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Javier Puente, *The Rural State. Making Comunidades, Campesinos, and Conflict in Peru's Central Sierra*. University of Texas Press, 2023. 295 pp. ISBN 9781477326282.

The Rural State approaches 20th-century state formation in Peru - and its entanglement with capital accumulation - from the vantage point of rural societies and landscapes. Historian Javier Puente convincingly shifts the focus from the common historiographical emphasis on the more recent reorganisation and collapse of rural-state relations towards long-term continuities. While the title alludes to those relations in seemingly straightforward terms, Puente develops an elaborate argument about rural incorporation as a two-directional, negotiated process through which the state and the countryside have been “shaping and molding each other in intended and unintended ways” (p. 198). While reconnecting with Peru’s rich tradition in rural studies, the book’s central argument transcends its specific Peruvian contributions. While mostly framed in terms of “human geography”, the book’s explicit attention to the material implications of incorporating upland grazing economies also hints at recent debates that recast the state and capitalism as fundamentally ecological projects. Rural worlds emerge not as the residue of an emerging and consolidating state, nor as a blank canvas for one-sided interventions and reimaginations, but as both product and producer of state and capital expansion.

Through in-depth ethnographic archival research, Puente is able to give ‘the rural’ a face. It is the face of San Juan de Ondoës (Department of Junin), a face adapted to endure high-mountain environments, marked by the daily labour involved in sheep grazing, and oriented towards wider networks of mobility, exchange, and solidarity. Situated in the higher parts of Peru’s central *sierra*, Ondoës presents one particular trajectory of how rural villagers engaged with successive cycles of incorporation within the national state apparatus and a globalising economy. While they did not control the terms of negotiation, villagers’ repertoires of reaction and adaptation were oriented towards the protection of a minimal degree of collective political and ecological autonomy, most tangibly expressed in their decades-long struggle to recover control over the Atocsaico hacienda.

Puente identifies a recurring pattern in the material and discursive reorganisation of the countryside, which is reflected in the organisation of the chapters. These cycles were supported by the production of new subjects – “indios” became part of “comunidades”, later fragmenting into “campesinos”. Yet they generated unanticipated results, giving way to conflict and politics

of abandonment that facilitated the re-initiation of a new cycle of reimagining and reclaiming the countryside. The book starts off with a strong introduction that situates the central *sierra* and Ondoës within old and new debates regarding rural Peru. It then develops as a multi-scalar, ‘glocal’ account, interweaving oscillations in global capitalism, national and regional dynamics of state-building, and the routine and the turbulence of rural village life.

The first chapter starts in the years following the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), when the recasting of the rural Andean highlands as a new frontier for extraction and state power takes off. It reveals how the state’s schemes to open up the central *sierra* essentially relied on incorporating – rather than expelling or exterminating – indigenous rural populations. The second chapter elaborates on how the state dealt with this ‘incomplete’ transition. Formalised in 1920, the legal figure of the “comunidad” was designed as the basic organisational cell for the spatial and socioeconomic incorporation of the indigenous population, fostering rural legibility, and hence surveillance. This new cycle of state-driven social and spatial engineering permitted a closer articulation of the spheres of capital and indigenous lifeworlds. Simultaneously, it brought the tensions between state bureaucracy and communal autonomy more clearly to the surface. Yet, interestingly, Puente emphasises how the latter continued to exceed that of the former in the sense that comunidades pragmatically appropriated the state-sanctioned instruments to preserve and even radicalise their political agenda.

The third chapter zooms in on the ‘still-to-be-transformed’ herding world of San Juan de Ondoës. Puente argues that the mid-twentieth century context of rising urbanisation did not simply translate into a dismissal of rural worlds. On the contrary, they were targeted as crucial terrain for agrarian industrialism. Comunidades actively adopted – and adapted – state-fostered modernisation projects, thus accepting the premise of further acculturation and state surveillance over intimate communal and household life. The detailed study of Ondoës’ internal statutes offers insight into how the appropriation of legal mechanisms gave shape to a new, though ambiguous “social contract” that allowed comunidades to negotiate what was previously addressed through resistance and mobilisation.

