country.

The Revolución Juliana introduced a new period in which various visions for how to govern the country were forwarded. Lawmakers codified these ideas in a new constitution that was promulgated in 1929 and introduced reforms related to land tenure, labor rights, and other social and political concerns that aimed to address persistent problems with economic inequalities and social injustices in the country. Over the following several decades, debates continued as to how to develop an economy that would benefit the population at large, something that became even more challenging with the onset of the Great Depression, and how to broaden popular political participation in the country, particularly in the midst of a rising authoritarian fascist threat on the global stage. In this context, new models of government intervention in the economy emerged, and new political forces (particularly on the Left) gained strength that transformed the construction of the concept of social and economic rights and how they defined the relationship between communities, state structures, and public power.

The administration of public health was one of the most significant tasks that the Ministry of Social Welfare (MPST) assumed. One of the key institutions of this ministry was the Junta Central de Asistencia Pública (JCAP, Central Committee for Public Welfare), which administered the government-owned haciendas that earlier in the century the liberal government had expropriated from the "dead hands" of the Catholic Church. The JCAP used the income from the estates to fund hospitals, clinics, orphanages, and asylums. The records of this administrative structure today are archived with other public health records in the Museo Nacional de Medicina in Quito. Together with the records that Coronel mines from the MPST collection in her study, these archives provide an unequaled

² The second volume, *La revolución ecuatoriana entre las democracias indoamericanas*, is forthcoming from FLACSO Ecuador.

opportunity to examine the influence that state structures had on subaltern and marginalized communities, including how government officials conceptualized the state and how the subjects of their administration sought to manipulate that administration.

The anthropologist A. Kim Clark and the historian David Carey Jr. both exploit the rich collection of records at the Museo Nacional de Medicina to examine public health concerns from complementary but distinct perspectives. With a strong belief in modern scientific methods and medicine, government officials sought to extend access to health care to marginalized urban and rural communities. Progressive public health officials endeavored to treat and ultimately hopefully prevent a range of endemic diseases, including malaria, typhus, and typhoid. Health-care providers employed a variety of metrics to measure outcomes. Specific goals included boosting infant and maternal well-being and improving the overall health of a community.

Clark uses the arrival of bubonic plague in the coastal port city of Guayaquil in 1908 as a point of departure to explore questions of social history and public health.³ She expertly traces how public health officials extended the reach of their services and programs into isolated communities. Through these attempts to combat disease, encounters with public health officials converted abstract ideas of government administration of state structures into tangible realities. Clark effectively employs public health concerns as a window to understand social relations in a country that has experienced deep regional, class, and racial divides. As an anthropology of the state, Clark's work directly engages Abrams's twin dimensions of state formation: the state *system* that is centered on the practices of government institutions and the state *idea*, which refers to how a society imagines and represents the state or government. As Abrams understood and as Clark demonstrates in her work, the state idea is not a static or objective concept but is shaped by the culture, history, and social context of a particular society.

Clark situates her study at the intersection of historical and political anthropology, which provides her with a distinctive methodological approach to the study of both state systems and state ideas. As a political anthropologist, Clark demonstrates a strong understanding of how state structures functioned in the administration of public health concerns. She excels at studying how Ecuadorian society was structured and the roles that leaders and institutions played in decision-making processes. Historical anthropology provides Clark with the tools to analyze which processes shaped the documentary record on which this study is based. As Clark aptly notes, the archival research resembles ethnographic fieldwork in terms of exploring questions such as what it was like to work on plague eradication campaigns while still lacking a strong understanding of how the infection was transmitted or what was the most effective means of combating it. In a sense, the archival record becomes a type of informant through which Clark examines the interactions within and between officials in government agencies and those whom they sought to administer. The archive provides insights into how state institutions were created and how government officials carried out administrative tasks. Together, historical and political anthropological methodologies inform Clark's analysis of how public health officials coordinated their activities with each other, with other government officials, and with private physicians. This strategy facilitates Clark's examination of the cultural, social, and political effects of the everyday practices of public health officials.

Throughout her work, Clark emphasizes that public health campaigns in Ecuador were national projects carried out by Ecuadorians. This is an important corrective to tendencies to interpret Latin America through an external, imperial lens, particularly that of the

³ In many ways, the book under review here, *Conjuring the State*, is a twin of her previous book *Gender, State, and Medicine in Highland Ecuador: Modernizing Women, Modernizing the State, 1895–1950* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), although both engage very different topics. Rather than repeating earlier research, both works are usefully read together.

