

Review – Vernacular Sovereignties: Indigenous Women Challenging World Politics

Written by Margot Cohen

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Vernacular Sovereignties: Indigenous Women Challenging World Politics

By Manuela Lavinás Picq

University of Arizona Press, 2018

From September 2018–September 2019 I lived in Quito, Ecuador while conducting a mixed-methods study on violence against women in collaboration with the *Red Nacional de las Casas de Acogida*, a national network of women’s shelters. I found that the shelters were not reaching Indigenous women, one of the groups most affected by gender-based violence. Indigenous women whom I interviewed explained how they faced discrimination from both the state and their own communities, describing how identities informed by indigeneity, gender, race, class, and education intersect to shape experiences of violence. As an IR scholar, I sought to understand this relationship between Indigenous women’s intersecting oppressions and experiences of violence, but found this relationship notably absent in IR, a field still dominated by colonial and patriarchal worldviews. Despite increasing awareness of gender-based violence as a global phenomenon, studies continue to overlook these interlocking roots (and forms) of oppression. This review, informed by my own fieldwork in Ecuador, discusses *Vernacular Sovereignties: Indigenous Women Challenging World Politics* and its empirical contributions showing how Indigenous women actively participate in world politics through transnational networks and global movements.

Manuela Lavinás Picq demonstrates the necessity of bringing intersectional feminist theory and Native studies into the field of IR to articulate the innovative process through which Kichwa women are (re)shaping legal authority, a process she calls *vernacular sovereignties*. The book maps the intersecting forms of oppression Indigenous women experience and subverts colonial histories through the narration of Indigenous women’s resistance. Picq disputes “top-down” models of norm diffusion by showing how Kichwa women successfully articulate political demands for self-determination with gender parity. Picq argues that these *vernacular sovereignties* challenge Westphalian notions of sovereignty and colonial/ patriarchal power structures within international relations. Her book challenges the discipline of IR to expand its epistemologies to account for multiple realities.

The first chapter, “Invisible Women,” situates indigenous women’s political situation in the intersecting factors that contribute to their oppression: definitional violence, the multidimensional overlap of socioeconomic exclusions, and the effects of domestic violence. Picq starts from the concept of *intersectionality*, still overlooked in the field of IR, paying homage to the Black feminists who developed the term to describe the intersecting oppressions and exclusions of Black women in the U.S. (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). She addresses her own positionality as a non-Indigenous scholar of European descent while tracing the interlocking systems of oppression that Indigenous women experience. To illustrate lived experiences of intersectional violence, Picq narrates a case of domestic violence, in which congressional delegate Estuardo Remache was charged with abusing his partner, María Lucrecia Nono, in 2006. Remache turned both state and Indigenous justice systems against Nono, ultimately evading justice. Picq argues this case is emblematic of the acceptability of violence against Indigenous women in Ecuador; Nono was unable to access justice through the state because she was indigenous, and unable to access justice through her community because she was a woman. This intersectional analysis offers the theoretical framing to describe the experiences and acceptance of violence that I encountered in Ecuador’s *Casas de Acogida*. One participant, when

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asked how violence differs across the region in the Amazon where she is from, explained “Some of them hit the women, others hit them with sticks, others shoot them, others drown them in the river.”[1] During these interviews, I first learned the phrase *aunque pegue, aunque mate, marido es* (although he hits you, although he kills you, he is still your husband).

The second chapter on Indigenous women’s historic agency, “Inheritance of Resistance,” subverts familiar understandings of Indigenous women as passive and unrelated to state-making. Picq does not portray Indigenous women as powerless victims; instead she stresses the legacies of Kichwa leaders Dolores Cacuango (1881–1971) and Tránsito Amaguaña (1909–2009) as founders of Ecuador’s modern Indigenous movement, and their crucial role in consolidating modern Indigenous politics. In tracing these histories, Picq builds on arguments that Indigenous women are considered “more Indian” than men (De la Cadena, 1992) to argue that the consolidation of Indigenous formal politics frequently aggravates gender inequalities. Tying this process to histories of patriarchal colonization and state-making, Picq argues that the institutionalization of indigenous movements within the structures of the modern state reinforces the masculinization of Indigenous-state relations; Indigenous men’s capacity to interact with the state increases while that of women diminishes. Picq urges us to critique the colonial and patriarchal structures that are embedded within state forms of government, including that of Indigenous parties.

Although Picq makes a compelling case for using an intersectional lens to understand violence against Indigenous women, she could have been more deliberate with the use of language such as “domestic violence,” which often relegates violence against women to the private or “domestic” sphere. As Picq herself explains in her discussion of Indigeneity and definitional violence, definitions matter. However, the book fails to adequately distinguish between “domestic violence,” “intimate partner violence,” “violence against women,” and “gender-based violence.” These definitions are essential. The *Casas de Acogida*, for example, employ a broad definition in their scope of work to provide services to “women [and their children] who have been affected by gender-based violence” in order to be as inclusive as possible. Violence against women is anything but domestic, and gender-based violence is not only toward women. While feminist perspectives have now entered the field of IR (Tickner, 2005; Enloe, 2004; Peterson, 1992) and scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of queering IR (Weber, 2016; Bosia, 2019; Rahman, 2010; Wilkinson, 2017), more nuance is needed to understand the relevance and significance of feminist concepts to explain violence and power.

