

REVIEWS

Javier Auyero (ed.), *Portraits of Persistence: Inequality and Hope in Latin America*

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Portraits of Persistence offers clear and engaging ethnographic stories about contemporary life in Latin America that will be stimulating for newcomers, refreshing for seasoned scholars weary of dense prose, and potentially vexing for theory enthusiasts. The collection, born from the University of Austin's Urban Ethnography Lab, features 12 chapters offering close-up and personal accounts of the life worlds of key protagonists: prison abolitionists in Brazil, sustainable farmers in Colombia, security entrepreneurs in Mexico City, women working in the drug economy in Nicaragua, and more. The collection explores certain overarching themes of urban violence, neoliberalism and climate change within the context of inequality in contemporary Latin America. With its expansive scope, easy-going narrative and breezy approach to theory, this collection side-steps the social scientific vocabulary that can deter non-academic readers from picking up our books. The overarching goal of this collection is surprisingly simple: to bring 'readers into the social worlds of many different individuals' and to 'illuminate the paths their lives have taken, the triumphs and hardships they have experienced' (p. 1). My own intrigue was piqued especially when the editor Javier Auyero, referencing investigative journalist Katherine Boo, states in the book's Afterword that he hopes readers will 'finish the stories and maybe give half a damn' (p. 264). What to some readers might seem a gallingly modest aspiration also hints at an underlying dissatisfaction with mainstream anthropological publishing conventions. While the critique of social scientific writing could be explored more deeply, the authors seem to embody their critique through a more relaxed approach to intertextuality, theory and citations. Eschewing explicit engagement with theories of inequality or hope, the book relegates the bulk of the supporting literature to the 'Suggested Reading' sections that wrap up each chapter. While this tactic may not satisfy all readers versed in the social sciences, the compensation is a collection of highly accessible and thought-provoking stories.

Set in contemporary Latin America, a continent where 'poverty and luxury boom side by side' (p. 4), the book's overarching rubric is 'persistence', conceived straightforwardly as how people 'imagine and strive toward their individual and collective futures' (p. 14). With so broad a line of inquiry, each chapter's success

hinges not so much on the social scientific ‘gap’ being filled but on the author’s storytelling abilities.

Eldad Levy’s portrayal of security entrepreneurship in Mexico is especially gripping. It follows Rodrigo, who spent his twenties studying at the Institute of Counterterrorism in Israel. Born into privilege, Rodrigo capitalises on his family’s political ties and the influx of US funds to combat organised crime to establish a private security firm catering to the capital city’s elite. Ironically, funds originally designated for crime prevention fuel the illicit operations of his entrepreneurial venture, and Rodrigo’s firm thrives off of the state’s failure to protect its citizens. The seeds of an entertaining TV script are all here: we learn how Rodrigo leverages his connections to track kidnappers, fend off extortionists, administer extralegal justice and extract favours from judges, police officers and state officials. Levy’s chapter crackles with undiscovered theoretical insights into the inversions of law, order and criminality in Latin America and about the coloniality of corruption. Yet Levy pulls his punches, refraining from making any strong theoretical statements. To his credit, the story stands strong on its own, underscoring that truly compelling ethnographic material does not necessarily need theoretical acrobatics to shine.

A second outstanding chapter comes from Jennifer Scott, who tells the story of María, a resilient, compassionate and eminently likeable mother who leaves Mexico for gruelling employment in Louisiana’s crawfish peeling industry. While working relentlessly, María faces exploitative bosses, brutal working hours and meagre pay – earning only \$1.25 per pound (500 g) of crawfish, totalling \$5,000 for a nine-month season. Her poignant story is punctuated by injuries, rights denied and the upsetting detail that, despite spending over a decade working in ports and the seafood industry, María has never learned to swim (p. 181). I found this detail deeply affecting.

There are many more poignant moments in this collection, and readers will likely find themselves drawn more to certain stories than others. Yet, as one reads through chapter after chapter, there’s a gradual waning of emotional attachment to the characters, revealing the challenges of uniting short stories into a cohesive message. In his Afterword, Auyero highlights the book’s distinctive feature: its collective authorship and use of nonfiction narratives (p. 264). He celebrates this narrative style and collaborative approach, contrasting it with the solitary ‘*homo clausus*’ (p. 264) of academia. This was another instance where the book could have aimed its arrow more squarely, in particular by getting into the weeds of what truly distinguishes narrative non-fiction from ethnography. Additionally, while there are hints of a critique regarding the political economy of social scientific knowledge production, this is not explored explicitly, leaving readers to ponder the editor’s discontent with the anthropological genre. While the collection certainly captivates in places, it veers away from the theorising and critique at the heart of the ethnographic project without addressing the genre’s shortcomings head on.

That said, as a collaborative effort involving 13 authors, the project showcases many strengths. Commendably it includes graduate students alongside junior and senior scholars, highlighting the University of Austin’s dedication to early career development and publishing. The stories are presented in clear, accessible prose that will resonate with readers who may be less familiar with the social sciences. However, while the editor emphasises collaboration, the Introduction and Afterword could benefit from more detailed insights into the collective writing

experiences and perspectives of the contributors. This would offer valuable insights for educators and programme directors seeking practical guidance on collaborative writing projects, their successes and challenges.

In sum, *Portraits of Persistence* serves as a compelling introduction for undergraduates new to ethnography and Latin America, illustrating how departments can commit to their students and how faculty can commit to each other. Individual chapters will probably suffice for teaching purposes, and will be especially useful for whetting new students' appetites for ethnography and storytelling.

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Tiffany D. Barnes, Yann P. Kerevel and Gregory W. Saxton, *Working Class Inclusion: Evaluations of Democratic Institutions in Latin America*

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In *Working Class Inclusion*, Tiffany Barnes, Yann Kerevel and Gregory Sexton provide a fresh perspective on the regional trend towards declining trust in elected officials, political institutions and democracy writ large: the dearth of working-class representatives. The idea is that out-of-touch ruling elites are doing a bad job of representing the interests of most voters. The question of political inclusion, and class-based inclusion specifically, is a worthy and urgent one to explore, especially considering the myriad threats to democratic governance in contemporary Latin America.

While much of the work on labour politics, to date, has been more historical and focused on a few cases to analyse labour mobilisation, corporatist legacies and the formation of political parties of the working class – for instance the tome *Shaping the Political Arena* by Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier (2002) – *Working Class Inclusion* adds a different perspective, focusing on the attitudes and preferences of voters. In relying on a wealth of survey data from LAPOP (specifically its AmericasBarometro project) and PELA (on attitudes towards parliamentary elites), this book marks a new frontier in this research tradition. It opens a dialogue between scholars of political representation in Latin America, those focusing on the United States, and those who study voting behaviour. It also links labour scholars and scholars of gender, race and ethnicity, who are interested in the political representation of other historically excluded groups.

The extent of data is impressive in terms of its regional scope and its reliance on open-ended questions that paint a rich portrait of voter attitudes, perceptions and