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Marc Becker. *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6959-2 (cloth, \$104.95), 978-0-8223-6908-0 (paperback, \$27.95).

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For historians writing about the intervention of the United States in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is never far from the scene.¹ In *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files*, Marc Becker, a historian of Indian and peasant movements in Latin America, takes a different approach, focusing instead on another three-lettered federal agency—the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Yet Becker offers something more than simply another layer to the well-known story of U.S. covert action. Becker creatively uses FBI surveillance records to peer into the otherwise opaque history of leftist movements in Ecuador. By employing what he calls a “counter-hegemonic” use of intelligence reports, Becker helps us to rethink the contours of U.S. imperialism in the region, while also providing historical insight into how past movements for social justice can inform similar efforts today (255).

Although it is usually seen as solely a domestic law-enforcement agency, the FBI launched the Special Intelligence Service (SIS) in 1940 to conduct foreign intelligence-gathering in the Western Hemisphere. Throughout the program, which ended in 1947, the FBI stationed around 700 agents in Latin America and the Caribbean, with 45 sent to Ecuador alone. The agents worked variously as local police trainers, undercover operatives for U.S. corporations, or most often, as legal attachés in U.S. embassies. The initial justification for the program was to combat the infiltration of Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and imperial Japan in the region. In this role, agents reported on the political, economic, and social aspects of different countries that were seen as detrimental to U.S. security interests. But as Becker shows, the program’s mission shifted soon after it began. The Axis powers ultimately made little headway in the hemisphere, and combined with FBI director J. Edgar Hoover’s rabid anticommunism, SIS agents spent the bulk of their time surveilling leftist political parties, labor organizations, and peasant movements.

Even with a singular focus on leftist organizations, the program suffered from several shortcomings. The FBI had little experience in the region and, therefore, could offer its agents only limited advice and training. Moreover, the bureau selected mostly young, unmarried men for the program, depriving SIS of the organizational and technical expertise held by more seasoned operatives. Perhaps most notably, many agents had no real knowledge of the countries where they were stationed and often lacked critical language skills. Becker describes how only a week after applying to the SIS program, agent Ronald Sundberg was asked if he would go to El Salvador, to which Sundberg replied, “Fine—where is it?” (18). Another agent, William Bradley, received Spanish lessons before he was sent to South America, though he was ultimately sent to Brazil.

This lack of training and expertise, combined with the agents’ reliance on paid informants, no doubt colors the information contained in the SIS reports. To his credit, Becker is clear-eyed about these limitations. But as he argues, it would be a mistake to ignore these sources altogether. According to Becker, many of the historical materials needed to study Ecuadorian

¹ For a recent survey, see Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

social movements are either inaccessible or non-existent. And because SIS agents focused less on infiltrating movements than on gathering information and recording personal observations, their reports include a wealth of historical detail that is unavailable elsewhere. As such, the records of the SIS program, when used carefully, provide historians with an invaluable documentary record. Becker also relies on U.S. State Department records, Latin American government reports, social movement sources, and newspaper articles.

Becker's distinct approach to studying the history of leftist movements in Ecuador yields some striking insights. For example, he reveals that although early reports exaggerated the threat of Communist influence in Ecuador, SIS agents also acknowledged that the *Partido Comunista del Ecuador* (Ecuadorian Communist Party, or PCE) remained relatively weak. More surprising, SIS reports also detailed how the PCE leadership adopted moderate and cautious positions designed to win broad public appeal. During the 1940s, the party emphasized its anti-fascist positions, criticized more radical tendencies among leftists as socially disruptive, and denounced Ecuador's government for resolving a border dispute with Peru in order to burnish the party's nationalist image. The SIS program's continual surveillance of leftist movements also illuminates the local dynamics that drove labor organizing in Ecuador during this period. While the United States opposed Communist-led labor movements, the failed attempt to form a national worker's federation in Ecuador owed more to the combined efforts of the government, the oligarchy, and the Catholic Church than to outside influence. Although President Carlos Alberto Arroyo del Río and conservative labor leaders initially supported the convening of a worker's congress in March 1943, they eventually sabotaged the meeting, frustrating the attempt to unify Ecuador's diverse working class. Becker demonstrates that despite the influence of Mexican labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano and his Colombian counterpart Guillermo Rodríguez on local efforts, it was domestic opposition that ultimately doomed the meeting.

