

Book Reviews

Konefal, Betsy (2010) *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960–1990*, University of New Mexico Press (Albuquerque, PA), x + 247 pp. \$28.95 pbk.

Foreigners who come to Guatemala in search of Mayan culture do not react favourably to beauty pageants for *reinas indígenas* (indigenous queens). But this is where historian Betsy Konefal begins her account of Mayan ethnopolitics, during an unusual moment in the 1978 contest, when several of the queens representing different indigenous towns protested against an army massacre of peasant protesters at Panzós. A quarter of a century later, Konefal tracked down the women and interviewed them about this courageous decision, which could have taken their lives. Her investigation led back to the men who organised the protest, who proved to be founders of Guatemala's pan-Maya movement.

This is Konefal's larger subject, with special attention to how Guatemalan guerrilla organisations tried and failed to incorporate some of the first Mayan political organisations into their revolutionary project. The topic is important because, through such vehicles as Rigoberta Menchu's famous memoir, the Guatemalan guerrillas convinced a broad international audience, including American foundations and European social democrats, that they represented Guatemala's indigenous peasantry. But from start to finish the four largest guerrilla organisations were led by non-indigenous Ladinos from the cities. When Mayan-led insurgents emerged as an alternative, the Ladino-led insurgents killed them off – a fact that Konefal's claims has never been substantiated (p. 144) but can be documented by talking to survivors (Le Bot, 1995:290, and Kobrak, 2003:52 c.f. Morales, 1998:92).

I was surprised by Konejal's use of the Spanish slur term *indio*, which she highlights in her title and which indigenous activists in some countries have adopted as a point of pride, like gay militants who refer to themselves as faggots. I've never heard Guatemalans refer to themselves as *indios*, so I was enlightened when Konefal traced this expression to Antonio Pop Caal in 1972, as well as to the pages of the journal *Ixim* and a mysterious Movimiento Indio Tojil. The stirring expression 'for every indio who falls, thousands of us are rising up' (p. 123) she traces to the 1980 meeting that produced the Declaration of *Iximché*, which aspired to be a quasi-declaration of war by indigenous Guatemalans but failed to anticipate how many of them would end up patrolling for the army. In my experience, the idea that army massacres would create an unstoppable revolutionary movement was more characteristic of middle-class revolutionaries than of peasants.

Konefal's portrait of the guerrillas is not very flattering, but she clings to guerrillaphile versions of key events such as the 1980 fire at the Spanish embassy that killed 36 protesters and their hostages. Thus she refers to Vicente Menchú and the other Quiché peasants who died in the fire as activists of the Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC; p. 111) – yet the CUC claimed only five of the dead as its members, notably excluding Rigoberta's father, Vicente. Konefal also refers to Vicente and the embassy occupiers as unarmed when in fact the students and other urbanites leading the peasants carried Molotov cocktails, as well as a couple of revolvers, and took hostages who died with them (p. 121; see Stoll, 2007: 76–81).

As a historian of ideas, Konefal should have given readers more context for her designation of Guatemala's indigenous population as Mayas. This is a usage that foreign scholars pioneered, that Mayan political activists have embraced as their own, and that the Guatemalan state has normalised, but many so-called Mayas are not very interested in identifying themselves as such. Even though Mayanistas could have quite an impact on their people at some point in the future, I would not want to assume that current Mayan organisations represent all or even a majority of Guatemala's indigenous population, any more than the guerrillas merited this assumption. Given Konefal's command of the archival sources, she should have pinpointed the surprisingly late date at which the guerrilla organisations decided to echo the Mayanista discourse of the Mayan cultural activists who refused to join them.

Konefal reiterates that she's only studying activists, not the wider population, but she is patronising toward the many *indígenas* (their most common term for themselves) who failed to enlist in revolutionary or ethnic activism. This is scholarship by a believer. Since my criticisms are substantial, I should underline that the author's strategy of bringing together archival research with interviews with key figures such as Emeterio Toj Medrano is very fruitful. The book sheds light on important episodes. I learned a lot from it and expect that other Guatemala specialists will as well.

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References

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