Book Review

Domesticating Democracy: The Politics of Conflict Resolution in Bolivia

Susan Helen Ellison. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, ISBN: 9780822371083, 296 pp., Pb. \$25.95.

Reviewed by Nico Tassi

Domesticating Democracy is an in-depth study of the complexities of a foreign-founded programme of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) and its effects, appropriations and interpretations amongst El Alto residents in Bolivia. Originally funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), ADR programmes and integrated justice centres (IJC) explicitly conceptualise their role in terms of improving access to justice for underprivileged groups in contexts of overburdened state bureaucracies with the aim of reducing potentially destabilising conflicts, improving governance and creating the conditions for business to flourish (6). The objective that Ellison sets for this book is to examine 'how foreign aid ideologies about legitimate democratic personhood, participation and justice, chafe against local meanings of social relations, political engagements, and conflict in the city of El Alto' (7).

In the Introduction, Ellison describes how indigenous and poor Bolivians are frequently humiliated at the hands of state bureaucrats of European descent, who often force these vulnerable segments of society to operate outside of the formal legal framework. This exclusion overlaps with the agenda of ADR organisations providing a tangential, private, conciliatory/legal framework for the poor. After contextualising ADR as a component of democracy-assistance programs attempting to reduce 'overly bellicose', illiberal and authoritarian modes of political participation, Ellison warns about the potential of these interventions to foster modes of 'entrepreneurial' or 'counterinsurgent' citizenship in the service of governance and development leading to forms of tamed or 'domesticated' democracy.

By providing a history of US-funded development agencies' approaches to justice, in Chapter 1 the author outlines a neoliberal shift in such assistance programmes from the intention to reform local institutions to the objective of transforming Bolivian citizens. In the specific case of ADR practices, this implied the training of citizens towards democratic practices of conflict resolution, promoting a culture of peace, and keeping people away from a hopelessly broken bureaucratic system. In Bolivia, as Chapter 2 shows, this implied an *a priori* characterisation of *Alteños'* social movements and organisations as particularly predisposed to conflict and violence, and therefore as threatening to democracy. ADR interventions are thus justified as bringing about a new culture of peace. However, the scepticism of Bolivian ADR practitioners towards this culture of peace seemed to emphasise the possibility of conceiving of conflict as a healthy and necessary element that may even favour justice.

Such a tension is further emphasised in Chapter 3 through a set of interviews with mostly Bolivian mediators between the ADR programme and the local reality. The author here outlines a discursive battleground between a local suspicion towards development projects imposing their own agenda, on the one hand, and a certain tendency amongst development workers to show fidelity to foreign employers and/or to reconceptualise IJCs as distinctively Bolivian spaces of justice, making them domestic, on the other. In Chapters 4 and 5, Ellison tackles the interactions between ADR practitioners and *Alteños*, focusing on the tensions between ADR's dyadic logic of conflict resolution and the role of kinship and neighbourhood networks in El Alto in addressing disputes. Particularly, she questions how reducing quarrels to a dispute between two parties and inducing each to take individual responsibility may disentangle conflict from broader politico-economic forces (138) and even overshadow the root of the problem. However, the author also points out how the practices and procedures of the IJCs can also be locally appropri-

ated by kinship networks in order to strengthen and legitimise the validity of their informal agreements.

Throughout the book, the author draws on extensive interviews and participant observation in the IJCs, taking a reflexive tone and making the book particularly relevant for practitioners and civil servants. However, the reader is left begging for a broader ethnographic engagement with Alteño notions of conflict, justice and/or democracy as well as with local meanings of the political to compare with and challenge ADR's universal/liberal premises. As a field site, El Alto is particularly suited to engaging with informal legal practices and local strategies of conflict resolution, as local families, organisations and ideologies have often overrun formal institu-

tions both in providing urban services and in socially and politically structuring the city. As it is, the book is much more focused on non-Alteño practitioners' perceptions and donors' ideologies than on the ideologies of the people their legal services are destined for. We will have to wait for Ellison's next book to fill this gap.

Nico Tassi is a research associate at University College London (UCL). He holds a PhD in social anthropology from UCL. His work is dedicated to understanding the connection between Bolivian indigenous highlanders and modernity, the nation and the market. Email: nico.tassi@ucl.ac.uk