

frameworks. For example, those following recent work on the ‘political ecology of things’ will be struck by Catherine Allen’s enduring interest in objects, like the drinking vessels that have a ritual resonance with the past but are still in use (p. 71), and in Frank Salomon’s discussion of *kipus*, the knotted cords from pre-colonial times which we cannot precisely ‘read’ but which are still today ‘patrimony of a living community’ (p. 177). And the vibrant field of environmental and ecological anthropology, concerned with the social dimensions of anthropogenic climate change, will find fruitful the long history of this work in the Andes. For example, Carmen Escalante and Ricardo Valderrama point to how climate-change scholars can learn from Andeans who, like their ancestors, adapt to their ecosystems by modifying their environments and landscapes (pp. 133, 145), and Peter Gose notes how his interlocutors’ understandings of ‘the landscape’s generative surfaces’ extend to critiques of its ‘extractive scarring’ through mining (p. 114), an issue of continued concern in the Andes and beyond. For all these reasons, this book is a welcome contribution that should travel beyond the community of Andeanists for whom it is of such immediate interest, to reach readers interested in the history of anthropology and in some original views on current theoretical approaches.

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Sian Lazar, *The Social Life of Politics: Ethics, Kinship, and Union Activism in Argentina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. xi + 243, £23.99, pb

Sian Lazar’s book *The Social Life of Politics* is an excellent piece of scholarship. It presents an infrequent combination of theoretical density and empirical depth and rigour. Based on extensive ethnographic work centred on two Argentine public-sector unions (the Peronist Unión Personal Civil de la Nación (Civil Service Union, UPCN) and the independent Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado (State Workers’ Association, ATE)), the book illuminates the foundations of labour activists’ political and social participation in contemporary Argentina. Lazar rejects both fashionable neo-utilitarian theories and Foucauldian orthodoxies to account for persistent base activation in the historically strong Argentine unions. At a time when political and social engagement has been understood, in much of social science, and for more than two decades, through the lens of hegemonic rational-choice paradigms, in such mainstream theories as vote buying, clientelism and collective action, the book’s approach is a breath of fresh air.

For Lazar, the enduring (and, in an age of globalisation and social fragmentation, unexpected) commitment of Argentine union activists hinges on the two core concepts of *militancia* (militancy) and ‘containment’. *Militancia* is first and foremost an ‘ethic of the self’ that shapes everyday labour activism, and is rooted in both history and a web of personal relations. The vast trajectory of the Argentine labour movement provides the historical fulcrum and symbolic politics that upholds militancy, whether it is the anarchist distant past, the more contemporary radical, left-wing insurrections, or the Peronist struggles against proscription and repression. Intergenerational family ties are the most frequent origins of a militancy that is ‘not a youthful activism that recedes into the distance’ (p. 63). Rather, *militancia* develops into an ethical political subjectivisation, with the necessary doses of love and passion to avert the stigma and difficulties of political activism in modern

labour organisations besieged by globalisation. Containment, the conceptual logic of which Lazar situates in the therapeutic practices so popular in Argentina, refers to the sociability, care and problem-solving services that both organisations offer, though in different ways. In the case of UPCN, containment is more centred on the life of the union delegation and the administrative aspects of collective bargaining and everyday work conditions; in the case of ATE, it is more concentrated in the crucial instances of street demonstrations and workplace assemblies.

Drawing on contemporary strands of political anthropology theory, Lazar argues that both militancy and containment configure a space of 'kinning', a practice of ritual, shared cultural activities, educational spaces and family care which brings together nothing less than a collective organisation, and bolsters political community. In this way, for Lazar, activism is grounded more in everyday life than in episodic or 'spectacular' moments. The combination of militancy and containment forges a collective identity which transcends the Foucauldian notion of the individual as the foundation of the ethical subject. This collective nature of a personal ethics that shapes base-level organisation, Lazar suggests, is a crucial platform for the mobilisation capacity of Argentine public unions and, one could argue, for the Argentine labour movement in general.