United States. Many public health studies emphasize the role of the Rockefeller Foundation's eradication campaigns. While never ignoring that larger international political and economic context, this study emphasizes instead the influential roles of local public health leaders in forging new notions of state and society. The officials whom Clark meets in the archival record faced Ecuadorian problems and sought out Ecuadorian solutions to them.

Carey, who previously conducted research on Guatemala, approaches Ecuador through a comparative lens. He examines how Indigenous communities in the two countries embraced a syncretic approach to issues of health that combined traditional practices with new scientific understandings of medicine. The result was at best mixed. At times, government officials in both Guatemala and Ecuador allowed, and sometimes even encouraged, traditional medical practices that they viewed as better than nothing. At other times, government policies reinforced overtly racist attitudes that denigrated Indigenous lifestyles and practices. As can be assumed in the presence of long-standing colonial and patriarchal mentalities, functionaries often viewed women and Indigenous peoples as subjects to be controlled and policed. "Public health is always political," Carey quips, "but the politics are not always clear" (20). In what Carey calls "medical racialization" (148), public health officials typically called for cultural rather than structural changes to stop the spread of disease. In what may or may not be a surprise for some, Carey concludes that government policies in Ecuador embodied a more pluralistic vision of national unity than those in Guatemala, and as a result, Ecuador achieved somewhat better health outcomes than its Central American counterpart. He argues that combining traditional healing practices with modern scientific methodologies is the best strategy for achieving the goals of Indigenous communities.

Clark and Carey mine the same archives for their projects on public health but use them in very different ways to ask very different questions. While Clark reads the archives as an anthropologist for the rich ethnographic conversations between government administrators, Carey points to a common methodological problem for social historians. One of those is that documentary collections tend to marginalize already marginalized and vulnerable peoples. Even so, as with his previous work on Guatemala, Carey is determined to recover the proverbial voices of the voiceless as he examines how race and gender influenced public health debates. In this way, the two books nicely complement each other. Both conclude that medical professionals employed public health campaigns to "civilize" Indigenous and other marginalized peoples, even though they approach that question from two different perspectives.

Discussions around issues of public health also relate to how we discuss and understand disasters. A study from the research and advocacy group Center for International Policy concluded that a person is fifteen times more likely to be killed by a hurricane in the United States than in Cuba.⁴ That statistic highlights the positive role that strong state structures can play in the face of disasters. A related common trope is that disasters are not "natural" but the result of political decisions, and proper preparedness and thoughtful government regulation can mitigate their damage. This was graphically demonstrated with the magnitude 7.0 earthquake that struck twenty-five kilometers southwest of the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince on January 12, 2010. That quake killed almost a quarter million people and destroyed much of the country's infrastructure. A month later, a much stronger earthquake struck Chile, registering 8.8 on the Richter scale, or at least five hundred times more powerful than the Haiti earthquake, but it caused much less damage and loss of life. A variety of factors naturally determine the extent of damage of such a disaster, so the comparison is never one to one. But unquestionably an absence of

⁴ Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, "Hurricane Tips from Cuba," *New York Times*, July 29, 2013, D6.

government services and preparedness made the Haitian earthquake, one of the deadliest disasters in the history of the world, much worse than it otherwise might have been.

The question of responses to disasters is a theme that the anthropologist A. J. Faas picks up in *In the Shadow of Tungurahua*. He relates the stories of the people living around the volcano Tungurahua during volcanic eruptions in 1999 and 2006, as well as resettlement communities built for those displaced by the eruptions. Faas is most interested in the humanitarian politics of disasters and how people respond to those disasters and confront the hardships that they create. The inherent goodness of people emerges in the immediate altruistic responses to disasters (this was readily apparent with the 2010 earthquake in Haiti), but once that initial short-term wave of cooperation passes underlying structural divisions including class and racial stratifications reemerge (107). His ethnography dives deep into discussions of *mingas*, or communal work parties, including the difficulties of administering them and questions of who is included and excluded from labor expectations. He presents *mingas* “as an institution of subaltern political power and utopian projects” (145) and concludes that they are an institution that enables rural subalterns to “influence the conduct of the state” (160). Inherent in these questions of agency and political responses are forms of cooperation designed to cope with and adapt to disasters, including the potential for locally derived disaster recovery projects and politics. Faas engages with debates over the relative advantages and weaknesses of state-led responses to disasters, especially in relation to local initiatives and those from the private sector or religiously motivated missions.

