

Book Review

## The State and the Idea of Vernacular Sovereignties

*Vernacular Sovereignties. Indigenous Women Challenging World Politics*, by Manuela Lavinas Picq, Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2018.

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The book's suggestive title, 'Vernacular Sovereignties', points at the status some indigenous communities aim to achieve. In this line, I contend that the book connects with concepts such as sovereignty, self-determination, autonomy, the State, and statelessness.

It historicises and complicates typical notions of sovereignty (chapter 3). Ecuador is a geography where the international order (i.e. indigenous frameworks) and the State meet. The analysis of the struggles of Kichwa women – located at the intersections of forms of exclusion in Ecuador. In this analysis, gender takes a role in struggles over recognition of territorial and political rights. Indigenous women are, therefore, 'dynamic actors in world politics'. Their agency is displayed despite socioeconomic and political oppression; it is further displayed despite sexual violence. At the same time, indigenous women are active and organised beyond Ecuador as activism across America (aka *Abya Yala*) articulates the local with the international. Networks emerged from the 'Abya Yala' summits (p.103) where 'women were key actors in the construction of a continental Indigenous platform' (p.102) perhaps undermined by the assassination of Berta Cáceres – in march 2016. International activism and international law are both, convenient and useful platforms for indigenous women. Indigenous women activism illustrates this links as women have consolidated their networks since the 1990s; they have done so by articulating agendas with continental feminist movements like *Enlace Continental de Mujeres Indígenas de las Americas*. This is an example of how indigenous women politics fit with international agendas, institutions and

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international law on topics like gender, indigeneity and development. For Picq, this illustrates how indigenous women politics is ‘inherently international’ (p.106).

International Law is the cradle of indigenous rights. International activism has found in it a useful platform. Indigenous peoples’ struggles and aspirations have been acknowledged internationally. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has done it in Convention 107 on Indigenous, Tribal and Semi-tribal Populations (1957), and in Convention 169 (1989). Equally, the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) recognise those struggles and aspiration. Internationally, indigenous rights are consolidated.

A claims is that indigenous peoples, as non-state subjects, have been relegated from the ‘sovereignty game’ and have been relegated to the theoretical peripheries of international law, too. The book section titled ‘Worlding without stateness’ (pp.116-124) addresses the argument that suggests that the model of ‘Westphalian authority of the state’ has been challenged as international law has formalized the existence of non-state forms of political authority in world politics. Picq argues that Indigenous peoples have been denied full participation in the international state system (p.119). Centred on ethnicity and gender, the book takes evidence from Ecuador’s Kichwa women to establish a connection between mobilised gendered ethnicity and internationally framed ethnicity.

Chapter 4 (Self-determination with Gender Parity) addresses how indigenous women engage international norms to consolidate their rights in local contexts. The chapter illustrates contemporary debates with Kichwa women’s engaging international rights but contesting homogenising tendencies, finding the compatibility between gender rights and cultural autonomy. Picq claims that a contribution Kichwa women to feminism lies in the ‘indigenous claims to gender within collective rights’. In other words, ‘Kichwa women articulated their initial demands within their own cultural systems’ (p.156). This, however, has been a decade-long discussion on gender equality and cultural diversity. For instance, there are several books approaching the experiences of indigenous women of Chiapas (Mexico), particularly those of the Zapatista movement (Jung 2008; Speed 2008).

Newer is the discussion of indigenous peoples (nations, communities, tribes) in relation to the term sovereignty. ‘Sovereignities Within’ (Chapter 5) approaches indigenous politics in relation to state sovereignty – the organizing principle of world politics. Picq argues that indigenous political practices have influenced international law principles and practice; at the

same time, they have challenged sovereignty from within the state. Therefore, indigenous politics pose a challenge to the concept of the exclusive authority of the state over a defined territory. She takes Ecuador's Kichwa women experience to illustrate their engagement with international norms, national constitutions and indigenous *usos y costumbres* in their quest for accountability and autonomy. Such an engagement challenges, it is argued, 'established practices of sovereignty' (p.27).

