

Review Article: Class or Identity Politics? A False Dichotomy

Gerardo Otero

Simon Fraser University, Canada

Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge, by Deborah J. Yashar, 2005. New York: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 0521534801). US\$37.99, paper, 388 pp.

The last decade of the 20th century saw a vigorous rise of indigenous mobilizations in Latin America centered on the demands for land, territory and autonomy to control their resources. Students of these mobilizations have used several theoretical perspectives to understand them. Some opted for a 'reconstituted class analysis,' as if the fight for indigenous culture were merely an ideological phenomenon involving 'false consciousness,' and the 'true' interests of peasant actors with Indian disguise lay in the struggle for socialism (e.g. Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001). Others have emphasized the identity focus of struggles and international solidarity that Indian mobilization has garnered in the midst of globalization. In this 'new-social-movements' and 'identity-politics' perspective, the new focus of politics should be on building a transnational civil society to contest globalization (e.g. Brysk, 2000).

The novelty of Deborah Yashar's book consists in offering a more synthetic theory that accounts for several of the factors that explain Indian mobilization. She starts with the *motivating* factor or changes in 'citizenship regimes.' The main change consists in moving from the 'corporatist regime' that predominated from the 1940s to the early 1980s, in which Indian communities were able to retain most of their organizational autonomy vis-à-vis the state. Introduction of the 'neoliberal regime' in the 1980s, however, shook the foundations of Indian autonomy. Neoliberal impetus for privatization and commodification was perceived as a major threat to Indian access to land and territory, the very conditions for material and cultural survival of Indian peoples. Yashar rightly observes that, by itself, a change in citizenship regime is not sufficient for mobilization. Most Indian peoples in Latin America have confronted neoliberalism, but not all have mobilized. Two other factors must be present to set

off mobilization: 'political associational space' or the *opportunity* to mobilize, and 'transcommunity networks' or pre-existing organizational *capacity*. Where the three factors converged – motivation, opportunity and capacity – Indian mobilizations acquired at least regional if not national presence.

The first three out of seven chapters of *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America* are devoted to 'theoretical framing,' which indicates the strong concern for theorizing by the author. In this framing, Yashar addresses five country cases which concentrate the largest proportions of Indian peoples: Guatemala, Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. In Chapters 4–6, however, Yashar focuses her empirical contribution on the last three Andean countries based on secondary sources and multiple interviews. Her methodological purpose is to build a 'most similar cases' design. The three Andean cases are quite similar on a number of aspects, and yet Ecuador faced the most vigorous national Indian mobilization, followed by Bolivia with strong regional movements. In Peru, however, although Indians also faced the neoliberal citizenship regime, excepting the Aymaran south, they lacked the political associational space and/or the transcommunity networks to mobilize.

Yashar critiques five theoretical approaches for their inadequacy to deal with Indian mobilization. *Primordialists* 'assume that ethnic identities are deeply rooted affective ties that shape primary loyalties and affinities.' But this perspective assumes that identities are fixed, locally rooted and they are understood as immutable (p. 9). This perspective fails to 'problematize when, why, and where identities become politically salient and the conditions under which they engender political organizations' (p. 11).

Instrumentalism or rational-choice analysis, in contrast, assumes that individuals have fixed preferences, are goal oriented and act intentionally to maximize utility. Ethnic politicization is seen as a tool to achieve other goals, so this perspective shifts identity issues to a discussion of other goals that are to be maximized. 'The conditions under which ethnicity becomes politicized is less relevant to these studies than modeling and predicting the utility and capacity of ethnicity for collective action' (p. 12). Yashar argues instead that changing institutional circumstances are key to explaining why, when, and where movements emerge.

On the relation between social conditions and individuals, *poststructuralist* scholars have been skeptic about the role of structural conditions in determining collective action. Poststructuralism 'opened the door to see ethnic identities as primary and purposive without arguing that they are primordial or instrumental by nature ... Indigenous identity is, from this perspective, both constituted by social conditions as well as renegotiated by individuals' (p. 13). While Yashar draws on poststructuralism on how individuals are plural subjects with multiple identities, she also assumes that 'structural conditions of poverty and authoritarian rule can impede the unencumbered expression of identities and pursuit of collective action just as they can shape needs as preferences' (p. 13).

