

Indigenous Intellectuals and the Politics of Decolonial Knowledge: New Anti-Colonial Paradigms in *AbyaYala*

Waskar Ari (2014). *Earth Politics: Religion, Decolonization, and Bolivia's Indigenous Intellectuals*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 280 pages.

Claudia Zapata (2014). *Intelectuales indígenas en Ecuador, Bolivia y Chile: Diferencia, colonialismo y anticolonialismo*. Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 445 pages.

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Ari's *Earth Politics* and Zapata's *Intelectuales indígenas en Ecuador, Bolivia y Chile* propose critical approaches to the study of intellectuals, indigeneity, and colonialism as they creatively intersect Indigenous and Latin American Studies. The figure of the indigenous intellectual serves to foreground indigenous cultural and political production to rethink colonialism as a continuing form of power. In fact, by underscoring how indigenous intellectuals and collectives across different periods and regions in the Americas have produced a radical anti-colonial tradition of thought through writing, historiography, culture, and politics, these works present different indigenous critiques of colonialism as one of the structuring technologies of dehumanization that subtend the constitution of liberal nation-states by excluding indigenous societies.

Organized around seven chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, Chilean historian Claudia Zapata's *Intelectuales indígenas en Ecuador,*

Bolivia y Chile offers a vast critical survey on the social history of Quichua, Aymara, and Mapuche indigenous intellectuals in relation to hemispheric and global anticolonial political movements occurring since the 1970s. Zapata explains that while the figure of the indigenous intellectual has gained more visibility in the last decades due to the more widespread presence of indigenous students in higher education institutions, indigenous politicians and activists in the spheres of political representations, as well as indigenous workers in metropolitan cities, scholarly studies have not reflected on these social changes. The historian argues that the omission of these processes and social formations in the academia are directly related to the essentialist approaches to studying indigenous societies in the Americas. This is mainly because the ubiquitous rubrics of acculturation prioritize rurality, orality, and the fulfillment of traditional identities over their coexistence with indigenous writing, urban diasporas, and educational and

political projects that indigenous societies have proposed in the past century¹. Zapata, thus, advances a definition of indigeneity as a “political” category by means of which a relationship of power/subordination is articulated. There, culture –the undeniable diversity of the past and the present, yet with different forms and contents– is one of the main axes, though not the only one, that has been ideologically used to create a historical hegemony since the European conquest, thus creating an inferior and less prestigious social positionality for these collectives” (p. 22).²

In Chapter 2, Claudia Zapata outlines the figure of the indigenous intellectual in relation to discussions about knowledge production, postcoloniality, and the uneven development of educational projects in the Americas. Zapata distinguishes indigenous intellectuals from traditional or elitist intellectuals in that the former –as a Mapuche, Aymara, or Quichua intellectual– is a “situated” subject who “politically and culturally anchors their intellectual practices” in an indigenous social collectivity, whereas the latter elitist case assumes “a social

autonomy” to produce supposedly “universal knowledge” (pp. 69, 67).³

Zapata points out that the access of indigenous intellectuals to “Western” disciplinary knowledges is mediated by an apolitical commitment to their indigenous collective. For this reason, the author notes that the figure of the indigenous intellectual is not new, since traditional indigenous intellectuals have always existed and developed knowledges from within, in close relationship with their communities and members. Indeed, the indigenous subjects studied by the social historian advance the work of traditional indigenous knowledge by “legitimizing knowledges orally created and transmitted, through kinship and communities (p. 71). Moreover, the author states that indigenous intellectuals in the Americas acknowledge their social positionality as oppressed subjects part of an indigenous society equally excluded within national states, but whose subaltern identity is a consequence of historical processes that the indigenous intellectuals attempt to solve by participating “in a historical project of liberation” with their labor (pp. 72, 77).

The second part of the book provides a historiographical account of the complex relationships between the Ecuadorian, Bolivian, and Chilean nation-states, their expansive, inclusionary, yet contradictory

1 See, for instance, the two volumes of essays *Comunidad de Historia Mapuche—Talñ Fijke Xipa Rakizuameluwun: Historia, Colonialismo, y Resistencia desde el país Mapuche* (2012) and *Awükan Ka Kuxankan Zugu Wajmapu Mew: Violencias coloniales en Wajmapu* (2015)—for a collective of intellectuals that brilliantly theorizes and examines Mapuche politics and knowledges, in addition to addressing Chilean and Argentine colonialities across periods and spheres.