A thread that runs through Faas’s account of responses to volcanic eruptions is the messiness of the situation. He begins the book with the comment “The state at its margins, be it in the colonies or the rural periphery is a tangle of endless complications, which have real consequences that can mean the difference between bare life and living well” (xii). Government officials scrambled to try to figure out how to act in the face of the disaster, while local inhabitants struggled to make sense of what could alternatively be viewed as incompetent or negligent responses to the eruption. One thing is readily apparent: as with the contrast in responses to hurricanes in Cuba and Florida, if the government had been better prepared for such a disaster, the outcome—in both the short and the long term—would have been much better. This provides either a contrast or tension with Clark’s work on the reaction of public health workers to disease outbreaks at the beginning of the century. A key difference is that leading early public health promoters such as Pablo Arturo Suárez were confronting little-known diseases, yet came up with effective solutions, whereas current bureaucrats, situated in a volcanic alley with millennia of experiences with eruptions, have little excuse for their inept responses.

Extractive industries are not “natural” disasters in the same sense that diseases, earthquakes, and volcanoes are because their harmful impacts are the direct result of deliberate and intentional human decisions regarding economic development models, but government policies can have a very similar mitigating effect in their ultimate effects on the lives of humans. This is the topic into which geographer Linda Etchart delves in her book *Global Governance of the Environment, Indigenous Peoples and the Rights of Nature*.

During the course of the twentieth century, Ecuador experienced three different export commodity booms: cacao at the beginning of the century, bananas at midcentury, and petroleum at the end. All of them followed similar trajectories and engendered similar debates, including over the roles that government policies should play in facilitating extractive industries and whether commodity extraction was ultimately helpful or harmful to the country’s economic development. Particularly with the onset of the petroleum boom in the 1970s, government policies played an outsized role in facilitating resource extraction with the belief that the rents the government collected would help grow the country’s economy. Critics, in contrast, cynically quipped that for every barrel of oil that Ecuador exported, the country became a dollar poorer. It can be hard to define the

exact costs of any megaproject, depending on the time horizons and what exactly is included and excluded in the calculations. The Panama Canal, for example, can either be seen as a cash cow for the government coffers because of the high transit fees or a boondoggle that keeps the country impoverished. Either way, without a doubt, the canal has not made the country a wealthy, industrialized powerhouse on par with its North American or Western European counterparts.

During the administration of Rafael Correa (2007–2017), the Ecuadorian government sought to capture petroleum rents to develop the country. By some metrics, the results were stunning. Poverty and extreme poverty rates plummeted, and inequality rates dropped precipitously as the government pumped petrodollars into education, health care, infrastructure, and other development projects. At the same time, Correa sought to advance an environmentalist agenda by offering to forgo drilling for oil in the ecologically diverse but fragile Yasuní National Park if other wealthier countries would pledge development funds to offset the lost revenue streams. When those donations were not forthcoming, in 2013 Correa ordered the commencement of drilling operations in the park. In response, environmentalists launched a petition campaign to keep the oil in the ground. It took a decade, but in August 2023, the Ecuadorian public overwhelmingly supported a resolution to halt petroleum extraction from the park. The one place where the resolution lost by a significant margin was in the province of Orellana, where the oil block in question is located. This again raised questions of who has the right to determine the administration of local affairs—those in control of distant state structures that reflected the interests of larger societal concerns or local inhabitants who would be most immediately affected by government policies.

Scholars have repeatedly asked the increasingly urgent question of whether the Left can find an alternative to extractivism.⁵ These issues came directly into play in the 2023 presidential election. In our upside-down world, the leftist candidate Luisa González of Correa's party *Revolución Ciudadana* (RC, Citizen's Revolution) opposed the Yasuní referendum because of the argument that the petroleum rents could be used to fuel much-needed development in the country. Her right-wing opponent Daniel Noboa, the son of banana magnate and Ecuador's wealthiest man Álvaro Noboa, supported the referendum and opposed expansion of the petroleum frontier, in part because of its environmental impact but also because of how overreliance on a single commodity tends to underdevelop the entire economy. Ironically, this argument falls in line with dependency theory that is traditionally associated with the Left (although Noboa's opposition to petroleum extraction can also be seen as opportunistic rather than ideological because it benefits his family's fortunes to have the state support the banana industry instead).