Structural conditions of inequality, however, may be a constant in many regions and countries without being a good predictor of mobilization. They cannot help us respond to questions of when, where, and why.

For the *globalization* approach, changes in context are what explain Indian mobilization. These include 'the integration of economies, the growth of civil societies, and the development of international norms and cultures – all of which impact heavily on ethnic movements' (p. 15). This perspective suffers from an ahistorical understanding of economic globalization that does not explain the why, when, and where movements emerge. More importantly, the globalization approach 'suffers from the assumption, rather than demonstration, that the state is of declining relevance in contemporary politics' (p. 17), a critique I have made elsewhere (Otero, 2004). Yashar argues the opposite of globalism: that the 'changing and uneven role of the state will prove consequential to this politicization of indigenous identities in contemporary Latin America' (p. 17). She argues that the change in citizenship regime from corporatism to neoliberalism politicized ethnic cleavages by challenging Indian autonomy.

Yashar's approach is a revised and synthetic version of three existing social-movement theories: 1) neoliberal citizenship regimes introduced a *structural stress* or threat to local autonomy; 2) emerging although weak democracies constitute *political opportunity structures* which offer the space and legality to organize; and 3) preexisting organizational networks are akin to *resource mobilization*. Yashar uses this combination of existing theories in an able and creative manner, offering a much superior analysis to that offered in the past by scholars using a single explanatory framework. A similar synthesis was offered earlier by Donna Lee Van Cott (2000), although focusing on democratic constitutional changes promoted by indigenous movements.

In chapter two, Yashar sets up the conceptual apparatus around citizenship regimes. With a useful literature review, she proposes that this concept is made up of three main aspects: the *who* is a movement member, the *how* or what forms of interest intermediation are organized, and the *what* or the content of citizenship. The latter involves the trilogy of civil, political and social rights, not all of which are attended by every liberal state. This depends in part on state capacity, and belies the inherent tension between democracy and capitalism. In particular, the state is limited in its capacity to address inequalities. While Yashar mentions Marx and others as influential in this contextual discussion, she does not systematically incorporate the issue of inequality and social cleavages in her conceptual model of citizenship regimes. This absence may emanate from her shared assumption with the resource mobilization theory and the political opportunity structures perspective that economic stress is a poor predictor of mobilization. Her problematic is thus confined to the politics of identity as if Indians did not primarily fight for *land* as the very condition to reproduce such identity.

Yashar's final chapter is also analytical. She revisits the multicultural challenges to the liberal state and the need to redefine states as heterogeneous to accommodate Indian demands. Indians want autonomy, but not secession. She looks at the perils for Indian organizations of participating in electoral politics. In particular, she discusses the relative scarcity of leaders with sufficient preparation for this task: if they participate in electoral politics, they may neglect organizational needs. There is also the dilemma of how to deliver without compromising organizational autonomy. The acceptance of Indian leaders in established political parties has been problematic, and falling prey of party competition may lead to movement divisiveness. In the end, however, Yashar considers that Indian organizations have enhanced their agendas more by participating in *both* electoral politics and civil society mobilization.

My main critique of this book is that it adopts the problematic of identity politics and its focus is too strictly political. It thus misses important class-structural aspects behind the fight for autonomy, such as control over land and territory. That is to say, Yashar misses these aspects in the construction of her argument, but not in her empirical descriptions. Let me substantiate this argument by briefly reviewing her main country case studies, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru.

One indication of Yashar's adoption of the identity problematic is her treatment of corporatism, which she equates with 'class-based organization.' The essence of corporatism, however, is that it is a state policy to divide and rule, not for bottom-up class representation. Corporatist organizations are based on economic short-term interests, and not on long-term class interests. In Mexico, for example, this led the state to form peasant groups around their crop specializations, such as coffee, tobacco or sugar growers, inhibiting their organization as *peasants*, whether Indian or mestizo. Furthermore, corporatism in Mexico and Peru functioned to increase state control over direct producers, although it may have also given room for economic autonomy, *when* Indian production was inconsequential. 'In sum,' says Yashar about corporatist organizations, 'class-based federations have lost political and social leverage throughout the region, and consequently Indians have lost their formal ties and access to the state ... [neoliberal policies] have threatened the social rights that had been extended with the earlier corporatist citizenship regime' (p. 68). The conceptual problem here is that 'class-based' demands are equated with economic demands. Such simplification of the class concept may lead to seeing the identity-politics problematic as more attractive. But the fact remains that *land* was the central demand in all mobilizations studied by Yashar.

