

Book Review

- *Coca Yes; Cocaine No: How Bolivia's Coca Growers Reinvented Democracy*, by Thomas Grisaffi, Duke University Press, 2018

In this vivid ethnographic account, Grisaffi shows how Bolivian coca growers grew from a criminalized union to a strong social movement with a vernacular vision of “radical democracy”. They hoped their form of social control could be scaled up to the national level when the leader of the coca growers union, Evo Morales, was elected as Bolivia’s first indigenous president. Yet, this hope faded as Morales enacted a liberal state. Grisaffi makes clear his goal is not to highlight the illegal activities of the coca growers, but to “theorize the contradictions in Bolivia’s claim to be an indigenous-led and grassroots-oriented, democracy” (p. 3). To do so, he investigates what happens when vernacular forms of democracy become institutionalized, tracing how an agrarian union criminalized by international drug policies becomes a ruling governing party. This fascinating case study shows that the conditions for realization of alternative democracies locally are always linked to broader political economic forces.

The introduction places this drama in the context of the Andean Drug War. Over the last 50 years, the United States and its allies have poured millions of dollars into this war, pairing militarization with a policy of forced eradication. Unlike Peru and Colombia, in Bolivia coca production and consumption are accepted as part of national custom. In the 1980s, however, United States’ pressure forced Bolivia to adopt draconian laws. Facing increasing government repression, coca growers fought back, focusing on the coca leaf as a symbolic and cultural resource. Grisaffi argues this forged a collective anti-imperialist identification, and the basis of a social movement. Yet, this compelling ethnic argument could not obscure the fact that a percentage of their harvest is used for cocaine production.

In Chapter 1, Grisaffi describes the formation of the coca growing unions in the 1980s, especially in the Chapare tropical region. He then takes up the formation of the MAS (Movement Towards Socialism) political party. He shows how the coca growers built the MAS and put it into power, transforming a small organization into a ‘government of social movements’ they thought could construct a new more democratic national government. The second

chapter places this political trajectory into context by looking at “two faces of coca”: the first, its traditional use and ritual character, and the second, as a part of the illegal narcotics industry. This is a critical part of Grisaffi’s contributions: he faces clearly what few other authors have been willing to admit: coca-growers are tied to a criminal international economy. This forms the basis of his central argument: Morales could not enact forced eradication and risk the support of his base, but neither could he ignore international laws. Thus, despite the power the coca growers had, larger political and legal structures constrained the Morales regime’s abilities to enact the social movement’s agendas. However, this was not the only reason for the tension between the coca growers union and the Morales government. Chapter 3 describes the form of vernacular local democracy the coca growers practiced. For the Chapare coca growers, Grisaffi says, democracy is not about competitive elections, individual liberties, universal suffrage, and the secret ballot. Instead, they expect leadership to remain deferential and collective, and to “lead by obeying” (p. 11). This refers to the forms of direct participatory democracy enacted in collective assemblies. The cocaleros expected this direct connection with their leader to continue when Morales became president, but that did not happen: Morales had to respond to wider constituency. This chapter, based on Grisaffi’s many years of work in the region, provides a rare view into a functioning form of alternative democracy. It is also an argument for the anthropological method, showing how grounded empirical ethnographic data is essential for theorizing about politics.

In the second half of the book, Grisaffi shows what happened when Morales came to power. The cocaleros were able to enact their form of vernacular democracy at the local level, in municipal government in the Chapare. Yet, as Morales gained political power at the national level, he broke with the cocaleros, even taking over a union radio station (described in Chapter 7). More importantly, the MAS government did not lift all sanctions on coca production. Instead, it implemented the “Coca Yes, Cocaine No” initiative, permitting a limited amount of legal production in the two coca regions, the Chapare and the Yungas, regulated by processes of ‘social control’, where unions themselves police coca production. As a result of this compromise between social movement demands and international constraints, Grisaffi argues, Morales could not protect all the rank and file cocaleros, many of whose livelihoods were severely affected. This led them to feel betrayed and to call Morales’s legitimacy into question, even experiencing the MAS as a form of domination (p. 194).

This is a moving story, tracing how the promise of the MAS victory in 2005 gave way to disappointment and a sense of betrayal by the grassroots social movements that gave birth to it. This disillusionment is widespread among many sectors of the MAS coalition. One lesson of this book is that analysts should take into account alternative meanings of democracy from the grassroots level to better understand tensions within, and the failures of, the

ruling MAS party. Thus, Grisaffi asks in the conclusion: "from the coca growers' perspective, what needs to change for the MAS's experiment with democracy to function better?" (p. 193). His account of local practices of governing will be important reading for scholars of politics, indigenous studies, and democracy. How and when can progressive ideas and practices be scaled up? What are the larger structural obstacles? For scholars of social movements more broadly, this book also might offer an insight into Morales's betrayal of other social groups in his coalition, such as lowland indigenous groups resisting extractivism. In conclusion, Grisaffi suggests that "utopian movements have to find a way of reconciling big ideas with the profane and mundane realities of everyday life and to resolve these contradictions in a way that does not alienate the bases" (ibid).

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