The third chapter, “Indigenous International Relations,” approaches Indigenous women’s politics from an international perspective. Picq locates Indigenous experiences in the international realm and demonstrates the dynamism of Indigenous women in world politics, citing two main examples: Indigenous women drawing on international human rights norms to form ILO Convention 169 (1989), as well as to pass the UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007). These examples demonstrate how Indigenous peoples do not seek to expand rights within a state, but instead seek autonomy *from* the state. Picq argues that Indigeneity is inherently international and builds on the body of scholarship that critiques the lack of recognition of Indigenous world views, especially within the field of IR (Epstein, 2014; Lightfoot, 2016; Shaw, 2008; Tickner and Blaney, 2013).

The fourth chapter, “Self-determination with Gender Parity,” tells the story of Kichwa women’s claims for gender parity through Indigenous justice during the 2008 constitutional reform. Picq explains how Kichwa women from the *Red Provincial de Organizaciones de Mujeres Kichwas y Rurales de Chimborazo* (REDCH) drew on international norms such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and UNDRIP to call for gender parity within formalized Indigenous rights. Despite numerous obstacles, Kichwa women successfully lobbied for the addition of gender-specific language in the 2008 Constitution. This example challenges dominant theories of norm diffusion in IR, including the “boomerang effect” in which local groups or actors bypass the state to bring about normative change by leveraging support from international or transnational allies (Keck and Sikkink, 1996), and the “spiral model,” which stresses socialization as the process through which principles or ideas become institutionalized and internalized as domestic norms (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 1999). While these approaches have contributed to understandings of normative frameworks, they continue to employ a “top-down” model. Newer constructivist approaches, such as “vernacularization,” (Merry, 2009; Levitt and Merry, 2009) or “localization” (Acharya, 2004), more strongly consider the role of local actors in framing norms to fit local/domestic contexts. However, I share Picq’s critique of these models, which still emphasize global norm makers and local norm

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receivers. Instead, Picq posits a form of “interlegality in reverse” (Hoekema, 2005) that more closely resembles the distinction between “ethical contexts” and “ethical contents” (Gaard, 2001), in which Indigenous women utilize the contents of international women’s rights norms within the contexts of Indigenous judicial autonomy. This process demonstrates how international norms can be (re)shaped at the local level to resist homogenizing structures. Picq’s contribution radically challenges models of norms cascades and socialization by recognizing the agency and autonomy of local actors in the making of international norms. Drawing on international norms to frame their claims for gender parity within their own cultural systems, Indigenous women hold their communities accountable for gender-based violence while simultaneously strengthening Indigenous self-determination.

In the fifth and final chapter, “Sovereignties Within,” Picq argues the innovative process and legal structure developed by Kichwa women constitutes *vernacular sovereignties*, challenging the Westphalian notion of sovereignty as singular and hegemonic authority. Indigenous women’s framing created a “legal triangulation” between international norms, constitutional rights, and Indigenous justice; this system of legal accountability forces Indigenous justice systems to abide by international women’s rights norms, using the Ecuadorian state as a guarantor. These strategies contribute to postcolonial arguments (Chakrabarty, 2000; Spivak, 2007) to provincialize the colonial state, rather than attempting to replace it. The legal triangulation Picq posits with *vernacular sovereignties* confirms authorities other than the state over various territories and peoples, demonstrating the potential for sovereignties to be inclusive. Indigenous women are creatively constituting new forms of authority and power through recognizing the multiplicity of sovereignties.

Theorizing at the margins, Picq offers new insights into sovereignty by highlighting the influence of Indigenous women’s politics in international relations. This is a step forward in decolonizing feminism, and IR more broadly. She employs an intersectional approach to center Indigenous women’s experiences of violence, traces their histories of agency and autonomy, and argues for their influence in international relations. *Vernacular Sovereignties* can be read as a disruption of the colonial and patriarchal status quo within IR, and within the international political system. Indigenous women practice sovereignty in the vernacular and creatively weave multiple legal scales to form complex systems of justice. Indigenous women matter for the study of IR because they are showing how sovereignties can be malleable and multiple. As global crises deepen, such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is becoming increasingly clear that the state of the modern nation-state is not only ineffectual, but harmful. We would do well to follow the example of Kichwa women in Ecuador, who are creatively appropriating the master’s tools to turn them against the colonial and patriarchal state.

[1] Interview 13_24B (de-identified) from Casa Wasi Pani in Tena, Ecuador, conducted on April 25, 2019.

About the author:

Margot Cohen is the Executive/Research Assistant for Ibis Reproductive Health, where she contributes to a variety of research projects focused on expanding access to safe abortion and reproductive health care worldwide. Her independent research, funded by Brown University and the U.S. Fulbright Program, focuses on intersectionality, decoloniality and gender-based violence. Margot holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Brown University.