

Book Review: Latin America's Multicultural Movements: The Struggle Between Communitarianism, Autonomy, and Human Rights, edited by Todd A. Eisenstadt et al.

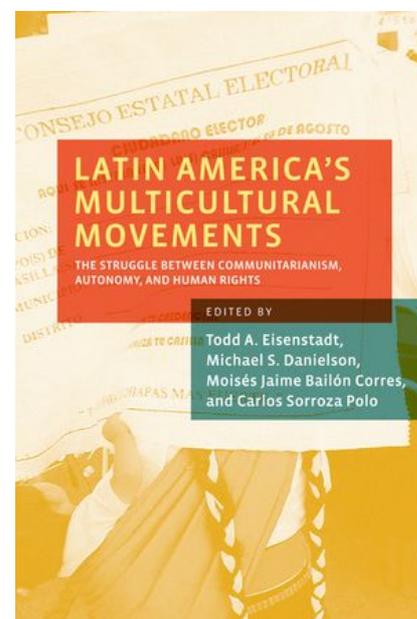
Throughout the Americas, indigenous people have been arguing that as “first peoples” they should be entitled to representation in local, national, and international fora in a capacity different from that of other civil society groups. *Latin America's Multicultural Movements* is a collection of empirically-based chapters that aim to advance debates concerning multiculturalism and indigenous and minority group rights in Latin America by looking at the struggle between communitarianism, autonomy, and human rights. **Senia Cuevas** recommends this book to those interested in the history and politics of indigenous communities and the weaknesses of multicultural policies.



Latin America's Multicultural Movements: The Struggle Between Communitarianism, Autonomy, and Human Rights. Todd A. Eisenstadt, Michael S. Danielson, Moises Jaime Bailon Corres, and Carlos Sorroza Polo (eds.) Oxford University Press. March 2013.

Find this book:

Multicultural policies (MCPs) which aim to solidify recognition of the rights of indigenous communities in Latin America are often controversial, with substantive evidence about their success on both sides of the debate. However, most agree that rights recognition is but one step in the process of inclusion and equality; true changes will not occur by providing legal rights that will never be enacted upon. While major binding international conventions concerning recognition of indigenous peoples – such as the [ILO-Convention 169](#) – have been widely ratified, in practice this has come at a slower pace (p. 4). Similarly, the Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian territorial circumscriptions which would grant autonomy in the form of self-governance to indigenous groups have not been successful after ten years (p. 23).



In light of these calls for rights, *Latin America's Multicultural Movements*, edited by [Todd A. Eisenstadt](#), [Michael S. Danielson](#), Moises Jaime Bailon Corres and Carlos Sorroza Polo, is a wonderfully relevant publication. This collection of essays considers the relationship between formal political institutions and informal cultural and social practices especially as they interact with indigenous forms of organization, and features case studies from Mexico, Bolivia and Ecuador. Contributors – made up of well-regarded Latin American scholars – look at the controversial role of the state regarding multicultural rights and discuss whether the state enables or hinders the advancement of multicultural rights.

kindle edition

amazon

The opening chapter, “Ambivalent Multiculturalism: Perversity, Futility and Jeopardy in Latin America”, sees José Antonio Lucero argue that we need to find a middle ground between the demonization of MCPs and their limited success. Lucero takes up [Albert O. Hirschman's work](#) on the rhetoric of conservatism in opposition to social change and apply it to the context of MCPs, giving readers three reactionary narratives to get to grips with. Firstly, the perversity thesis sustains that the MCPs set out to improve the current situation for indigenous groups, but instead have served to exacerbate the situation (p. 19). The example of Bolivia in the mid-1990s is given, where President Sanchez Lozada voiced support for indigenous movements led mostly by prominent indigenous leader Hugo Cardenas, but continued with a liberal economic agenda that promoted decentralization, privatization, and agrarian legislation, eventually leading to serious divisions in the indigenous movement (p. 26). So, “rather than giving voice to subalterns, they have actually strengthened neoliberal domination” (p. 19) writes Lucero.

Second, the futility thesis posits that multicultural policies “have been essentially symbolic and have lacked the legal and political power to be truly meaningful” (p. 18). Lucero points to the Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian territorial circumscriptions, which “would be new units for the administration of Indigenous self-government” (p.23). These provisions will only come into effect once new legislation is passed, but after ten years campaigners are still waiting.

Lastly, the jeopardy thesis concerns that “the proposed change, though perhaps desirable in itself, involves unacceptable costs or consequences of one sort or another” (p. 32). MCPs and reforms have “not only failed and backfired but also made people worse off” (p.19), as in giving power and autonomy to indigenous groups that oppress women’s rights. The summary of these theses is useful for newcomers to the topic, with Lucero making it clear that the debate is certainly complex and there are no easy answers.



Residents and supporters of the TIPNIS Native Community Land in Bolivia, marching in October 2011: [Szymon Kochanski](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Following this introduction, the chapters take a case study in turn and showcase the breadth of peoples and communities affected. In Chapter 5: “The Backlash Against Indigenous Rights in Ecuador’s Citizen’s Revolution,” Carmen Martínez Novo argues that The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) has been able to mobilize the indigenous population through a bottom-up process to fight for bilingual education. The movement has created institutions for education, health, and development as a result of this increased political representation, and changes have been proposed to the 2008 Constitution that stands for the interests of indigenous groups (p. 118). However, this movement has been losing momentum as class differentiation has become more evident and the organization has lost focus. Martínez explains that “the grassroots seem to be more interested in economic mobility and inclusion, and therefore in individual rights, than in reinforcing indigenous culture and collective autonomy” (p. 117).

Recently, conflicts over natural resources have refueled the rivalry between indigenous groups and the government. The ambiguity of the Constitution has made it even harder for either side to determine rights over territory or natural resources, namely water and mining. CONAIE argue that the mining and water laws are unconstitutional because they were passed without the consent of indigenous peoples or environmental groups, and indigenous owners are obliged to sell the land to large corporations as a source of income (p.125). Others

argue that there have been some changes though they have not significantly impacted indigenous groups positively, since they “do not seem to originate in a sincere attempt to solve the drawbacks of multiculturalism but in an attempt to dismantle collective autonomy” (p. 126).

Overall, this book provides in-depth case studies from Latin American indigenous movements through critical and historical analyses while projecting the future of specific MCPs and the inclusion of minority groups. The authors are not afraid to explore the sometimes controversial interactions between groups and institutions to ask who is benefitting, and as set out above the answer is always complex. This book is useful for individuals who seek to protect indigenous collective rights, as well as scholars who study culture, international human rights, and political and social life throughout Latin America.

Senia Cuevas is a political scientist with an MA in Diplomacy and International Relations from Seton Hall University, New Jersey, with expertise in Latin American studies and International Economic Development and a focus on diplomacy. Senia’s previous work deals with the state of democracy, foreign policy, politics and economic issues in Latin America. Currently, she works for a non-profit organization in New York. [Read more reviews by Senia.](#)

Related

[Book Review: America’s Blind Spot: Chávez, Oil and US Security by Andrés Cala and Michael Economides](#) In "Bloomsbury"

[Book Review: Political Struggles and the Forging of Autonomous Government Agencies by Cristopher Ballinas Valdés](#)In "Economics book reviews"

[Book Review: Linguistic Minorities in Democratic Context by Colin H. Williams](#) In "Africa and the Middle East"

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books