

The Place and Places of Indigenous Peoples in Latin American Societies: New Challenges, New Possibilities

What Charles Hale called “the permitted Indian” of neoliberal multiculturalism received the right to conserve a distinct language and culture, but not to pursue demands for self-determination that would involve exclusive rights over territory and resources. It is therefore unfortunate that many indigenous people live in areas that are rich in the kinds of resources that are central to the neo-extractivist economy that Latin American governments of a variety of ideological complexions see as crucial to national development, as well as in areas of high biodiversity that are targeted for conservation by national states and the international development apparatus. Their situation is sometimes doubly contradictory when the same territorial areas upon which conservation regimes are imposed are also of interest to oil and mining interests. Although indigenous groups sometimes succeed in defeating the more civilized kinds of “anti-politics machines” established to manage their environments, the recent history of struggles against hydroelectric projects and environmentally devastating oil, gas and mining operations has been characterized by an escalating deployment of violence against them by states and paramilitary forces. This lecture will provide examples of the complex politics that generally underlies the local contentious politics of indigenous efforts to assert self-determination over resources located within rural territories that constitute “places” for their indigenous inhabitants but are seldom treated as anything other than “spaces” from which resources are to be extracted by outsiders, even in the case of corporations which claim to be socially responsible businesses and governments that claim that revenues generated by extraction will underpin national poverty-reduction programmes. But I will also emphasize the need to recognize that the future place of indigenous peoples in Latin American societies is not simply a matter of the future of rural territories or reserves, but a broader issue that is increasingly about indigenous people who live in towns and cities. Although urban people of indigenous origin may come to see themselves as “different” from rural indigenous people in their everyday social lives, neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal techniques of government have also changed the significance of political claims to “indigeneity” in urban contexts in important ways.