2 “Lo indígena como una categoría política en torno a la cual se articula una relación de poder/subordinación, donde el factor cultural (la diversidad innegable en el ayer y en el ahora, aunque con distintas formas y contenidos) es uno de los elementos, fundamental por cierto pero no el único, que ha sido utilizado ideológicamente en la construcción de una hegemonía a partir de la conquista europea (...) [que] creó el lugar de inferioridad y escaso prestigio en que se ha situado a estos colectivos.”

3 “Vale decir, que los intelectuales indígenas son aquí intelectuales situado como lo indica la necesidad de agregar la palabra ‘indígena,’ que actúa como anclaje político-cultural.” “Los intelectuales que los asume como un grupo social autónomo... que produce un conocimiento igualmente elitista y universal.”

educational systems, and different indigenous societies. On its third part, the book studies the intellectual practices of three indigenous groups: (1) the *Taller Cultural Causanacunchic* (TCC), a Quichua intellectual group from the Otovalo area of Imbabura, in Ecuador; (2) the *Taller de Historia Oral Andina* (THOA), a mostly Aymara coalition of intellectual from La Paz; and (3) the *Centro de Documentación Mapuche Liwen* (CEDM-Liwen), a collective of Mapuche social scientists and cultural critics.

Among the many topics and interventions elaborated by Aymara, Quichua, and Mapuche intellectuals, Zapata underscores in Chapter 7 how colonialism and anti-colonialism have been reworked as socio-political rubrics to critically examine subordination and power. Intellectuals such as Sergio Caniuqueo (Mapuche), Luis Macas (Quichua), and Roberto Choque (Aymara) understand the “colonial situation” as a collective experience of oppression that calls for a different periodization. This is because indigenous societies have experienced a continuous and systemic exclusion not only during Spanish colonialism, but also by Latin-American nation-states, in a different way. For this reason, the indigenous intellectuals studied by Zapata understand the differential violence against indigenous societies of Latin-American liberal and neoliberal nation-states in terms of a “colonial situation”, which represents political conflicts with indigenous collectives as an “Indian problem” (p. 306).

Colonialism, then, is not a periodization. Rather, it works as a structuring feature of Latin America’s nation-states that forges constitutive asymmetries between a “national society” –whose status is granted by rights and access– and excluded indigenous societies. Zapata highlights how, through the assemblage of writing and political practice, indigenous intellectuals in *AbyaYala*⁴ build anticolonial projects towards decolonization in direct relation with indigenous collectives (pp. 349-68). In this radical indigenous tradition, anti-colonialism becomes the political and intellectual articulator that revises the past, creates socio-political memory, and raises ethnic (and not only class-) awareness in order to envision a decolonized world and build “identity, memory, and dignity”, as Mapuche thinker Pablo Mariman would write (p. 359).

A more particular political and intellectual formation is addressed by Bolivian historian Waskar Ari in *Earth Politics: Religion, Decolonization, and Bolivia’s Indigenous Intellectuals*. In six chapters, Ari narrates the history of the rural indigenous political movement Alcaldes Mayores Particulares (AMP) focusing on four of its main indigenous intellectuals: Toribio Medina, Gregorio Titiriku, Melitón Gallardo, and Andrés Jach’aqullu between 1920 and 1960, in addition to a conclusion superficially addressing Morales’ Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra. Examining the AMP movement, Ari presents *earth politics* as the political project that has

⁴ *AbyaYala* is the native term proposed by Aymara leader Taki Mamani in 1980s to refer to the Americas. It means “Land in its full maturity” in Kuna language.

been constructed and is constantly re-articulated by indigenous intellectuals in Bolivia from the aftermaths of the 1874 Agrarian Reform to a few decades following the National Revolution of 1952.