Along with his creative use of sources, Becker's detailed reconstruction of leftist organizing in Ecuador in the 1940s and its relationship to a larger regional pattern of social transformation is perhaps the most valuable contribution of the book.² Despite the failed worker's congress in March 1943, leftist organizing continued apace, eventually producing the 1944 Glorious May Revolution (*La Gloriosa*). After a military attack against a police barracks in the coastal city of Guayaquil, a popular uprising spread across major highland areas until it reached the capital in Quito. Facing widespread protest, Arroyo del Río was forced to resign. Soon after, the populist leader José María Velasco Ibarra returned from exile to assume the presidency. In July 1944, an organized electorate of workers, peasants, and Indigenous peoples delivered a left-wing majority to the Constituent Assembly, which drafted Ecuador's most progressive constitution. Grassroots movements also seized on this moment to successfully organize a labor confederation. These events not only represented a high point for the Ecuadorian left, they also coincided with other popular mobilizations, labor militancy, and the election of democratic governments elsewhere in the hemisphere.

As Becker argues at the outset, the SIS reports on this period can offer useful perspective for social movements today. Although it did not lead the uprising, the PCE sought to capitalize on the social upheaval of the Glorious May Revolution. Much of the party's energy was directed at participating in the Constituent Assembly, collaborating with Velasco Ibarra, and electoral organizing. This proved to be a fateful decision, as the party's momentum soon dissipated, the political coalitions that produced the May Revolution eventually fractured, and the collaboration with Velasco Ibarra rapidly broke down. Seeking to present itself as a moderate force in the country, the PCE chose to work with the new government for gradual reform, which left them without a strong presence outside of government. When the "populist caudillo" Velasco Ibarra moved against the leftist elements in his government, the PCE again found itself in a weakened position (159). Becker uses the SIS reports to illuminate the intense debate within the PCE over how to respond to Velasco Ibarra's authoritarian turn and explores the pitfalls that popular movements face when they abandon the streets for the halls of government. Given the current debates over electoral strategy among a resurgent left in the United States, this historical context is especially timely.

While Becker maintains that the book is not intended as a history of U.S. policy, he nevertheless uses the SIS reports to examine the nature of U.S. intervention in Ecuador and the hemisphere more generally. In discussing the program, Becker

² For a key study of this period, see Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough, *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944–1948* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

highlights the larger context of the Good Neighbor Policy, which is usually associated with U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.³ A key component of the policy was the U.S. commitment not to interfere in the affairs of its southern neighbors, as exemplified by the removal of military personnel from Haiti and Nicaragua. Yet as Becker points out, the presence of hundreds of FBI agents across the hemisphere in the 1940s made a mockery of the principle of nonintervention. Moreover, given the pervasive political surveillance, the SIS program undermines the notion that the period of the Good Neighbor Policy might serve as a positive model for U.S. relations with Latin America today.⁴

The SIS reports, Becker contends, also reveal some of the bureaucratic differences in the U.S. approach to Latin America and the Caribbean during this period. While the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover focused its efforts abroad at surveilling Communists, members of the State Department were willing to accommodate leftist movements in the shared struggle against fascism. Of greater concern was labor organizing efforts that might pose a threat to U.S. business interests. While Communist paranoia may have shaped the SIS program, Becker contends that the wider U.S. policy toward the hemisphere was centered on preserving access to raw materials and markets for finished goods. In this sense, political parties and ideological opposition ultimately proved less important to U.S. officials. While these latter points are generally convincing, the analytical distinction between a focus on surveilling Communists and a concern with threats to U.S. business interests is not always clear. Moreover, the relationship between the relatively limited SIS program and longer patterns of U.S. imperialism in the hemisphere might have benefitted from greater development. As Becker himself maintains, the intelligence gathering of the SIS agents was ultimately less damaging to the Ecuadorian left than “the tools of explicit imperial intervention” that were more characteristic of the Cold War period (247).

Well organized and written in clear, accessible prose, Becker's *The FBI in Latin America* has much to offer scholars of U.S. empire, Latin American social movements, and policing and surveillance. By offering a counter-hegemonic reading of FBI intelligence reports, Becker reconstructs the local dynamics of left movements in Ecuador, and places them in a wider regional and international context. He also deepens our understanding of U.S. imperialism in Latin America and the Caribbean by offering a pre-history of U.S. covert action in the region, a form of intervention that would only expand during the Cold War period. In the process, Becker provides historians and other scholars with a useful model for how to creatively use law enforcement records to gain new insights about the past. Despite the counterrevolutionary origin of these records, Becker uses them to provide important historical context for debates that still shape leftist movements today.

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³ Some scholars argue that the Good Neighbor Policy developed prior to Roosevelt's election. See, among others, Alexander DeConde, *Herbert Hoover's Latin American Policy* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1951); and Alan McPherson, “Herbert Hoover, Occupation Withdrawal, and the Good Neighbor Policy,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 44:4 (December 2014): 623-639, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12153>.

⁴ Becker echoes revisionist scholars who are critical of the Good Neighbor Policy. See, among others, Lloyd C. Gardner, *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); David Green, *The Containment of Latin America: A History of the Myths and Realities of the Good Neighbor Policy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971); Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983). For more recent studies that also highlight tensions in the Good Neighbor Policy, see Eric Paul Roorda, *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).