



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Convictions, beliefs, and the suspension of disbelief

On the insidious logic of neoliberalism

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Comment on De la Cadena, Marisol. 2015. *Earth beings: Ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Marisol de la Cadena (2015) has made an earnest and sympathetic attempt to transcend the various boundaries that separate her own biography and outlook from those of her ethnographic interlocutors. She shares with her readers the various reflections raised by her struggles as an urban intellectual to comprehend the life-worlds of illiterate, Quechua-speaking agro-pastoralists (*runakuna*) who inhabit the rugged rural landscapes east of Cuzco. The project of adequately understanding their experience of the world proves indistinguishable from the challenge of formulating an anthropological position that does not simply adopt a top-down documentation of their “beliefs,” but grants their reality an ontological validity that serves as a critique of mainstream modern worldviews and their interfusion with power.

Ultimately, de la Cadena’s deliberations concern the role of anthropology in the ongoing shift from colonial to neoliberal perspectives on cultural diversity. She highlights the continuities linking sixteenth-century Spanish extirpation of Andean “idolatry” to a modern Peruvian president’s dismissal of animism as an “absurd” and “primitive” form of religion posing an obstacle to development. But the assumption of enlightened superiority, she observes, is as evident among the very leftists who would criticize the president’s intolerance of religious and cultural diversity. The long-standing leftist struggles in Peru have consistently been conducted within the confines of Enlightenment discourse, even when the land reforms they endorsed were largely propelled by rural indigenous populations that



subscribe to a very different ontology. Mariano Turpo exemplifies such political agency, allied with the urban left but experiencing the struggle in distinctly different terms. The close attention to Mariano's and his son Nazario Turpo's understandings of their interactions with the outside (non-ayllu) world is no doubt de la Cadena's most significant achievement.

If the colonial and modernist repression of diversity represents a blunt and straightforward form of power, we also read between de la Cadena's lines about the subtle and insidious power of neoliberalism: the official celebration of cultural diversity through tourism, museum exhibits, and the recognition of indigenous rights. But if the logical historical trajectory of colonialism was a revolutionary leftist struggle for emancipation, the political trajectory of neoliberalism remains obscure. De la Cadena (2010) and Mario Blaser (2013) suggest "cosmopolitics" and "political ontology," but to the extent that such political struggles require a "post-humanist" foundation, their proposals raise a number of objections (cf. Hornborg 2017).

The dilemma for an emancipatory anthropology is no longer how to confront colonial or modernist aspirations for cultural uniformity, but how to confront neoliberalism. Although it may seem democratic to abandon a realist ontology and officially accept one's interlocutors' claims as valid, no matter how counterintuitive, such public suspension of disbelief is hardly conducive to one's own political positioning. To propose that the anthropologist's hosts literally live in a different world than their guest (cf. Law 2015) may be a convenient way of expressing respect—while circumambulating differences in class and purchasing-power—but is tantamount to an extreme form of exoticism that disqualifies the common parameters through which power can be gauged and challenged. Nor, it seems, was political ontology even an efficient strategy for rescuing the mountain Ausangate from being transformed into a pile of rubble. As de la Cadena observes, "to save the mountain from being swallowed up by the mining corporation, activists themselves—*runakuna* included—withdrawed *tirakuna* [earth-beings] from the negotiation" (2015: 275).

Remarkably, however, de la Cadena asks her readers to take seriously not only the relationships that *runakuna* maintain with earth-beings but also the existence of those earth-beings themselves. The former is a crucial and obvious foundation for the ethnographic project since its inception, while the latter has become a shibboleth for the so-called ontological turn in anthropology. If we are seriously prepared to endorse animistic mountain worship, to the point of deploring the exclusion of earth-beings from the public policy discourse that saved Ausangate from a mining project, what are the political implications for anthropology? What is the significance of animism for our endorsement of a land reform or environmental protection? If the discursive eclipse of "earth-beings" by "defense of the environment" is a deplorable accommodation to modernity, what alternative discourses would have been preferable from the perspective of political ontology? To the many anthropologists for whom a geological formation must remain devoid of sentience and purpose, local assertions about the agency of Ausangate—while certainly deserving acknowledgement, respect, and sensitive translation—cannot be taken literally.

