

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SAWYER, SUZANA *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 2004, 223 p.

Crude Chronicles is an ethnography that describes how Ecuadorian indigenous activism is provoked by, and embroiled in, deleterious legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism as well as global neoliberal economies. Sawyer focuses on how multinational oil companies exploit neoliberal initiatives that recommend allowing Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of the market to operate without state intervention. Crude oil is the latest of the raw resources, after gold, sarsaparilla and rubber, to be crudely extracted from Ecuador's Amazonian basin. Ironically, the "invisible hand" can only work by explicit state interventions such as the Ecuadorian government withdrawing from OPEC, an organization designed to protect the interests of oil producing nations by regulating the global supply of oil. This move allowed Ecuador to increase its crude oil exports beyond OPEC's production quota, and offer "succulent incentives", potentially allowing oil companies like ARCO (Atlantic Richfield Company) to expand their exploration and pipeline infrastructure. This "development" comes at the expense of the livelihood and health of the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazonian region where the oil reserves – and the imagined wealth and "modernity" of the Ecuadorian state – lay as a subterranean black gold mine.

Sawyer describes particular political events, like meetings between indigenous activists and ARCO executives, where the activists challenge the ways in which governmental and multinational corporate initiatives continue to threaten their physical and social environments. These indigenous activists understand that the tokens offered by oil companies – such as school supplies and corrugated iron roofs – operate like what Mauss calls the "tyranny of the gift", leaving the indigenous recipients in the thrall of their oil company donors, instead of allowing them to participate in the economic decisions that affect their quality of life or even their lives themselves. Sawyer includes transcripts of these meetings, when she was often present as a collaborator and sometime translator, allowing her readers to appreciate the articulate political savvy and passion that indigenous activists bring to the oil company's table.

While Sawyer provides moving and memorable vignettes of the Ecuadorian indigenous activists, this is hardly an ethnography that focuses exclusively on the "untouched native." Sawyer also deftly describes the oil

men who indelibly mark indigenous worlds. Without relying on an obvious condemnation of “big oil,” she produces a close analysis of the speech of the oil company executives, exposing how they are part of a larger civilizing-through-liberal-corporate-capitalism project which allows oil company executives (and Ecuadorian government officials), to discount or ignore claims phrased in different terms. She also includes an exposition – both descriptive and critical -- of the actual techniques of oil exploration. Sawyer, who grew up in an oil family, as did I, has an unerring ear for what she dubs “petro speak” where benign terms like “upstream production,” for instance, are used to refer to the harsh incursions of seismic exploration which require cutting swaths of forest in order to detonate dynamite into holes drilled every 100 meters.

Indigenous activists note how these purportedly scientific/pragmatic practices frighten off wildlife and destroy their landscapes. The land inhabited by the indigenous Ecuadorians that Sawyer worked with has, in environmental discourse, become the “rain forest,” depicted as a global treasure chest of irreplaceable “biodiversity.” Sawyer depicts how indigenous activists are expert at situating their claims for self determination within this popular ecological and environmental discourse; they argue that they have been for centuries “defenders of the rain forest” (p. 53). Yet the Ecuadorian government and the oil companies manipulate ecological concerns for their own benefit.

This book is essential not only for scholars of Latin America, but also for those interested in indigenous activism elsewhere. One can also envision teaching it in a theory course as an example of an ethnographic frame that allows an examination of the co-creation, not always equal, of the events which structure the lives of the dominant and the subordinate. Sawyer acknowledges the irony that her capacity to do her research and activism was facilitated by her quotidian knowledge of, and privileges generated by, the oil business itself. This fascinating book, which vividly recounts the meetings, marches, and roadblocks that activists use in their quest for social justice, will be inspirational for those who want to combine activism and anthropology and write about it critically and honestly.

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