Pamela Erickson’s article on bride capture among the Waorani offers insight into gendered differences in responses to violence. She shows how, rather than seeking revenge, the best option for women who survived a raid is to get protection from the men that raided her village. This allows their survival and reproductive success. Such a lack of retaliatory revenge is also the topic for William H. Crocker’s article on the Canela, who avoid conflict through the mediation of elders. Yet the author suggests that the expected break in cultural institutions that follows increasing contact with national-level actors and institutions will probably increase acts of revenge.

In the “Mostly Symbolic” section, Izquierdo et al. chronicle how cultural change brought by integration into national society has altered the Matsigenka longstanding understandings of illness, which was once seen to be caused by vengeful spirits and now is seen to be caused by envious, “westernized” Matsigenka. The authors interpret this as most probably an attempt to validate Matsigenka moral orders: If an attack is believed to come from a supernatural source, the response should be appeasement; if it has come from another human, attacks can be avenged through shamanistic support. In subsequent sections of “Mostly Symbolic,” Cipolleti and Oakdale’s articles offer two interesting cases where human and animals’ spirits require revenge to attain a symbolic equilibrium in order to live in social harmony, something valued in Amazonian indigenous societies. An emphasis on harmonic relationships within groups is also evident in Silva Monterrey and Valentine’s piece on the Woi ritual among the Yakwana. Here a collective ritual is performed to return evil in cases of thievery, sudden death, and acute illness. This shared effort is part of a system of justice that meets a double purpose: On one hand, it helps re-affirms identity, while on the other it helps alleviate or avoid rage revenge. In the case of the Piaroa, presented by Mansutti Rodriguez, it is the shaman responsibility to carry out defensive rituals to protect the community against evil thought to be caused by envious neighbors. This is true even when these rituals will bring further revenge.

The case presented by Daniela Peluso on onomastic vengeance among the Ese Eja provides a fascinating account of what may be the most symbolic of all revenges, namely using names as devices for expressing and addressing social conflict. Here women are the main players, naming their newborns with humorous and humiliating names related to circumstances at the time of their birth even as the whole community understands these names as directed toward a person involved in a particular conflict. In this way, a woman may confront without direct aggression, and without seeming angry.

This volume should be appreciated by scholars interested not only in lowland South America, but also in legal anthropology, feminist anthropology and evolutionary studies. It includes much valuable, contextualizing theoretical insight even as it is grounded in rich ethnographic experience. Most of all, the compilation stresses the many ways revenge exists not in a vacuum, but takes complex form as a part of existing social institutions and cultural responses.


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In the chapter that precedes the conclusion of In from the Cold, Carlota McAllister describes a 1979 protest in Guatemala by “women wielding large sticks and torches.” The women, in the village of Chupol, successfully prevented the Guatemalan army’s forced conscription of young Mayan men. McAllister asks, “Is this event part of the Cold War?” (355). This is a good question and it helps bring into focus the concerns of the volume reviewed here.
The system of international relations that existed during the Cold War is conventionally characterized in terms of the “bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union” (Mearsheimer 2003, 268). Although not false, this bipolar and macropolitical characterization fails to do justice to the events in Chupol or to the complex causes and consequences of the Cold War in Latin America that are so richly analyzed in this book edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser. In the book’s superb and readable introduction, Joseph writes that he wants “to take discussion of the Latin American Cold War … beyond—or better beneath—the great diplomatic debates that have particularly stunted the region’s Cold War historiography” (16). The volume succeeds and, without overlooking the geopolitics of bipolar confrontation or the brutality of U.S. power in Latin America during the Cold War, opens new vantage points on the multipolar and everyday politics of Latin America’s Cold War.

Part I introduces the book’s principal themes and sources. After Joseph’s synoptic introduction, Thomas S. Blanton describes the new level of access to Cold War archives that makes the book’s comparative project possible. Although his essay touches on the enormous violence, repression, and suffering of Latin America’s Cold War, Blanton ends with optimism about turning “the surveillance state upon itself, using the secret police files to deconstruct the methods and means of repression” (68).