Chapters four and five cover the period of agrarian reform and trace its longer term, alienating effects on communal control over land and its labour base. In a context of widespread rural unrest, Belaúnde’s 1964 reform attempt was interrupted by the Velasco military government, whose radical 1969 reform struggled to channel rural expectations and dissatisfaction. In Ondoës, the reform period provided a new political vocabulary that reinforced and reformulated claims over the Atocsaico hacienda, at the expense of moral and juridical claims based on “immemorial rights”. However, the reform’s chaotic implementation, the ecological limits of the national agrarian frontier, and the state’s poor grasp of rural realities on the ground produced a highly ambivalent, and mostly disappointing version of agrarian justice. Under the banner of cooperativisation and “campesinización”, rural incorporation and state surveillance entered a new cycle. Ondoës was integrated in the “Agrarian Society of Social Interest” (or SAIS) *Túpac Amaru*, and its comuneros were relabelled as “rural workers of the state”. Seemingly empowering, cooperativisation in fact pushed communal structures deeper into the domain of the state. Puente alludes to the ways that it masked the partial continuation

of a hacienda-type system that foreclosed direct land redistribution, fragmented communal lands, and replaced communal authorities. Particularly for grazing economies and ecologies, the erosion of comunidades' collective arrangements over land, herds, territory, and their vital capacity to pool diverse organisational logics and socio-economic networks proved devastating. It ultimately left comunidades impoverished, disenfranchised, and more receptive to radicalisation and political violence.

Chapter six opens with the 1987 assassination of a communal leader in Ondores, a symptom of further destruction of communal organisation and networks during the Internal Armed Conflict (1980-2000). Navigating between local memory (and oblivion) and national debates, Puente aims to decentre the period of political violence by juxtaposing this episode of dramatic rural-state antagonism with long and generally understudied periods of coexistence and negotiation. In discussing this conflict as primarily agrarian and ecological, he details the profound breakdown of communal politics of consensus and the increasingly unsustainable incompatibility between state and Andean territorial logics, which left highland comunidades eventually with no option but to realign with the state. In an insightful concluding chapter, Puente scrutinises the 'post-conflict' years in light of the book's overall ambitions. If rural highland Peru today seems indeed more distant and "dispensable" than ever, Puente argues, this cannot be explained as the outcome of a protracted, inevitable development. Rather, recent political violence and neoliberalism upended a long and dynamic process of communal state-making and state-driven comunidad-making. However, while Puente identifies neoliberalism as a fundamental breakaway from 'rural state-formation' for claiming to no longer require rural legitimisation, he also draws attention to the potential of environmentalism and reindigenisation for initiating new rural-state dialogues. Yet, the painful reminder of Pedro Castillo's shortlived government after being elected as Peru's first campesino president (2021) hints at the profound difficulties of initiating a new cycle of rural-state interdependency.

In synthesis, Puente offers a cyclical account of rural state-making and un-making, thereby powerfully delegitimising the still frequently upheld linear story of perpetual rural marginalisation as cemented in the very roots of the Peruvian state. By pointing to the mutual dependencies between state formation and rural transformation, Puente evokes the figure of a "social contract", albeit one that ultimately contained the roots of its own collapse. That cyclical rhythm is also supported by Puente's explicit integration of capitalism as constitutive rather than antithetical to the production of the modern countryside. The history of Ondores and other Andean comunidades evidences the capitalist logic of exhausting and simultaneously recreating landscapes and their populations. A symbolic and material transition that remained incomplete as rural villagers co-produced a countryside that integrated their collective formations. However, this history does seem to reflect a more linear trend. In each cycle, property, specifically private land ownership, is continuously identified as the central problem for a new state-rural realignment. Situating property in the context of grazing economies, Puente discusses the push to regulate Indigenous landholding systems not just as an economic endeavour to discipline Indigenous labour, but as an ecological one too, as property becomes a vehicle to unlock the potential of soil and new sheep breeds (pp. 36-38). The trajectory of how Ondores recovers the

Atocsaico hacienda is quite revealing of how local moral economy eventually shifted and new notions of property eroded communal cohesion.

With *The Rural State*, Puente takes up the urgent job of historicising the constant reproduction of the rural frontiers of capitalism. By placing Andean rural societies and landscapes plainly at the centre of his analysis, he provides a key contribution to the new wave in Peruvian and Latin American rural history scholarship, one that resonates far beyond the Peruvian Andes. Through engaging and eloquent writing, *The Rural State* offers insights that brilliantly help to break down – academically and otherwise – many of the false dichotomies that continue to distort our view on, and engagement with rural communities, their landscapes, and their histories.

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