The fact that highland peasants and lowland tribal peoples chose to mobilize as Indians has been primarily a strategic choice, as Yashar herself notes: 'they have observed the success of indigenous movements before them, and the failure of many other types of movements, and strategically decided to use ethnic identities

as the marker for mobilization' (p. 80). Hence one of the most notable aspects of Yashar's case studies in Chapters 4–6 is the fusion of material-and-cultural movement demands. While one of the main goals of the corporatist citizenship regime was to control Indians by incorporating them into dominant mestizo societies, it unintentionally 'also granted the space for physical, material, social, and cultural autonomy ...' (p. 97). As ethnic subordinates, however, Indians never had substantial access to social programs and the state. Therefore, such discrimination and increased threats to land led to class organization around an Indian identity.

Several influences account for transcommunity networks, including the communes that were organized by several of the land reform programs. Like *ejidos* in Mexico, these became what may be called 'structural class capacities' for organization (Otero, 1999). Churches and unions also played an important role in developing leadership capacities, which were completely unintended consequences for churches; their main goal was to gain spiritual followers, not creating political leaders.

Citing a document by CONAIE, Ecuador's national indigenous organization, Yashar highlights the significance of the demand for land: '[F]or us, the indigenous, the claims to land were of double significance, we used them as the basis for our subsistence, but also as *Pacha Mama* (Mother Earth), the source of our culture' (p. 101). She then narrates how most organizations struggled to define their agendas between 'class' (actually, economic) goals and an ethnic agenda. Interestingly, she argues that collectivist culture came from the Church, which introduced it as a paternalistic measure (p. 120). Ultimately, articulating the demands for land and culture became the glue that unified the indigenous organizations in Ecuador, even though two distinctive productive groups exist: hunter-gatherer tribes in the Amazon, and peasants in the Andes highlands. CONAIE describes this unity as follows: '... one of the primary objectives is to defend the culture and the land, create a consciousness of the unity of all the indigenous of the Amazon, and to also promote coordination with other organizations in the sierra [highlands] in order to come to form an organization that brings together all of the indigenous of Ecuador' (cited on p. 129).

Unfortunately, in spite of her own evidence, Yashar continues to pit ethnic against 'class' demands as if they were really separable. Within the same page she posits this separation while providing evidence about their unity. She first points out how CONAIE succeeded in unifying the two main regional groups (Amazon and Andes) when neoliberal reforms '*directly challenged the land base on which indigenous communities had survived*' (p. 133, original emphasis). Presumably, one of the two organizations came closer to the other when it 'began to move away from its more class-based focus and toward a more explicitly ethnic-based position.' But just a few lines below, Yashar indicates that by the 1980s both organizations 'were arguing that the loss of land was tantamount to the loss

of culture and indigenous identity' (p. 133). Citing Victor Hugo Cárdenas, a Bolivian Indian leader who eventually became vice-president, he observes that 'one cannot reduce the exploitation to either an ethnic or class one, that they form part of a more complex and interrelated context in which Aymaras find themselves dominated as Indians and as peasants' (p. 174).

Curiously, though, Yashar keeps referring to this unity of land and culture as an *ethnic* agenda (e.g. p. 140). One can only conclude two things about such insistence: on one hand, Yashar has a clear loyalty to the identity politics perspective, which clouds her own data; and she mistakenly conflates the concept of class with economic demands. Her confusion on class appears again in the Bolivia case study when summarizing the results of reforms emanating from the corporatist citizenship regime: 'This class-based transformative project was publicly institutionalized in two ways: land reform measures and corporatist peasant unions' (p. 156).

