

Binford, Leigh, Lesley Gill, and Steve Striffler (eds.). 2020. Fifty years of peasant wars in Latin America. London, New York: Berghahn Books. 228 pp. Hb.: \$120.00/£89.00 ISBN: 9781789205619.

Book Review by

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The editors have collected seven articles that examine peasant wars in Latin America. All are informed by Eric Wolf's seminal 1969 *Peasant Wars of the 20th Century*, and they all make those connections explicit; while all are historical, they emphasize events in the more than five decades since the publication of Wolf's book.

It is refreshing to see such a collection of work that explicitly critiques the Foucaultian emphasis on identity and discourse and favors the historical materialism that Wolf exemplified. As such, it stands as a cogent critique of much contemporary anthropology in the US. The editors provide an excellent introduction that outlines the issues, and Gavin Smith has contributed a perceptive afterword.

The contributors all at least mention the dire consequences of US foreign policy in Latin America. This takes two forms: one is military and police support of repressive regimes, which often amounts to state-sponsored terrorism, and the other is the aggressive pressing of neo-liberal policies on governments in the area. These include World Bank loans that require re-structuring to immiserate the people of the various polities. Time and again, anthropologists, with our insistence on on-the-ground ethnography, have documented the dire effects of neo-liberal policies and this book contributes to that record.

The editors have done an excellent job of editing the papers so that they are consistent in their content and parallel in their arguments. By and large, the writing is accessible, clear, and free from jargon. Leslie Gill's piece exemplifies the crystal-clear expository writing that is lacking in much of the Foucaultian-inspired literature in the anthropology of recent decades in the US. The writers slip into obscurantism only when they confront Foucault-inspired anthropologists in their own language.

Aaron Kappeler discussed the role of peasants in Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution. Steve Striffler analyses the revolutionary potential of Ecuador's countryside. Lesley Gill's article focuses on the development and failure of a militant, heterogeneous working class in the oil export enclave of Colombia, Barrancabermeja, partly as a consequence of state-sponsored terrorism directed against them with US aid.

Leigh Binford discusses the role of liberation theology in the Catholic Church in El Salvador. The church was the purveyor of elementary education and taught a message that poverty was the destiny of poor people and their reward for passive acceptance of their fate would be a glorious afterlife. Liberation theology, however, preached activism in opposition to oppression and poverty. These priests offered alternative educational opportunities, and radicalized workers and peasants returned to their communities. However, paramilitary organizations, police, and the National Guard kidnapped, tortured, and murdered people over a wide area. This is another example of US-backed state-sponsored terrorism. A twelve-year war of revolution ensued that ended in a 1992 peace accord under which the revolutionaries became a political party and policing functions were placed under civilian control. A land reform was overseen by the US Agency for International Development and based on market principles in accordance with neoliberal doctrine. Other neoliberal reforms at the behest of the US resulted in the usual impoverishment. Even when the former revolutionary party won a 2009 election, they were saddled with the previous regime's neoliberal arrangements.

Casey Welch argues that the narcotics and sex and migrant trafficking in northern Mexico are not a peasant revolution; they are businesses in the neoliberal mold whose organizations use violence as simply one way to maximize profits. Cliff Welch outlines Brazil's history of peasant uprisings, none of which transcended their regions to become revolutionary in scope, and the reasons for those processes.

Forrest Hylton writes about the complex situations in Bolivia, from tin mines to coca plantations, from urban to rural, where revolutionary movements every few decades. He takes Foucault to task for ignoring class and political economy in his discussions of identity. A historical materialist perspective allows us "[...] to integrate culture, economics, and politics into a single analytic frame" (p. 171) as exemplified by the work of Wolf and Roseberry. By 2002, all indicators of wellbeing put Bolivia next to Haiti "as the most wretched country in the Americas" (p. 175), and the US successfully opposed political solutions. However, the most "salient political fact of the twenty-first century in Bolivia is that indigenous highland and highland valley peasants, as well as urban working classes" (p. 181), transformed the state via collective action in the electoral processes

when Evo Morales became president. This was in part due to the changes of 1952 that introduced universal suffrage, rural schools, and trade unions. The military dictatorships from the 1960s through the early 1980s did not dampen the demands that went with citizenship. The presidency of Morales should be contextualized in the interplay among race, ethnicity, class, and state formations to understand better what he brings to the process. It is unfortunate, he argues, that the recent thrust in anthropology has abandoned causal explanation, “[...] giving up on what Wolf called cumulative knowledge, which uses the work of predecessors to ask new questions” (p. 185). Fundamental to this is the analysis of class struggle.

The lessons from the writers in this book are applicable to understanding any social formation in any area of the world or at any time. They are not unique to the several cases or to the area of Latin America. The book is a significant contribution to contemporary anthropological thought and practice and an important corrective to more culturalist approaches that focus on identity, deny the existence of class, and ignore class struggle.