

Book Review

— *Doing democracy differently: Indigenous rights and representation in Canada and Latin America*, by Roberta Rice, University of Calgary, 2024

Roberta Rice's latest work offers an innovative contribution to the increasingly relevant debate on the realization of Indigenous self-determination in countries with colonial pasts. Her comparative analysis of Indigenous peoples of the South (Bolivia, Ecuador) and those of Northern America (Yukon and Nunavut) is a valuable methodological choice that differs from the usual approaches, which tend to compare cases located in the same geographical areas or with shared trajectories. For Rice, it is possible to compare the various Indigenous peoples of the Americas to the extent that extractive colonialism (Latin America) and settler colonialism (North America) share similar logics of extermination and exclusion – logics that continue to define nation-states within each context to this – day (p. 4).

Similarly, Rice's proposed analytical framework enhances traditional perspectives in the subfield of comparative politics by incorporating premises from the subfield of Indigenous politics, such as the persistent coloniality in the relationships between Indigenous peoples and the state as well as the difficulties facing liberal democracy in addressing key Indigenous political demands (autonomy and self-governance). The result of this innovative theoretical perspective takes shape in the key concept of democratic decolonization, which Rice defines as the re-establishment of Indigenous traditions and values in the institutions that govern or regulate society (p. 26).

Looking at the chapters of the text, Rice argues in chapter 2 that the model of autonomy achieved by the Indigenous nations of Yukon (Canada) – which for her represents one of the ways of democratic decolonization – best embodies Indigenous aspirations for sovereignty and self-governance. For her, the agreements reached between the Canadian government and these Indigenous nations – rights over surface and subsurface land, and establishment of their own forms of governance, among others – reveal a nation-to-nation relationship. That is to say, the Indigenous nations of Yukon would have power not within the Canadian state but alongside or equivalent to it.

In contrast, chapter 3 argues that Bolivia shows an alternative path of democratic decolonization. In the absence of prior recognition of territorial rights, Rice argues that Indigenous peoples opted to redesign the state through substantive constitutional reform with a plurinational perspective. This strategy facilitated, among other benefits, the creation of the so-called Indigenous Original Peasant Autonomy (AIOC, in Spanish) as a new sub-national political-administrative entity. Although Rice warns that this strategy has been criticized for its excessive bureaucracy, several Bolivian municipalities have transformed into AIOCs and are establishing their own forms of self-governance. The ongoing issue is that, while there is a way to achieve self-governance, the legal framework does not include rights over non-renewable natural resources.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the last two cases, Nunavut (Canada) and Ecuador. The case of Nunavut is similar to that of Bolivia, as the path of decolonization taken responds to the significant weight that the Indigenous population holds in the northeast of Canada. However, rather than redesigning the government's structures – a matter that is also unfeasible due to its federal design – the Inuit have established themselves as a “territory” – that is, a federal entity with fewer powers than those of a province, according to the Canadian federal system. For Inuit leadership, the government's “inuitizing” is understood as a necessary intermediate step before achieving greater autonomy and becoming a province. Finally, Rice argues that Ecuador aligns with the mini-municipal autonomy model, where Indigenous self-governance is formalized as a local government reliant on the established state institutional framework.

Overall, the cases addressed by Rice provide a better understanding of the Indigenous political action in the Americas. Indeed, if we consider that most influential studies – especially those focused on Latin America – take as a starting point the state's centrality in the building of ethnic identities or interpret their politicization as a reaction to the expansion of statehood, Rice's work shows us the other side of the story: namely, Indigenous peoples' efforts to engage in formal politics to expand democratic institutions till they transcend them. The result of this latter process would be the consolidation of a different democracy that enjoys greater legitimacy, as conventional institutions coexist with others that better represent the political aspirations of Indigenous peoples (self-governance, shared sovereignties, etc.) (p. 107).

In her conclusions, Rice states that her cases reveal that liberal democracy is more flexible than one might think (p. 107). Likewise, when she identifies the factors that may explain the various paths of democratic decolonization, she concludes that the differences between these are partly due to the reluctance of governments to cede sovereignty, particularly those from the Latin American region (p. 105). Rice acknowledges, however, that as the cases of Yukon and Nunavut show, the establishment of territorial rights is crucial to fully achieving Indigenous autonomy and self-governance (p. 81).

As a result of this observation, the significant differences between the cases of autonomy achieved in the North versus the South deserve further explanation,

as they call into question part of Rice's argument about democracy's flexibility. That is to say, we could ask whether "decolonization without territorial rights" (Ecuador and Bolivia) would respond solely to the political will of the governments, or perhaps it is because democracies are not as flexible as Rice claims. Although she acknowledges that there is a tension between the extractivist development model promoted by Latin American elites and democratic decolonization, a larger debate with Latin American neo-extractivism interpretations – that, from certain perspectives, erodes democratic institutions as it expands based on authoritarian logics and territorial dispossession (Anthias & López Flores, 2023) – could have been useful to strengthen her argument. Nonetheless, as she states towards the conclusion, the debate remains open and revolves around a major paradox: Is it possible to decolonize liberal democracies using the very mechanisms of the democratic-liberal state?

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References

Anthias, P., & López Flores, P. C. (2023). *Neoextractivism and territorial disputes in Latin America: Social-ecological conflict and resistance on the front lines*. Routledge.