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# Emory in the Andes: 'Off-Centering' Political Risk

BY BRUCE M. KNAUFT



## What is it like to

direct a project that brings together scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and students for workshops and conferences that take place in regions of political transition and risk across the world? The short answer is truly exhilarating.

Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the States at Regional Risk project (SARR) conceptualizes, organizes, and implements such workshops and conferences, bringing together diverse constituencies in some of the world's major trouble-spots. The project's northern Andes portion developed after completing successful major workshops and conferences among scholars, officials, and civil society leaders in West and East Africa. Then, this last spring,

in a first-of-its-kind engagement for Emory in South America, SARR brought together twenty-five regional and international scholars—including five from Emory—in Quito, Ecuador, on May 20 and 21, 2010, for the conference “Off-Centered States: Political Formation and Deformation in the Andes.”

I had known that a range of South American countries, including Ecuador, have strong cadres of social science faculty and that some of these scholars also advise—or critique—government plans, policies, and projects. But I was still surprised by the depth, breadth, and rigor of our South American faculty colleagues. We were fortunate to have outstanding presentations by international scholars from anthropology, history, and political science, representing a wide range of Andean and non-Andean universities. The conference was co-organized by the Quito branch of the prestigious Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO). Emory Professor David Nugent (anthropology) and SARR postdoctoral fellow Christopher Krupa (now an assistant professor in anthropology at the University of Toronto) co-organized the event.

With the lean to the left in some countries of the Andes—including Bolivia and Ecuador, not to mention Venezuela—scholars sometimes view political upheavals across the region as a struggle between state centralization and decentralization, between political centers and their margins. Broadening this understanding, the SARR conference facilitated a range of new dialogues among Latin American and Western scholars to consider alternative—or ‘off-



(top) Three indigenous Bolivians at the inauguration of the first indigenous president of Bolivia, Evo Morales. (Photo by Olmo Calvo Rodríguez.)

(bottom) Bruce Knauff, director, SARR Project. (Photo by Kay Hinton.)

centered’—locations of power and influence in Andean polities. Special attention was paid to how state-like practices are being adopted and shaped by those acting outside sanctioned state governments, including in ostensibly extrapolitical spaces such as the workplace and even the domestic household.

A larger issue is how Western notions of ‘the political’ seem narrow when applied to Andean social contexts and, in complementary fashion, how seemingly non-state Andean organizations and groups operate, as Krupa put it, as “state by proxy.” How are these attempts legitimated (if at all) and what challenges or competitions arise from them?

During two days of intensive discussion, participants examined political dynamics affecting Andean countries, past and present, including the everyday, extraofficial, and frequently invisible or cloaked permutations of state power in the lives of Andean people. We also examined the role of political culture and impact of transnational forces such as global capitalism.

The conference was especially important given the election in recent years of anti-neoliberal presidents such as Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, as well as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. The rise of these leaders reflects major political shifts that are often considered only superficially in Western policy analysis and media coverage amid the complex forces and alternative perspectives within the region and countries themselves.

Our larger intention in orchestrating the conference was to provoke reflection among this international body of regional experts about the sources of current regional tensions and to assess possibilities for new and influential forms of governance to emerge within northern Andean countries. We achieved this goal with great success.

Conference participants agreed that many factors contributing to the current regional tensions can be traced back to the colonial period and the transition to independent republics in the 1800s. Andean countries often are thought of as overly centralized systems—attributed historically to long and violent centuries of Spanish crown rule in the region, to the administrative strength of the church-state nexus in governing local populations, and to the development of tight bureaucratic networks that continued into the republican period. Scholars have tended to view this overcentralization of the state as a root cause of current political conflicts in the region, which may give the weight of national political power to charismatic presidents and their allies with specific agendas.

Against this interpretation, we found instead that the colonial period seeded deep struggles between diverse power blocs—including clergy, landowners, government officials, and urban settlers—concerning the right to govern or extract surplus from indigenous societies and territories. Definitive features of the modern state—such as the establishment of a singular and universal legal code—were lacking well into the republican era in many Andean coun-



Co-organizer Christopher Krupa discusses the concept of ‘state by proxy’ in a South American context. (Photo by Bruce Knauft.)

tries, which allowed local power holders to act as state actors “by proxy” in the lives of local people.

The important implication of this history is that, in recent years, analogous patterns have developed—and are often unrecognized—in Andean countries. What seems like centralized state political influence and organization is, in many respects, much more dispersed, contended, and diversely claimed by persons and associations within Andean states, including in outlying areas.

Our understanding and response to dynamic political change—and potential—in the Andes needs to learn from, rather than repeat, the myopias of the past. The United States has developed political and economic interest and leverage in South America in the 187 years since the U.S. Monroe Doctrine in 1823, which first officially proclaimed the Western hemisphere to be a special zone of American influence. It is hence important for Western scholars, as well as those within Andean countries, to bring the realities and political potential of the region’s present out of the shadows of its deeper past.

I am particularly pleased that Chris Krupa and David Nugent are compiling the conference papers into an edited volume, *Off-Centered States*, that will be co-published in English with a North American university press and in Spanish with FLACSO. They plan to use the release of the Spanish edition as an impetus to discuss the findings of the SARR Quito conference with state and civil representatives in Ecuador and Peru and to consider a conference with them thereafter.

In a word, this project has been exhilarating and deserves the expression of deep thanks to many people at Emory, in Ecuador, and—indeed—around the world.

For more details, please see the SARR website at [sarr.emory.edu](http://sarr.emory.edu). ❁

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*Bruce M. Knauft is the Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Anthropology and director of Emory’s States at Regional Risk project.*