

Introducing

Christopher Carter

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Christopher is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics, and John L. Nau III Assistant Professor of the History and Principles of Democracy at the University of Virginia. He is also a Research Associate at the Center on the Politics of Development at the University of California, Berkeley. In this interview, we spoke to Christopher about his research on Indigenous-state relations, what made him want to work in Latin America, and one of his most cherished fieldwork experiences from rural Cusco.



Could you tell us a bit about your research on Indigenous-state relations? Why are historical experiences with extraction pivotal in shaping the outcomes you examine?

My research explores the enduring effects of extraction on the demands Indigenous communities make and the rights they achieve. In the existing literature, there exists a common assumption that Indigenous communities want autonomy. Yet, the degree to which this is true—and what autonomy demands mean across Indigenous communities—varies substantially. With my book and connected research papers, I highlight this variation, showing that some communities want protections for their longstanding institutions and cultures. These include the recognition of traditional Indigenous authorities, communal landholding arrangements, and Indigenous languages. Yet, others want only some or none of these recognized. To understand why, I argue it is essential to understand the longstanding, often fraught, relationships between Indigenous groups and the state.

Historically, extraction lies at the heart of Indigenous-state relations. During the colonial period, Indigenous peoples were solely responsible for paying a head tax (the Indian tribute) that funded much of Spain's coloni-

zation efforts in places like Peru and Mexico. The Crown also took the most fertile Indigenous land and forced Indigenous workers to provide unpaid labor in mines through the notorious mining mita. This extraction did not stop when independence was achieved in the early nineteenth century. Many newly independent nation-states preserved various forms of extraction, including an Indigenous head tax, unpaid labor mobilization, and the seizure of Indigenous land.

My research focuses on an often understudied but deeply transformative period of labor extraction, which occurred at the turn of the twentieth century. During this period, Indigenous peoples were conscripted to build roads and railways for states that sought to expand their presence in peripheral areas. At the same time, this period was one of increased debt peonage, in which large estate owners expanded their territorial holdings at an unprecedented pace—the goal of which was not to gain land per se but rather to capture the Indigenous labor that depended on that land for survival.

My research argues that different patterns of extraction affected communities in distinct ways. Labor extraction by states generated investments in ethnic institutions, ultimately generating demands for autonomy (the preservation of Indigenous identities and institutions).

Labor extraction by rural elites sparked investments in class-based institutions that generally downplayed ethnic identities and institutions, instead promoting demands for assimilation. Finally, some communities experienced both forms of extraction, leading to a hybrid demand for integration (the preservation of Indigenous identities but not institutions).

Could you tell us how you came to work on this topic? Why did you choose to work in Peru?

I have been interested in Indigenous-state relations in Latin America since I lived and worked in an Ecuadorian Indigenous community after my first year of college. It was my first trip out of the country, and it was an utterly transformative experience. I left with so many questions about Indigenous-state relations that I continued to explore in coursework and independent research throughout my undergraduate degree. I then pursued a Master's degree and wrote my thesis on Indigenous attitudes toward democracy in Ecuador.

When I started my PhD, I knew I wanted to continue working on issues related to Indigenous communities, but the path to my current research agenda was certainly not linear. My dissertation proposal sought to explain variations in the preservation of Indigenous collective labor institutions, through which community members voluntarily perform short- and longer-term service to their community (e.g., building a school for the community or serving in a year-long position as a festival organizer). However, after starting my fieldwork and speaking with Indigenous community members and leaders, I noticed a much broader variation pattern extending beyond communal labor institutions. Some Indigenous communities were extremely eager to preserve all Indigenous institutions and cultures and obtain state recognition and protection. Others were less interested in preserving Indigenous institutions but keen to protect longstanding cultural identities. Still others assigned little value to the preservation of either and expressed fear that the maintenance of Indigenous institutions and cultures invited discrimination. In my book, I label these outcomes autonomy, integration, and assimilation, respectively. Understanding this variation has become the central part of my research agenda.

In terms of my interest in Peru, that path was also non-linear. I had worked on Ecuador quite a bit, and I wanted to explore another case. I visited Peru after my first year of the PhD program and traveled to an area called the Callejón de Huaylas, where I learned about the complexity of peasant and Indigenous identities. After returning from that trip, I began to read more about Peru; many scholars note that Peruvian Indigenous mobilization is limited because of the absence of a strong national-level Indigenous movement. Yet, I had seen clear expressions of Indigenous mobilization

in parties and politics during my time in Huaylas. I knew that I wanted to demonstrate not only that this community-level mobilization existed but also to explain 1) why it is not present everywhere and 2) why it does not aggregate up to a national-level movement. This last question is one reason I ultimately conducted extensive fieldwork in Bolivia as well, as it is a case with both local- and national-level Indigenous mobilization.



Communal labor event in Indigenous community: Cusco, Peru
Photo Credit: Christopher Carter

Do you have a memorable experience from your fieldwork or research trips that has left a lasting impact on you?

It is so hard to pick just one. One of my most cherished experiences was a meeting with a mayor I had in rural Cusco. The mayor was extremely humble and advanced in age. He could not read or write, but unlike most mayors I met, he was deeply familiar with the people he served. We did a tour of the district in his pickup truck, visiting several Indigenous communities in the hills surrounding the town. As he got down from the truck, everyone rushed to be near him, shaking his hand and speaking to him in Quechua. I spoke to one community member during these visits while the president was inspecting a new irrigation project, and he told me that the mayor was from an Indigenous community himself and thus understood the issues they faced. As we drove back to the town, I asked the mayor if everyone loved him, as it appeared. He replied, "I know the empresa [business] hates me. They're not used to someone who isn't in their pocket." This was a welcome change: most of the stories I had heard during my fieldwork were of incompetent mayors, corruption, and communities being largely excluded from local politics. This example gave me hope that politics in Peru—and beyond—can work for Indigenous peoples.

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