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Ethnic Identities in Latin America

My name is Philippe Bourgois and I am currently a professor of anthropology at the University of California San Francisco. I have an extensive educational background, including various degrees in anthropology and other social sciences. Aside from teaching, I have conducted field research on a number of anthropological topics. I began my major field research projects surrounding the Miskitu communities of northern Nicaragua while still in graduate school. From 1979-80 I researched for the Center for Investigation and Studies of the Agrarian Reform and the National Literacy Campaign of Nicaragua. In the summers of 1983-85 and the winter of 1986, I researched the banana plantations in Costa Rica. Overall during my time spent in Central America, I worked in Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Belize. The multiple articles I have published during and since my Central American research surround issues of the political mobilization of ethnicity, immigration and labor relations, political violence, popular resistance, and the social dislocation of street children. Since graduating, I have become more interested in urban anthropology. Working full- and part-time in the late 1980s, I conducted extensive research on homelessness, substance abuse, and its effect in urban society in the United States. My urban fieldwork has been conducted primarily in East Harlem and San Francisco in the United States. I've published articles confronting inner-city social suffering and critiques of the political economy and cultural contours of U.S. apartheid. Most recently, I have been addressing gender-power relations, and the intersections between structural and intimate violence. A full explanation of my current project is described on the faculty site for the University of California, San Francisco, stating that Dr. Bourgois is currently conducting participant-observation fieldwork in the shooting encampments of homeless heroin injectors for an HIV-prevention study that is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse: "The Logics of HIV Risk Among Homeless Heroin Injectors." The project examines the ways unsafe syringe and ancillary paraphernalia sharing practices emerge out of the pragmatics of material and emotional survival strategies on the street. The goal is to demonstrate how macro-structural power relationships affect individual behavior. I am also analyzing experiences of war and political repression in Central America. To do so, I have been interviewing former Salvadoran guerrilla fighters who have now immigrated as day-laborers to San Francisco. Finally, I am conducting follow-up interviews with the families of the Puerto Rican crack dealers I wrote about in my book: *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge, 1995). I feel that with my background of anthropology and the time I have devoted to the study of the Miskitu communities in Nicaragua, my opinion on the subject should be one recognized as educated and reliable.

Although I have not been recently working as extensively on this topic, I have published a number of articles and presented the issues of the debate to scholarly institutions on a number of occasions. It has been my field research conducted in Nicaragua in the midst of the conflict that makes my position most qualified. As a U.S. citizen, but still someone who has witnessed the daily life and struggles of the different people at the center of the struggle, I attempt at a completely unbiased opinion. "The case of the Miskitu reveals a complicated history of internal contradictions intricately entwined with world power struggles" (Bourgois, "Politicized Ethnicity"). This situation becomes rather simple when one can stand back and look at it from a perspective that includes it as just a small part of a larger worldview of class, race, and ethnicity. "An analysis of the Miskitu armed opposition renders more evident the need for anthropologists to refine their theories of ethnicity and its complicated relationship to class confrontations" ("Politicized Ethnicity"). I see that implications of this debate extend beyond the Indigenous people immediately involved and those they have struggled against. It can be seen as an example of the power struggles of multiple other Indigenous groups worldwide. Usually, they are fighting against more than merely the government of the country in which their land might be found. They fight against the growing industrial economy, multinational corporations, and their governments (usually the government of the United States). In this instance, the struggle for power can be found on two separate planes: "1) the pan-Amerindian movement for indigenous rights; and 2) the United States government's determination to maintain its political and economic control in Latin America" ("Politicized Ethnicity"). What makes this autonomy debate so interesting is the involvement of the United States. "If Fagoth and the MISURASATA leaders had not been provided with sophisticated military hardware, intensive military training, and millions of dollars of spending money, they could not have engaged in protracted armed struggle" (Bourgois, "Ethnic Minorities"). What were the United States' interests here really? Indigenous people

might be fighting for rights of autonomy, to live by their own laws and represent themselves in government, and to maintain their own way of life without intervention. But at the same time, international organizations step in to help for more than purely humanitarian reasons. I am not attempting to give the impression that I am not concerned with the welfare of the Miskitu, but in retrospect, there are larger issues that this situation can help us examine. "In the particular case of Nicaragua, the real fear of the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. State Department, therefore, was not that the Sandinistas might mistreat their ethnic minorities, but rather the reverse. The Sandinista attempt to dismantle, in a democratic – although sometimes clumsy and insensitive – fashion, the historical patterns of interethnic domination and class exploitation on the Atlantic Coast threatened to set a 'subversive' precedent for other multiethnic nations. Therefore, by promoting armed struggle and prolonging an agonized blood bath, the United States hoped to prevent or perhaps at least to retard, the emergence of that liberating example" ("Ethnic Minorities").

### Bibliography

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