In this book, the State emerges as a central topic as the intersecting point of forms of exclusion in Ecuador – and elsewhere. By analysing the political struggles of Kichwa women, the book historicizes and complicates typical notions of state sovereignty. The notions of 'society of states' or 'the sovereign state system' have a points of reference in the Peace Treaties of Westphalia of 1648. The notion of the 'Westphalian state', I contend, presents difficulties when discussing indigenous peoples: the term reinserts the centrality of Europe in the analysis – contradicting the changes that have taken place, in the last two centuries, within the international system. Arguably, references to 'the Westphalian state' in a book on indigenous peoples hints at Ecuador's colonial past. However, the old colonial powers of Europe have lost hegemony since the early 19th century. Europe itself has fallen victim of political subjugation. The extent to which Germany, the country where Westphalia is located, illustrates the contradictory forces of the international order is interesting. Germany only secured a centralised authority in 1871, decades later than most republics of the vast American continent. Later, in the 20th century, Germany was partitioned (1945-1990) when victorious foreign armies dictated the new term of its political and territorial order.

References to a 'Westphalian authority of the state' are common in the academic literature of Globalisation (see Held and McGrew 2002; Scholte 2005). In this book, the references to Westphalia state historically contextualise the struggles of Ecuador's Kichwa women. Such a reference does not suggest a perpetuated subjugation of Ecuador to a European state in today's globalised world; it preserves, however, ideas of continued European hegemony over Ecuador that are hard to verify. Moreover, the book introduces another discussion in relation to the place of the Westphalian model of the state in the development of an international order. In a book concerned with indigenous peoples perhaps the Treaty of Tordesillas (signed between Spain and Portugal in 1494) is much more consequential. This treaty shaped the transatlantic world when Westphalia was a backwater in Europe. The treaty could contextualise the emergence

of indigenous identities in an effective way as we see the consolidation of indigenous rights internationally.

Finally, regarding its content, the book presents a case of how ethnicity and gender are analytically important in the construction of a political identity. Chapter 1 ('Invisible women') addresses questions like, are women vulnerable political actors? The vulnerability of women as political actors is presented in a multi-dimensional analysis. Vulnerable women emerge from exclusion (i.e. poverty, lack of access to public services). In contrast, the invisibility of women is refuted with evidence of their involvement in resistance struggles and institutional politics.

Chapter 2 ('The Inheritance of Resistance') presents the historical context to 'the invisibility of women'. Picq proves that, historically, 'women have long participated in Indigenous struggles against colonial governments' as she exposes instances of women in resistance, female leaders, and women agency in the history of the Andes. The conclusion then is not that women are invisible, but that they have been 'erased from memory by selective histories'. Still, even if invisible, ethnographic evidence shows that in Ecuador women are not 'passive or unrelated to state-making' (p.26). Cases of 'the two women who founded Ecuador's modern Indigenous movement' illustrate the chapter. It would be convenient that books like this stress how, within a disciplinarian dialogue between international law and anthropological research are informing the political experiences of indigenous peoples.

Chapter 3 (Indigenous international relations) examines the struggles of Kichwa women – located at the intersections of forms of exclusion in Ecuador. The case study, framed within the international framework for indigenous rights, provides an analysis centred on gender struggles over the recognition of territorial and political rights. In a context of oppression, Indigenous women have become 'dynamic actors in world politics'. Indigenous women are active and organised beyond Ecuador: international law and institutions address their concerns. The chapter reviews the two major international frameworks on indigenous affairs (i.e. ILO Convention 169 and UNDRIP). Other venues have been the UNPFII (2004) and the U.N. Committee on the Status of Women (2017).

Chapter 4 (Self-determination with Gender Parity) explains how indigenous women engage international norms to consolidate their rights in local contexts. The discussion stresses the political and legislative success in Ecuador of the organisation named *Red Provincial de Organizaciones de Mujeres Kichwas y Rurales de Chimborazo* (REDCH) with implications for

women rights in Ecuador and beyond.

Finally, chapter 5 (Sovereignities Within) presents indigenous politics in relations to state sovereignty – the organizing principle of world politics. The claim is that their political practices have influenced international law principles and practice and that indigenous politics have challenged sovereignty from within the state.

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