All these issues come directly into play in Etchart's work, which explicitly incorporates aspects of activist and academic research. It draws on in-depth interviews and participant observation in the Ecuadorian Amazon and at gatherings at the United Nations. As in her previous writings, Etchart's goal is to highlight a multitude of Indigenous voices. In examining diverse perspectives and political projects, she explores competing discourses, behavioral patterns, beliefs, and attitudes to analyze the influence they have on local, regional, federal, and global governance. Following Michel Foucault's ideas on knowledge and power, Etchart seeks to uncover hegemonic discourses that influence the state structures and state ideas that are designed to maintain order in a society. This is particularly relevant in terms of a discussion of how extractive industries relate to the concerns of Indigenous communities.

Etchart builds on the work that Alberto Acosta, Eduardo Gudynas, and others have undertaken on the rights of nature and how they intersect with the rights of Indigenous

⁵ Bret Gustafson, "Indigenous and Popular Struggle for Realist Utopias in Bolivia and Ecuador," *Latin American Research Review* 58, no. 4 (2023): 959.

peoples.⁶ The 2008 Ecuadorian constitution was a landmark document in advancing environmental issues because of how it claimed to govern following Indigenous concepts of *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir* (living well) and innovatively incorporated the rights of nature into its mandate. Long a problem for Latin American jurisprudence is a significant gap between theory and practice, or what scholars have long condemned as the dead letter of the law. Etchart openly critiques the fissures between government policies and the concrete implementation of those policies with a particular emphasis on the Amazonian regions of Ecuador and Bolivia. Even though the constitutions of both countries and other legal agreements present touchstones that activists can leverage to their benefit, obstacles still remain to protect the cultures and livelihoods of Indigenous peoples and the world's remaining rainforests.

Among the cases Etchart examines is the long-running lawsuit that Amazonian inhabitants first launched against Texaco in 1993 and then Chevron (when it bought out Texaco). This includes Chevron's strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) against their lawyer Steven Donziger. Etchart contrasts the largely unsuccessful outcome of the case against Chevron with others, including a free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) lawsuit that the Kichwa community of Sarayaku brought against the Ecuadorian government.

Etchart dives deeply into the realms of government administration, climate finance, and investment management, including corporate social responsibility and environmental, social, and governance investment strategies. She explores how Indigenous communities have engaged with local, federal, regional, and global environmental governance policies and the barriers that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and international institutions have faced in their attempts to preserve the rights of nature. Not content to leave the discussion merely on the level of problems and shortcomings, Etchart also seeks to find solutions to these long-standing problems, including such state-centered solutions as the protection of ecologically fragile areas through the creation of national parks. The questions of the rights of nature, climate change, and environmental issues in general remain issues of pressing importance, and permanent and lasting solutions are not always simple or straightforward.

Over the centuries, Indigenous communities have either directly or indirectly confronted state power in a variety of fashions. In recent years, the challenges have commonly revolved around issues of resource extraction, particularly how the extractive frontiers of global capitalism negatively affect Indigenous communities. The political scientist Japhy Wilson relates one example of a strike in August 2017 against Global Andean Construction, a fictitious subcontracting entity that the Franco-US oil-field-services company Schlumberger had created at Dayuma in Waorani territory in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The heart of the book (which Wilson characterizes as a "nonfiction novel") is a story in which Black, mestizo, Kichwa, Shuar, and Waorani workers and communities momentarily unify to confront the combined forces of the multinational oil company and a militarized Ecuadorian state. The labor dispute in question quickly escalated into a more serious conflict that involved the detention of the strike organizers, the kidnapping of the company manager, the blockading of the production facilities, and the launch of a military operation to break the blockade. From Wilson's account, it is difficult to ascertain exactly what kind of demands (if any) the activists wished to make of the government. At the outset of the story, the author suggests a certain level of class consciousness among the strikers. In the penultimate chapter, however, Wilson portrays their demands as being reduced to narrow economic concerns with individual interests

⁶ Among many other works, see Alberto Acosta, *Buen Vivir Sumak kawsay: Una oportunidad para imaginar otros mundos* (Quito: Abya Yala, 2012), and Eduardo Gudynas, "Buen Vivir: Today's Tomorrow," *Development* 54, no. 4 (2011): 441–447.

trumping collective goals. The story concludes with the spontaneous and fleeting unity of the strike disintegrating as the protagonists turn on one another in pursuit of their own self-centered objectives.

