

*J. Lat. Amer. Stud.* 41 (2009). doi:10.1017/S0022216X09005823

David Recondo, *La Política del Gatopardo: multiculturalismo y democracia en Oaxaca* (Mexico, DF: CIESAS/CEMCA, Publicaciones de la Casa Chata, 2007), pp. 485, pb.

The abundant rhetorical and constitutional grandiloquence heaped upon the pluricultural character, or even ‘identity’, of Latin American countries since the 1992 anniversary has only rarely been matched by enforceable legal and institutional change. Although large tracts of land in Amazonia may be recognised as indigenous territory, millions of indigenous people of the Andes and Central America have achieved no formal institutional autonomy. Much is promised by the latest Bolivian Constitution but that again has to be translated into institutional reality. The widespread adoption of the famous ILO Convention No. 169 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples imposes nothing more than moral obligations on states. However, in some states of Mexico there has been an institutionalisation of indigenous self-government within the Republican framework. The distinctively Mexican phrase used to describe this is *usos y costumbres*. The Chiapas rebellion – now 14 years old – may have propelled the rather different concept of *autonomía indígena* into high profile polemics and struggles, but Oaxaca has gone further in the institutional recognition of indigenous distinctiveness, by way of major changes in the state’s system of municipal government, and it has now been followed by other states, for example Michoacán.

Unlike much indigenous rhetoric, this is not principally – maybe not at all – about identity politics: these reforms did not touch the question of bilingual education for example, or even the question of land ownership. Oaxaca may not be typical – notably because issues of land ownership do not shape indigenous demands as in Chiapas or Guatemala. David Recondo’s recurrent theme is that the changes have been the result of a play of party politics, enlightened self-interest on the part of two state governors in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some very lively local political competition, and the pressure of intellectuals and civil society groupings including the Catholic Church.

Recondo, a French political scientist in the institutionalist tradition, accompanied the Oaxaca process from 1995 to 2006 and has produced a book that must be the best study so far of multiculturalism in practice at the institutional level in Latin America – or maybe the best study of multiculturalism in Latin America tout court. Based on state-wide electoral analysis and an extensive knowledge of state and national politics, the heart of the book lies in the seven *municipios* selected for intensive study whose results constantly illuminate the analysis. The book is also very well written: Recondo does not always resist the temptation to highlight the ironies of his subject, but he keeps the reader’s interest through 450-plus pages. It is to be hoped that an English version will soon be made available.

To begin with, Recondo explains that *usos y costumbres* have in a sense been practised in Oaxaca for generations by the PRI in a relationship of party to *comunidades* that was famously described by Jan Rus, as ‘la comunidad revolucionaria institucional’. In Oaxaca, whose 570 *municipios* account for a quarter of Mexico’s entire number, because, unlike elsewhere, community and municipal boundaries are largely coterminous, the standard practice was that the PRI arranged its single list of candidates together with the community leadership, very much like the consensual government that is said to accord with indigenous tradition. However, in the 1970s and 1980s the PRI’s grip began to weaken and, although it

only lost very few municipal elections, they were enough to alarm a leadership for whom electoral defeat was equivalent to a violation of the laws of nature. Indigenous intellectuals such as Floriberto Díaz (who had studied at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología and in 1993 organized a Latin America-wide Simposio sobre los Derechos Fundamentales de los Pueblos Indígenas in Santa María Tlahuitoltepec) founded local movements, NGOs began to spring up, and anthropologist-activists, such as Salomon Nahmad and Gustavo Esteva, also gained a hearing in some *príista* circles. So in 1995 the state constitution was revised and then the revision was institutionalised in a new system to define which municipalities would be governed under *usos y costumbres*, how such a decision would be reached and what the procedures would be. This institutionalisation – a law to ‘reglamentar’ a constitutional provision – is essential to bring about the enforceability mentioned earlier.

The system set up in Oaxaca in 1995 required the reconstituted and newly independent Instituto Estatal Electoral to manage a procedure whereby municipalities would choose whether to elect their Councils by the party method or by *usos y costumbres*. This in itself was an issue for parties of course since they had different ways of taking advantage of both new and old procedures. In 1997 they negotiated a revision that left 390 municipal elections under *usos y costumbres*, from which the parties are excluded, 150 under the party system, and 30 undecided. The PRI tried to ensure that the municipalities under *usos y costumbres* were those where it could safely rely on continued *de facto* dominance. Many municipalities did not really grasp the difference between the election of candidates and the ‘real’ election anyhow since, for generations under the PRI, the two had in effect been the same. In the meantime an anthropological study had even been commissioned, and for a very serious reason: to enable the IEE to establish procedural guidelines for the *usos y costumbres* election and to decide what to do with the 30 ‘undecided’ cases. In this way, the traditional method was gradually coming under the aegis of a modern set of impersonal criteria and, although municipal elections by raised hands were still prevalent in 250 municipalities, at least the other 140 proceeded by a more secret method.