Drawing from the *apoderados* and *caciques'* political practices and discourses, Ari argues that earth politics was a decolonial ideology shaped by the AMP that opposed liberal and Western conceptions of land and property because it advanced and proposed *earth* as "land, territory, nation, faith, religion, rights, and Indianness" (p. 4). An inextricable practice, understanding, and relationship to earth, this politics was contemporaneous to *indigenismo*; however, in contradistinction to elite appropriations of indigenous cultures and practices that understood indigenous peoples in opposition to modernity, earth politics proposed "a unique project of decolonization based on the reinterpretation and re-elaboration of colonial law" (p. 4).

In Chapter 2, "Nation Making and the Genealogy of the AMP Indigenous Activists," Ari emphasizes the long genealogy of indigenous politics in Bolivia by tracing the origins of the AMP to the organization of *caciques*, *alcaldes*, or *mallkus* after the passing of the 1874 Agrarian Reform. In doing this, the author deepens the historical trajectory of indigenous radical tradition pioneered by the *Taller de Historia Oral Andina* with focus on the post-1952 National Revolution, as this chapter stresses indigenous alternatives to Bolivian elite's projects of liberalization of

the country (e.g. Rivera Cusicanqui, 1984). Following the passing of the Agrarian Reform, the notions of private property and individual rights as structuring technologies of a Bolivian liberal subject were violently imposed over "all forms of collective Indian existence, including the Indian ethnic organization of *ayllus*" (Ari, 2014, p. 32). An early network of *caciques* sought to defend communal indigenous land with colonial property titles as well as to shape Aymara nationalism. This meant that Aymara rural communities envisioned the creation of "their own country after the [1888-1889] civil war" as a political solution to the severance of ethnic communal lands and relationships among Aymara regions (p. 39). Unfortunately, the project did not prosper, although it did plant the decolonial seeds for the AMP to carry out re-appropriation of colonial *Leyes de Indios* to create the Indian Law.

Chapter 4, "Against Cholification", explores the AMP's decolonial project of an Indian Law. Ari considers this law as a decolonial strategy for autonomy created by Aymara collectivities, as it was "a discourse that addressed dimensions of racialization by responding to the dehumanization of indigenous peoples" as well as it advanced "a more holistic sense of *suma qamaña* (living well)" through "colonial law in order to explicitly reject the republican law" (p. 97). In fact, re-elaboration of colonial *Leyes de Indios* by AMP *apoderados*, such as Toribio Miranda, Gregorio Titiriku, and Andrés Jach'aqullu, advanced an autonomous indigenous politics against

the Bolivian nation-state due to the colonial legal recognition of Aymara territories before the Bolivian republic. For example, as part of the Indian law, Miranda encouraged indigenous peons not to pay their rents and tributes to the *haciendas*, but instead perform indigenous religious practices and offer payments to *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) because “*pachacuti* [the time of great change] was coming” for the Indians (p. 74). AMP’s Indian law understood that Aymaras, Quechua, and Urus, as well as *peones hacendados*, were the *puchus* (vestiges) of the first Bolivia. This meant they had to practice Aymara religion and pay tributes to *Pachamama* and *Achachillas* in order to re-establish reciprocal relations with the earth, and to reject stipulations of liberal property, rights, and law as well as white and *cholo* dress codes and religion.

In this juncture, the boycott to the *hacienda* system and the refusal to comply with liberal Bolivian juridical stipulations were part of AMP’s decolonial earth politics that organically combined religion, oral traditions, cultural practices, and a radical interpretation of colonial legal texts in order to re-imagine ethnic diversity for the creation of an autonomous Indian Republic, as Ari explains.

The books reviewed offer insights to think the important tradition of indigenous decolonial political thought and praxis in the Americas. These traditions have not

only contested the rigidity of distinctions between written and oral, urban and rural, modern and non-modern categories, but also have thoroughly criticized the liberal and neoliberal nation-state and their economic developmentalism as structured by a colonial power that further dispossesses indigenous peoples. At times when we see the limits of the “Pink Tide” progressive political project – especially in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian cases– in their continuous deployment of militarized violence against indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, who oppose and challenge the extractivist matrix of the national economy, the long history of indigenous political movements and intellectuals across *AbyaYala* leads the way towards proposing genuine grassroots projects to confront segregation and build liberation for the future. Students of Latin-American, Indigenous, Cultural, Decolonial, and Postcolonial Studies will find innovative approaches to political history and social movements.

Bibliography

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