In the midst of presenting this story in the style of Hunter S. Thompson's "gonzo journalism" (which, frankly, does not work well in an academic piece), Wilson weaves in heavy doses of theory, particularly that related to decoloniality.⁷ The "universality" in the title *Extractivism and Universality* is a reference to a political universality that Wilson claims to have witnessed in Dayuma when strikers overcame racial, ethnic, and cultural divides to rally around a common agenda (before it all fell apart). He argues that a dominant decolonial dichotomy between a Eurocentric universalism and an Indigenous pluriverse should be replaced by an approach that is attentive to manifestations of universality that diverse subaltern subjects perform. While theories of decoloniality have contributed to a significant and growing interest in issues of power, identity, and colonial legacies, decoloniality has also been heavily criticized for offering a return to an imagined but fictitious distant past instead of confronting the historical impacts of capitalism and colonialism in a way that is necessary to move us forward to a better future. Critics have also complained that theories of decoloniality resort to vague and ambiguous terminology that makes it difficult to define and operationalize. In fact, that is the most significant shortcoming of this short book. It is missing a clear framing of the current political context against which this strike takes place. For a movement that is directly confronting state structures, we never get a clear sense of what the state is that they are confronting or what specifically the political agenda and perspective of the protagonists are. The strike in question took place in the aftermath of the Correa administration, which famously tangled badly with Indigenous social movements, especially over extractive issues, as Etchart details in her book. By the time Wilson arrived on the scene, Correa's successor, Lenín Moreno, was president and proceeded to break quite significantly from his predecessor's neo-Keynesian policy initiatives and reset the country to its previous neoliberal capitalist trajectory.

Ecuador has long experienced significant migratory outflows, with much of those emerging out of the southern part of the country. That flow slowed during Correa's time in office, and he sought to reverse it by offering incentives for emigrants to return to the country. In recent years, with declining economic opportunities and a rapidly rising sense of personal insecurity, those rates have only increased again. With a particular concentration on Indigenous young people in the southern province of Cañar, the sociologist Jorge Daniel Vásquez explores how global migration transforms the local dynamics of communal life in rural communities. His research question concerns precisely this concern: how do transnational migratory flows transform youth identities within Indigenous communities? Drawing on data from in-depth interviews and workshops he organized among young people, Vásquez demonstrates how migration changes ethnic identities, reconfigures intergenerational relationships, and modifies local dynamics around communal organizations (especially the *minga*). These transformations are not entirely negative, as they also produce new forms of belonging. Globalization does not necessarily mean a loss of ethnic identities.

While Vásquez does not directly engage with Abrams's concepts of state structure and state ideas, as he acknowledges, it is impossible to understand Indigenous identities outside of their relationship with the state. This theme becomes more immediately relevant in the final chapter, which engages issues of political representation and youth involvement in the October 2019 strike against president Lenín Moreno's neoliberal

⁷ On decoloniality, see, among others, Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580; Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

economic and labor policies. As Vásquez aptly concludes his short book, ethnic identities have been central to demands for historical reparations and state building, and in the process they broaden previously restrictive notions of citizenship. The motivations and participation of young people in these protest movements “allow us to envision *youth as reinvention* from a political horizon” (97).

Many of the issues that the various authors of the works under review engage come together in Christopher Krupa’s magisterial examination of race, class, and capitalism in Ecuador’s booming cut-flower industry. As a response to standard critiques of overreliance on monoculture export economies, some critics greeted the new industry as an appropriate avenue to diversify and thereby theoretically improve the country’s economic standing. Krupa’s deeply probing analysis demonstrates in ways that no scholar has previously done how capitalist expansion bound Ecuador’s economy to new modes of financial dependency that relied on credit peddling and currency speculation that led to a debt crisis and economic collapse. In the face of that reality, flower exporters rebuilt their businesses around the profitability of a local Indigenous labor force. These workers lay at the intersection of racial subjugation and the economic demands of a global economy.

Whereas for Clark the archive is the object of ethnographic inquiry, for Krupa the plantation occupies that realm. While superficially this might imply a rather traditional ethnography—and indeed, this analysis is rooted in years of fieldwork among the flower plantations in Cayambe—Krupa takes his discussion far beyond that. He presents his study as “an anthropology of how such global contradictions have become generative of the present world capitalist system” and how these forces give rise to new productive complexes like the cut-flower industry (8). He characterizes that productive complex as a “postcolonial mode of primitive accumulation” that is channeled through “the expansive power of neoliberal globalization” (15, 16).