In the end the PRI had safeguarded some of its positions, but both the PRI and the PRD have known how to use the new electoral mechanisms – the PAN being a minority party with few rural connections. This in itself is not a criticism, however, for while the entire account shows that traditional procedures were already tied in to party-political machines, there is also plenty of evidence that the changes opened the way for dissidence and expanded participation, as well as for new sorts of chicanery. In a chapter entitled ‘La costumbre contra la democracia’, we learn how school-teachers, once the emissaries of Cardenista and *príista* modernity (as we knew) can now become fully paid-up members of local power cliques – subsidised by unlimited leave on full pay if they gain public office! (Thus the play of local politics can feed into the notorious clientelism of the Teachers’ Union, the SNTE.) There are plenty of stories of dominance of the *cabecera* over outlying areas (*agencias*) that do not, under some traditional arrangements, enjoy access to positions or to the resources controlled by municipal authorities, and may have to do double service (*cargos*) in both *agencia* and municipality. Indeed the burden of *cargos* continues to be heavy generally, leading people into debt – unless they are teachers! – while they leave their usual work to undertake their community obligations. In a following chapter contrastingly entitled ‘Costumbres para la democracia’, Recondo softens his irony and lists many ways in which the local politics in Oaxaca have opened up to competition,

even if it could not be said that the state's rural areas have become more indigenous in any substantive sense at all. To the question 'How can the community governance be protected from infection by the vices of Mexican politics?' Recondo replies that a process has been set in motion and it will be increasingly difficult, for example, to exclude women, or people in the subordinate agencies, but it will take time.

A book on Oaxaca published in 2007 could hardly fail to mention the disastrous turn in the state's politics in 2006, when the PRI Governor Ulises Ruiz destroyed much of what passes for institutional normality, and the APPO coalition of his fiercest opponents created, or deepened, conditions of quasi-ungovernability. The account is lucid and very exciting, although it requires little allusion to the previous 400 pages: indigenous issues fade into the deep background when higher-level politics heat up.

This book teaches us many lessons, among which I would highlight the implication that indigenist politics are not necessarily cultural politics. But this does not mean that institutional changes such as these cannot lay the basis for wider and more active political participation.

*Cambridge University*

DAVID LEHMANN

*J. Lat. Amer. Stud.* 41 (2009). doi:10.1017/S0022216X09005835

Stephen Beckerman and Paul Valentine (eds.), *Revenge in the Cultures of Lowland South America* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), pp. xxii + 314, \$59.95, hb.

This volume reflects a revival of interest in matters that previously carried the risk of stereotyping lowland South American indigenous peoples as bloodthirsty. Although that caricature has long been dissolved, the new discourse, which is realist in its treating of what actually happens and suitably culturally relativistic in its contextualising of forms of violence within complex webs of behaviour and culture logic, illustrates ways in which new themes in the social/human sciences can both open up perspectives (the prominence of evolutionary psychology, for example, underscores an interest in a 'red in tooth and claw' analysis that has an obvious bearing) as well as recalibrating the meaning of violence in the context of new social landscapes (indigenous peoples challenges to developmental onslaught, as in the case of Kayapo demonstrations against hydroelectric projects, have played – often heavily – on themes of violence).

In line with the title, the contributions to this volume by and large couch questions of violence within the idiom of revenge, that is to say structured, feud-like reciprocal violence, rather than atavism, but the renewal of interest reflects a broader revival of readings, often quite dark and mysterious, of deep forest violence (cf. the *kanaíma* themes pursued by Whitehead).

The introduction, by Beckerman, stands apart from most of the other contributions in trying to inject into the discussion issues most closely associated, in a lowland South American context, with the work of Chagnon (that is, does violence correlate with reproductive success), but while there is a slight return to those arguments in the rigorous chapter by Erickson, most of the chapters address questions of violence as shaped by the analyses of Raymond Verdier (and, in passing, Evans-Pritchard).

Thematic coherence is sufficient, but the collection does at times seem rather disparate: an article on Inca revenge, for example, is fine in itself, but it is an