

Book Review

- *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files*, by Marc Becker, Duke University Press, 2017

While attending a conference in Washington D.C., Marc Becker, known for his book *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements* (2008), visited the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. There he ran into an extensive set of FBI-reports recording surveillance activities on leftist militants and labor leaders in Latin America between 1940 and 1947, the number of FBI-agents peaking at five hundred and eighty-three employees in 1943. Becker realized that these records, created by the FBI's Special Intelligence Service, shed a surprising new light on the development of leftist parties and movements in Ecuador. He thus decided to not use these documents to show the modus operandi of the FBI in Latin America, about which little is known; but to use them for what he calls 'a counter-hegemonic purpose' (p. 256).

The material on which his book *The FBI in Latin America. The Ecuador Files* is based, was assembled by a total of forty-five FBI agents stationed in Ecuador between mid-1940 and March 1947. Most of them worked clandestinely, under an (often weak) cover of American firms, while others acted as legal attaché of the U.S. embassy in Quito. The findings are organized chronologically, documenting a time of which so little is known about U.S. intelligence meddling in Latin American, compared with the Cold War period, when the FBI's successor in Latin America, the CIA, not only collected intelligence but also undertook covert executive actions.

Although the initial mission of the FBI in Latin-America was to detect German and Italian efforts at espionage, sabotage and propaganda, and to deflect these countries' economic penetration, the main interest of its agents was soon directed towards threats to the U.S. economic hegemony in Latin-America, and especially towards communists and the labor movement. The historical pinnacle in Becker's book is the Glorious May Revolution of 1944 (*La Gloriosa*), when a progressive military toppled the authoritarian president Arroyo del Río and his cabinet. This revolution, in which the communists played only a secondary role, was the high point of the leftist movement in Ecuador, resulting in the drafting of a progressive constitution and the creation

of a leftist labor confederation, which led to FBI worries that the flow of raw materials from the country would be interrupted. These worries soon subsided, however, when it turned out that the communist movement followed a rather reformist and patriotist policy and was unable to alter the increasingly rightist course of the new *caudillo* Velasco Ibarra. With the onset of the Cold War international pressure on Ecuador increased, leading to the isolation of the communists.

Interestingly the FBI did not pay most attention to ideological communists, but was primarily interested in labor leaders who would be able to challenge the U.S. economic supremacy. Thus, in Ecuador, the FBI showed a special interest in Pedro Saad, a leading labor activist and representative in the 1944-1945 Constituent Assembly, who later became the Communist Party's secretary-general from 1952 till 1980. Apart from the communist party, the FBI mainly reported on the *Vanguardia Revolucionaria del Socialismo Ecuatoriana*, which attracted progressive military personnel, industrialists, modernizing landowners and urban professionals, and on the efforts to establish a national workers' federation in Ecuador.

Becker shows that the Communist Party in Ecuador (PCE) was a very weak, poor and internally fractured political movement, which came in fourth place in the country after the conservatives, the liberals and the socialists. Especially between 1944 and 1947 the party was a stabilizing and moderating force rather than a mobilizing one in the Ecuadorian political scene and in Ecuador's relations with the United States. This fact was regularly recognized in the reports of the FBI-agents stationed in Ecuador, but led in no way to a reduction of the FBI's surveillance. The more the PCE functioned in a respectable way, the more the FBI feared that in the end the PCE could become a significant political force. With such a mindset the PCE would always end up as an object of surveillance.

In addition to this ideological bias, Becker indicates other flaws in the FBI-reports, such as: reliance upon local informants who overestimated the importance of the movement under surveillance; reproduction of information which was publicly available; a lack of understanding of the local language, cultures and situations; the absence of analysis of the raw intelligence by the FBI (processing was done in the U.S. State Department); undue emphasis on foreign, especially Russian (Moscow), influences upon a movement that was primarily autonomous; and, finally, race, class and gender biases, leading to a lack of attention for the role of left indigenous peoples, Afro-Ecuadorians and women in the FBI reports, irrespective of their importance.

Becker does not hide his own ideological position. On the one hand he opposes the American imperialism in Latin America, which the FBI-agents symbolized, and is eager to expose their flaws, while on the other hand he tries to demonstrate that the FBI material offers invaluable information on the history of Ecuador's left, as FBI-informants penetrated the very small intimate and secretive circles around people like Saad: 'We thank them even as we

condemn their mission' (p. 55). This ambiguity sometimes leads to a precarious balancing act, but in the end Becker is convinced that '[e]ven with these shortcomings, the reports do contribute new insights'(p. 92). This is particularly so because no archives of the communist movement in the country of that time have survived. Becker emphasizes that especially the internal party struggles and the roads eventually not taken come to the fore in the FBI-reports, showing a much more multi-faceted history of Ecuador's communist movement than previously known.

Becker justifies his choice for focusing on Ecuador because of its 'rich history of strong popular movements that pressed for social changes' (p. 4). His book creates a desire to know what the result would be of similar studies of other Latin American countries with even richer histories in this respect.

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