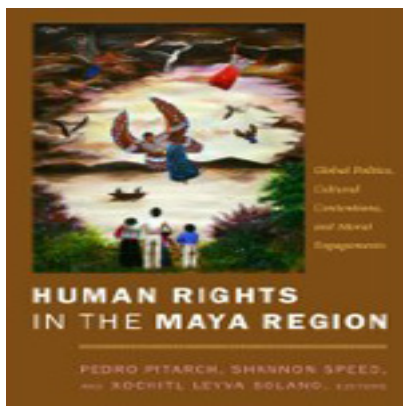


Pedro Pitarch's *Human Rights in the Maya Region: Global Politics, Cultural Contentions, and Moral Engagements*

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Human Rights in the Maya Region: Global Politics, Cultural Contentions, and Moral Engagements. Edited by Pedro Pitarch, Shannon Speed, and Xochitl Leyva Solano. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 377 pages. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.



Gone are the heady days when activists and academics alike could turn to human rights appeals as the salve for social injustice in Latin America. This critical terrain has been well covered by scholars who point to such factors as Western bias, NGOs beholden to their own agendas, and even fundamental contradiction between the liberal individualistic notion of rights and indigenous communitarian notions of respect and responsibility. This edited volume by Pedro Pitarch, Shannon Speed, and Xochitl Leyva Solano further develops the ongoing conversation regarding human rights in the Mayan region, both engaging philosophies of human rights, and the application of human rights in local communities. *Human Rights in the Maya Region: Global Politics, Cultural Contentions, and Moral Engagements* considers the consequences of human rights discourses for indigenous activists through a collection of essays by scholars, activists, indigenous peoples, ladinos, Americans, Guatemalans, and Mexicans.

The text is divided into three sections: “Global Politics and Nation-States,” “Cultural Contentions,” and “Political Engagements.” Representative of the range of contributions is Robert Carmack’s essay on the liberal root of human rights as a concept and Victoria Sanford’s ethnographic field report on oral history in Panzós, Guatemala. Carmack indicates the limits of human rights discourse in supporting indigenous agency through an exposition of the notion of rights as a key component of French and Anglo liberalism, one that developed alongside capitalism and democracy. These methods of conceiving power relationships are often at odds with communitarian indigeneity. Carmack’s philosophical contention is brought to bear on the community of Panzós in Alta Verapaz in Sanford’s evocative exposition of the challenges of testimonial work. This collected volume steps boldly into the ongoing conversation over transnational activism and representation previously initiated by Charles Hale (2001),

Richard Wilson (1997), Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998).

In this case, the multivocal character of an edited volume offers nuance to uncertain questions. There can be no single definition of human rights. For example, as Shannon Speed and Alvaro Reyes indicate in the case of Chiapas, human rights have been variously invoked by the Catholic Church with a religious hue, by the state and liberal NGOs in positivist legalistic terms, and by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) with an appeal to indigenous rights (282). On the other hand, it is equally impossible to speak of a singular, unified, homogenous “Maya culture” or even a homogenous state. Rachel Sieder’s essay challenges transnational efforts toward legal reform that target national governments, writing that their influence is rather limited when a fragmented state fails to inspire local confidence and is unable to protect citizens on a daily basis (84). This is especially problematic in the case of Guatemala, which does not share the Mexican experience of a strong corporatist state. Taken together, the collected essays argue for a dialogic conception of human rights where human rights ideals and activist infrastructures developed outside of local communities are contested, adapted, and ultimately adopted (or not) by local indigenous actors.

Perhaps it is because of the unfixed nature of the questions at stake that certain shortcomings emerge. One of the book’s implicit objectives is a redefinition of the Maya region. But do the authors in this volume delimit the region according to current geopolitical borders, linguistic groups, or shared histories of Mayan ancestry and subjugation by the state? Although the volume aims to be comparative, the authors’ reluctance to fully problematize community boundaries (whether local, national, or regional) precludes an effective comparative approach. Performance Studies scholars will wish for a more thoroughgoing engagement with various moments of commemoration and embodiment, as the volume remains suggestive rather than exhaustive in this area. In any case, the comprehensive bibliography will prove useful for readers interested in social movements, transnational activism, and postcolonial studies in Latin America.

This book has a curious effect. After twelve essays, there is no single answer to the volume’s question, “What is the relationship between ‘Maya culture’ and human rights?” Yet, in its nuance and good-faith consideration of the implications of scholarly and activist work undertaken “on behalf of” another, this edited volume is inspiring. It leaves the reader with one definitive conclusion: for better or for worse, international human rights discourses are a permanent feature in local, national and international legal, moral, and political agendas.

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