Translation necessarily implicates the anthropologist's own personal biography and frame of reference. Urban academics are predictably intrigued by the various

ways in which rural people express their embeddedness in community and the landscape. De la Cadena quotes a bilingual Quechua-Spanish schoolteacher on the meaning of *ayllu*. He beautifully conveys the sensory experience of local rural identity, with which a great many humans all over the world could no doubt identify, but it takes a detached, modern individual to reflexively express (and quote) that experience as a reality from which one has been estranged. Although de la Cadena repeatedly asserts that she is concerned with *relations* (e.g., when quoting Keith Basso or Roy Wagner), her approach to “in-ayllu” practices unfortunately seems to end up objectifying these experiential relations as if they were features of the people and the mountains whose interaction she seeks to explore. Although her efforts are sincere and painstaking, she is far from the first anthropologist for whom the phenomenological sense of place articulated by their rural hosts is inevitably lost in translation. To acknowledge and respect the web of relations that constitute such a sense of place is not equivalent to promoting, as literal statements about reality, the projections, attributions, and metaphors through which it is expressed.

Yet, this sometimes appears to be the ultimately untenable position pursued in *Earth beings*, raising the perhaps blunt question if the endorsement of fetishism is really an option. Are such perceptions really viable, in the sense that they are being adopted by increasing numbers of young people? In the unlikely event that this is indeed the case, is it because there is money to be made in tourism? Can we perhaps expect a continued expansion of “Andean shamanism” catering to the projections of modern people attracted to embeddedness, spirituality, tradition, authenticity, and other qualities missing in their own lives? And if so, is not this commodified version of indigenous embeddedness something very different from Mariano Turpo’s *despachos* to Ausangate? How, in these complex transformations and imperfect translations, are we to understand the ontological status of the *tirakuna*?

De la Cadena’s most remarkable sentences seem to suggest that the earth-beings invoked by the villagers of Pacchanta may indeed be real sources of agency. At one point she asserts, “our incapacity to be persuaded of their participation . . . does not authorize the denial of their being” (2015: 150). But then, how could we deny anything at all that someone might claim? What does denial mean? If we should not be permitted to deny something of which we cannot be persuaded, how would it at all be possible to have a conviction (for instance, a materialist worldview)? De la Cadena at times interjects her own inability to perceive Ausangate as more than a piece of rock, but her disbelief is consistently suppressed and renounced as a personal shortcoming conditioned by modernity.

To refer to the relation of *runakuna* to *tirakuna* as a “belief,” writes de la Cadena (2015: 187–88), is to distance oneself from them, and Nazario Turpo was obviously not willing to think of his convictions regarding Ausangate in such terms. Regardless of worldview, to thus relativize one’s own convictions would be to deconstruct the foundation on which one stands. Admittedly, the use of the word “beliefs” about others’ convictions expresses the speaker’s disbelief, but this is not necessarily tantamount to disrespect. To reject Cristóbal de Albornoz’s and Alan García’s intolerance of what they dismissed as “superstition” does not necessarily mean endorsing *runakuna* ontology. If the word “belief” were to be banished (as politically incorrect) from the anthropologist’s vocabulary, the hyperrelativist implication would be that any conviction is as good as any other, and that anthropologists are

prepared to share any conviction they encounter. However, as it will no doubt always be justified to distinguish between one's own convictions and those of others, an equivalent concept would soon have to take its place. As illustrated by the medieval tension between geocentric and heliocentric cosmologies, some beliefs are simply false. Although it is supremely legitimate to critically interrogate the political dimensions of the distinction between "our" rationality and "their" beliefs, the posthumanist campaign against modernity would be more subversive if it exposed the cultural foundations of modern rationality rather than endorsed the validity of nonmodern fetishism.

To calibrate the human subject with earth-beings or other deities is a means of bracketing the self-reflexive ego-consciousness that is a diagnostic norm of modernity. For nonmodern people everywhere, it is a way of emphasizing the primacy of relations, rather than the objectified self. To reify and take literally the imagined, nonhuman interlocutor is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness. This becomes particularly evident when de la Cadena argues that Andean earth-beings are "part of the political process" (2015: 93). If being targets of invocation qualifies them as political agents then the same must be said for the Christian God (and crucifixes, altars, temples) through two millennia of European history. In fact, de la Cadena observes that indigenous Andean spirituality should be understood as a syncretic fusion of Christian and non-Christian practices. A lingering question, then, is why the exclusion of *tirakuna* from public discourse is more deplorable than secularization in general?

The projection of anthropomorphic agency onto nonhuman entities is a way of relating to the world. To the extent that the concept of "belief" does not suffice to exhaust the substance of such relations, it is because beliefs generate real material consequences by significantly influencing human agency. But in contrast to non-social events such as earthquakes, the reality of mountain deities presupposes subjective human perceptions. John Maynard Keynes distinguished between atomic and organic propositions, and the critical realists distinguish between transitive and intransitive aspects of reality. Posthumanists such as de la Cadena disregard the relevance of such distinctions between the objective and the subjective, but they would have helped her deal with the fact that the purposes of earth-beings impact on the material world only to the extent that they serve as concerns of human beings. If we are to believe that earth-beings have purposes and agency that is independent of human concerns, we need to see it demonstrated. Apparently there were local voices suggesting that earth-beings were responsible for the tragic bus accident that ended Nazario Turpo's life (2015: 19). De la Cadena writes that she doubts that this was the case but—true to her narrative—she does not seem to exclude such metaphysical intervention *in principle*.