Bolivian organizations also came to realize that their class and ethnic struggles had to converge: 'The cocaleros [coca leave producers] saw the positive reception gained by the Kataristas and started to frame their struggle as one about indigenous rights. They banked on the perception that an ethnic struggle would resonate more powerfully than one for production alone' (p. 189). In this passage, in contrast with others, Yashar at least does not confuse the narrowly economic or production demands with 'class' demands. But the next sentence continues to artificially pit one type of demand against the other, as if one of them had to be privileged: 'Hence they shifted their prior class-based rhetoric to one about indigenous traditions and pride' (pp. 189–90).

It should be clear that this change in rhetoric is a question about strategic framing, not the content of the class struggle. As Yashar herself concludes about the result of a march in Bolivia, it helped 'to reinforce territorial demands as *the* central political issue for indigenous movements in the lowlands' (p. 214, original emphasis). And yet, Yashar's last sentence in the Bolivian chapter keeps pounding on the identity issue: 'Indigenous mobilization and ethnic-based demands are now *part* of the national lexicon, laws, and debates' (p. 223, original emphasis). With this conclusion, it would seem like Indian movements are primarily identity movements. Yet, as I have shown, most of Yashar's empirical evidence demonstrates that the central demands revolve around land, territory and, yes, the right to autonomy. If autonomy may be labeled an 'ethnic-based' demand, it is because Indians see it as the only way in which they can self-manage their *resources*. With such centrality of material demands, though, how can one continue to label them as merely 'ethnic' or 'identity-based'?

Another point of theoretical disagreement regards state intervention. In a typical liberal stand, Yashar thinks of political opening as the main condition for organizing and mobilization. Repression, by contrast, is seen only as a factor that inhibits them. In fact, however, her case studies show that repression can

sometimes encourage clandestine organizing (see, for instance, p. 177 on the Katarista movement) and favorable state policies in the midst of political opening can lead to co-optation. The main confusion lies in seeing political opening as a factor for mobilization, which it may be, with opening being a factor for organizing, which it not always is. On the other hand, state repression may inhibit mobilization, but not always organizing. In fact, repression may lead to radicalize a social movement.

Given Yashar's close focus on 'citizenship regimes,' she misses important differences among states. This comes out clearly in her discussion of the Peruvian case study in Chapter 6. Comparatively speaking, the Peruvian state may be regarded as a stronger state than those of Bolivia or Ecuador. Hence the prevalence of the corporatist regime did not result in giving Indians a space for autonomy. Rather, production organizations introduced with the 1968 agrarian reform, CAPs and SAIS, led to a form of state-run haciendas (p. 269). Not only did they not benefit direct producers in a homogeneous way, which created cleavages among communities; such divisiveness was used by the state to increase its political control. Similarly, in Yashar's view, CAN and SINAMOS failed as 'modes of interest intermediation.' But such conclusion misses the point that they were created primarily as corporatist organizations for top-down control over peasants and agricultural workers, not for their autonomous representation. Yashar's conclusion on how this divisiveness prevented the creation of transcommunity networks is right, however. But it would have been useful to highlight the state's role, beyond the mere 'corporatist citizenship regime,' which had a different content in Peru than it did in Bolivia or Ecuador.

Peru's main guerrilla organization, *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path), which emerged in 1980, was also a major obstacle to the creation of transcommunity networks along ethnic lines. While Yashar rightly points this out, she ironically fails to highlight the strong and rigid class reductionism of Sendero, and how it completely disregarded Indian identity as a basis for mobilization. In typical dogmatic fashion, ethnic discourse was considered by this organization as ideological false consciousness that distracted from 'true' class struggle.

In sum, *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America* is a valuable addition to the growing literature on indigenous movements and their role in democratization. It shows that the postliberal challenge that they posit must be accommodated if Latin American states are to deepen their democratic regimes. Theoretical disagreements apart, this book makes a significant contribution to elucidating why, where and when such movements emerge, and how successful mobilization requires motive, opportunity and capacity.

NOTE

- 1 For a sustained critique of these perspectives, see Otero and Jugenitz (2003).

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