In digging into kinship and history to account for persistent forms of political and social involvement in the Argentine unions and popular sectors, Lazar walks in the footsteps of classic work by Daniel James. Curiously enough, with some exceptions (Maristella Svampa, Denis Merklen, Javier Auyero), some of the best, empirically-grounded ethnographic work on the identity of Argentine popular sectors in general, and on Peronist political culture in particular, has been carried out more by foreign scholars such as James, Steven Ostiguy and Pierre Levitsky, than by Argentine intellectuals, who perhaps concentrate more on the macro-politics of a polarised Argentine society. Lazar honours this tradition and takes it to new heights in two ways. First, she restores the missing element in the recent work on the reactivation of unions and popular sectors in Argentina under the Kirchners' left-wing Peronism. The book delivers a view 'from below' of the surprising revitalisation of union activism after a decade of neoliberalism that culminated in an unprecedented social crisis in late 2001. This perspective provides a good complement to institutional analyses focused on top-level negotiations and the reestablishment of national collective bargaining and wage councils. In this way, Lazar shows that the potential for mobilisation and popular identity-building, which scholars like Svampa and others thought had been displaced by social movements in the Argentine post-industrial world, continues to be alive and thriving in the Argentine mainstream unions. Second, this volume is unusual in that the author compares, within the same theoretical framework, both traditional Peronist and bureaucratic unionism (embodied in UPCN, which is more hierarchical and issue-oriented) with social movement unionism (represented by ATE, a more autonomous and horizontal organisation). In particular, the value of Lazar's work is to show how this anthropology of kinship and ethics cements collective mobilisation not only in traditionally radical and combative unions such as ATE, but also (and especially) in bureaucratic and top-down unions such as UPCN, which tend to have friendly relations with all governments. This capacity of mainstream, 'even the most yellow [non-combative]' (p. 17), Peronist unions to foster an identity that breeds base-level support and organisation, and to use this identity as a source for their power deals with governments and business alike, has been generally overlooked by the Left in Argentina, both academic and political. It also probably signals a crucial

difference with other contemporary verticalist, bureaucratic labour organisations that share a legacy of state corporatism, such as the Mexican unions.

However, in this interpretation of identity-building in a bureaucratic and traditional Peronist union the book may leave some questions unanswered. Lazar's ethnography is smart and rigorous enough to acknowledge that the UPCN is essentially a verticalist, problem-solving, social-service union, whose grass-roots leaders are more worried about defending labour insiders than in waging broader political struggles. However, even if sometimes the UPCN may be unenthusiastic in its defence of temporary employees or of those workers not directly affiliated to the union, the period under study is, overall, one in which workers as a class advanced their material and symbolic interests. What happens, however, when the same union tolerates unilateral state down-sizing and a severe fall in real wages without major protest, as occurred after 2015 under the new right-wing administration? How can a union whose grass-roots leaders preach a 'sense of vocation, passion, commitment, rage against injustice' (p. 137) make an accommodation with a government that unleashes massive state layoffs, curtails collective bargaining and causes a major downturn in workers' incomes? Probably other mechanisms – less directly related to past symbolic struggles, kinship and containment, and more with coercion, organisational payoffs and lack of union democracy – are also at work. Of course, Lazar's approach does not neglect these more regressive elements present in the Argentine bureaucratic Peronist unions. However, in the period covered by Lazar's analysis – one of a general labour offensive – such mechanisms of coercion were less noticeable because the union leadership did not need (or was not pressed by the government) to restrain rank-and-file demands. Likewise, and from an opposite point of view, Lazar possibly overestimates the left-wing and 'autonomous' character of the ATE unions and their national confederation, the Central de Trabajadores de Argentina (Workers' Central of Argentina, CTA). If Lazar had chosen some other sections/provinces of ATE, or the CTA-dominated public teachers' union, she would have found a strong Peronist identity (less organic, and of a different, progressive bent from that in the UPCN), perhaps even more *kirchnerista* than the Peronist public union. However, every ethnography is probably prisoner of its object. These questions, the coercive mechanisms of mainstream Argentine unions, and the varieties of Peronist labour identities, constitute avenues for future, empirically-grounded research rather than real shortcomings of the book.

To sum up, this is a very important book, useful not only for Argentine and Latin American specialists, but also for all social scientists interested in the empirical forging of political identities, and in labour mobilisation. What is thoroughly clear from Lazar's book is that the understanding of the perennial fight of ordinary people for labour and social rights is a complex endeavour, one that is hardly reducible to a set of maximising assumptions.

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Aldo Civico, *The Para-State: An Ethnography of Colombia's Death Squads* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), pp. xxiii + 236, £22.95, pb

In *The Para-State: An Ethnography of Colombia's Death Squads*, anthropologist Aldo Civico aims to explain the violence committed by paramilitary groups in Colombia. He explores three themes: the motivations of young men to become involved in