I sense a contradiction between de la Cadena's critical skepticism regarding the demand for Nazario Turpo's presence in the promotion of tourism, museum exhibits, and even individual politicians, on the one hand, and her reluctance to acknowledge the transformations that these new opportunities must have implied for his practice of "Andean shamanism," on the other. As elsewhere, the incorporation of indigenous spirituality into the modern market has generated competition between different practitioners, involving contestations of authenticity. Authenticity is the primary cultural capital commodified by the tourist industry, catering

to disembedded moderns intrigued by the spirituality and embeddedness of the elusive native, yet it is inevitably undermined by this very commoditization. The *despachos* that Mariano had taught his son Nazario to direct toward Ausangate were a means of personal calibration, but when presented to tourists and museum curators they must have become something else. De la Cadena is of course quite aware of this dilemma, but chooses—no doubt out of respect for her late friend Nazario—not to pursue the topic. Nevertheless, if contemporary anthropological culture theory can be used to obscure such discontinuities, it is tantamount to serving as an accomplice of neoliberalism.

The requirement of a modern secular individual, writes de la Cadena (2015: 250), is the capacity to “distinguish cultural belief from rational knowledge.” Since “Andean shamanism” is packaged for tourists and museums precisely as a set of “cultural beliefs,” the implication is that people like Nazario must inevitably begin to experience themselves in such modern terms. But rather than pursue a consistent critique of how the market transforms culture, experience, and identity, de la Cadena at times seems to salute the “partial connections” and “equivocations” that characterize the interaction between local life-worlds and the modern system. Interestingly, she also seems to endorse what she identifies among *runakuna* as a conflation of signifier and signified, a distinctly nonmodern phenomenon that may in fact have facilitated the transformation of Nazario’s *despachos* into postmodern commodities. Contestations of authenticity appear more to have focused on the technicalities of ritual practice than on the modern preoccupation with degrees of correspondence between a person’s surface and inner essence.

Much as *runakuna* are inclined to conflate signifier and signified,¹ they apparently tend not to distinguish between leader and follower, or representative and represented. Combined with their conflation of human and nonhuman members of *ayllu* (society and nature), this means that their elected leaders speak “from” the entire local life-world, including the *tirakuna*. This suggests a local version of the insight expressed by Roy A. Rappaport (1994) that humans are that part of the biosphere that can reflect over itself. But being immersed in totalities that span the divide between society and nature does not absolve humans from their unique responsibility to speak and care for such totalities. When elected as *personero*, Mariano Turpo was expected not only to speak on behalf of the *ayllu* but also to be the *ayllu* speaking. If this is anthropocentrism, it is not hierarchical in the sense of conceiving humans as superior to the nonhumans with which they identify. Contrary to the assumptions of posthumanists deploring notions of human exceptionalism, an ontological distinction between society and nature is thus not necessarily political.

Whereas “in-ayllu” leaders are identical with their constituencies, more distant leaders such as *hacendados*, police chiefs, lawyers, and urban politicians are frequently portrayed as corrupt and oppressive. Their capacity to exert sovereign power over *runakuna* at will, encapsulated in the concept of *munayniyuq*, is

1. But in the Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, Nazario was prompted to distinguish between a picture of Ausangate and the mountain itself.

conceptually assimilated with the power of *tirakuna*.² While attempts are made to placate these powerful agents, as with gifts of sheep or *despachos*, both are ultimately beyond control. When such parallels between the supplication of human and nonhuman masters are acknowledged, the Andean invocation of earth-beings invites a rather conventional interpretation quite familiar to students of magic, ritual, and religion (cf. Sillar 2009). Nevertheless, this in no way deflates the value of de la Cadena's close scrutiny of its personal and political dimensions. Although her posthumanist conclusions can be contested, she raises crucial questions about the role of ethnography and anthropology in a world where cultural convictions and identities cannot avoid being transformed by the self-reflexivity of neoliberal modernity.

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2. This seems to contradict the assertion that *tirakuna* are included "in-ayllu." Similarly contradictory is the indication that *hacendados* "and even many Cuzqueño landowners" share *runakuna* "beliefs in Ausangate" (2015: 111–12).