Focusing on the transnational projection of Latin American power during the Cold War, Part II goes the farthest in undermining a principally bipolar view. It may come as a surprise to readers that the country to send the second largest number of troops “beyond its immediate neighborhood” during the conflict (after, of course, the United States) was not the mammoth Soviet Union, nor even its mammoth sometime ally, sometime competitor, China, but diminutive, sugar producing, Cuba (112). Piero Gleijeses examines Cuba’s extensive military involvement in Africa from 1959 to 1976, often pursued in defiance of the Soviet Union (124). Daniela Spenser’s contribution concentrates on the consequences of the global crisis provoked by the 1962 discovery and removal of nuclear weapons in Cuba. She shows that after the crisis, Cuba developed a level of autonomy and influence on Soviet policy in Latin America that has seldom been recognized. Ariel Armony illuminates the autonomy and transnational military projection of the Latin American right during the Cold War. He shows how Argentina (and also the Argentine regime’s sometime collaborators in Operation Condor: Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, and later Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru) “engaged in interventionist practices across Latin America and other continents, pursuing their own policy interests even when they did not coincide with those of the United States” (157), particularly in Central America.

The essays in Part III continue to chip away at commonplace perspectives on Cold War studies, not, as in Part II, through analyses of the war’s multipolarity, but through analyses of its relationship to quotidian politics. Victoria Langland analyses how the political activism of young women against Brazil’s Cold War military regime was often represented by the military and the media as “stemming from, and resulting in, deviant sexuality” (344). Addressing the connections between mass media representation and the materiality of repression, Langland suggests that “the reel is real” (310). The phrase is Seth Fein’s, who, in this volume, investigates Mexican politics and U.S.–Mexico relations through the history of the 1956–61 secret U.S. intervention into the production of Mexican newsreels. The project implementation suffered from numerous contradictions, particularly, that: “Mexicanized production—which conformed to state regulation, audience expectations, and business practices—could
not produce what Washington considered effective propaganda” (179).

Focusing on the ransacking of the Instituto Cultural México-Norteamericano in Michoacán by local students during the Bay of Pigs invasion, Eric Zolov shows how the attack and its repercussions had as much to do with the tensions between a resurgent Cardenismo and the Mexican State in the wake of the Cuban Revolution as it did with tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. In his analysis of labor protest at Ford, GM, and Chrysler plants in Mexico during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Steven J. Bachelor demonstrates how both U.S. power and Mexican authoritarianism were challenged by a labor movement that took its cues, not from Soviet Communism, but from the American auto industry’s “promise of [an] American dream” (255) that stood in brutal contradiction to a “labor regime built on repression and human rights violations” (267).

Focusing on the same period, Stephen Pitti’s essay highlights how the political mobilization of Chicano agricultural workers shaped the politics of labor and Latino life in the United States in ways that far outlived the Cold War itself. Together, the essays in Part III (including McAllister’s, with which I began this review) show how conceptions of the Cold War that are merely bipolar and macropolitical obscure much that was most significant about the war’s local manifestations and implications. But the conflict was partly one between two massive powers and between two world-changing ideologies. Spenser’s conclusion surveys the wide-ranging material presented in the volume and refocuses our attention on macropolitics. She offers the metaphor of an “international civil war” (382), which evokes the bloody complexity of the conflict much better than the familiar and aseptic metaphors, “bipolar” and “Cold.”

So, to return to McAllister’s important question after reading this edited collection: yes, the protest in Chupol was part of the Cold War, but the Cold War (in Latin America and elsewhere) was a great deal hotter and a great deal more complex than the literature has generally allowed. Those wishing to understand how the politics of the Cold War were shaped in part in Latin America as they transformed people’s lives there are advised to pay close attention to this fine volume.

Reference Cited

Mearsheimer, John J.


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A notable characteristic of this edited volume, especially in the introduction and chapters one through four, is that the analysis is framed around the context of recognizing, accepting, and defining the reality and existence of the socialist government and system in Cuba. This includes a focus on its difficulties, achievements, and changes. This book thus differs from a more common approach which considers civil society as oppositional and thus generative of a “transition” based on an implied need to change government and the socialist system.

The Introduction focuses on the historical causes for the growing importance of civil society, and the actual and potential contributions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to the development of socialism. The authors refer to the economic crisis foisted on Cuba starting in the 1990s as a result of the disappearance of socialist states in Europe and the Soviet Union:

The effects on civil society of the Cuban state’s necessary adaptation to the effects