Krupa leads us on a whirlwind tour through the intersections of state structures, state ideas, productive forces, and finance capital. A standard narrative that Krupa thoroughly deconstructs is that flower plantations were the result of personal initiative and the entrepreneurial spirit of motivated individuals attempting to improve both their own economic situation as well as that of society and the country at large. In reality, much of the success of the industry was a result of government policies, or perhaps more accurately, how capitalists sought to manipulate and take advantage of state structures for their own personal benefit.

In a startling and compelling dissection of the cut-flower industry, Krupa explains its origins as a credit capture mechanism. Growing flowers, he contends, was an accident of a credit boom. Rather than a flower boom, Krupa argues that the plantation economy emerged from a credit boom, and the flowers were merely an accident of those financial interests. At first the entire speculative process worked well for the entrepreneurs, who enjoyed access to cheap land and abundant credit until—as with all boom cycles—the bubble burst in 1996–1997. For the rural workforce in the plantations, the result was one of dispossession rather than proletarianization. One really needs to read the entire book to gain the full force of this argument and how it fundamentally alters our understanding of capitalist forces at play in the Global South and how finance capital appears from that perspective. Krupa then takes his story on another very deep dive into the realm of the plantation owners’ reliance on industrial psychological screening tests for manual labor positions and the management of what Karl Marx properly understood to be human capital.

Krupa sets a very high bar for advancing our understanding of Abram’s concepts of state systems and state ideas, and several of the authors under consideration here struggle as they directly engage with his arguments. Faas (70–71) presents the state as a shifting assemblage, where “it was not always obvious where the state ended and other assemblages and institutions began.” Clark addresses Krupa’s understanding of contested

hegemony as an “off-centered” perspective even more directly. At the conclusion of her study on public health, Clark observes “that protagonism is not only on the side of state actors,” but in consciously forging a state system and new state idea they set “the terms of engagement with nonstate actors from a variety of social groups” (156). As Krupa argues, the actions of recipient or target populations also call the state into being and insinuates state power into the material relations of everyday life.

The scholarship embodied in the various projects under review in this essay is characteristic of a larger research program that embodies a continual reevaluation of the impacts that popular mobilizations have on government administration, state structures, and the formation of the national state.⁸ These studies on Ecuador are situated in a broader current that questions the unilateral control of a dominant ruling class over the political landscape. Instead, the authors lead us to reconstruct our understandings of social and political developments and the weight that class conflicts have on routes of state formation. These studies represent varying attempts to connect an analysis of local social conflicts with the broader politicization of popular organizations and struggles. Approaching popular struggles from the perspective of the rural peasantry, Indigenous communities, and marginalized neighborhoods deepens our understandings of disputes for the positioning of public power and the definition of the character of the state.

All this brings us back to comments that Abrams made almost half a century ago on the difficulties of studying state structures. As he noted, the “state” was and continues to be a concept that was and is challenging to define precisely. He highlighted the multifaceted nature of the state as a subject of study and underscored the importance of recognizing its complexity, historical context, and the social relations that underlie it. Not only must these structures be analyzed in their historical and social contexts—which can be quite complex—but the state is also best understood as a social relationship that mediates interactions and power dynamics between individuals, groups, and institutions within society. This is particularly important in recognizing the crucial role that government policies play in shaping and maintaining capitalist systems and how ruling classes manipulate state structures to maintain their power and privileges. Understanding those relationships is essential for analyzing state power. Finally, Abrams advocated for the importance of methodological pluralism in studying the state. Scholars need to approach the study of the state with an open and interdisciplinary perspective, taking into account the challenges and nuances involved in this endeavor. Drawing on a variety of approaches, including historical, sociological, and anthropological methods, facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of state dynamics. That is something that the works under review readily demonstrate.

Marc Becker teaches Latin American history at Truman State University. He is the author of, among other works, *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador’s Modern Indigenous Movements* (2008); *Pachakutik: Indigenous Movements and Electoral Politics in Ecuador* (2011); *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files* (2017); *The CIA in Ecuador* (2022); and *Contemporary Latin American Revolutions* (2022). He is currently working on a project on Philip Agee and the CIA in Ecuador in the early 1960s.

⁸ Philipp Altmann, “Indigenous Movements in the Andes in the 21st Century,” elsewhere in this issue of *Latin American Research Review*.