

The Rise of Ethnic Politics: Indigenous movements in the Andean region

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ABSTRACT *Laura Fano Morrissey traces the rise of indigenous movements in four Andean countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. By analysing how these movements have formed, she discusses issues of identity and belonging and the role these concepts have played in making indigenous groups a growing force in the continent. She also provides an account of the new constitutions adopted in Bolivia and Ecuador and the innovative traits they have introduced in the political discourse on ethnicity and identity.*

KEYWORDS *buen vivir; identity; neo-liberalism; constitutions; World Social Forum 2009*

'Those who see the world through the eyes of the powerful should be warned. People are rising from the tyranny and oblivion to which we in the West have consigned them'. John Pilger, *The War on Democracy*

Introduction

The emergence of a significant indigenous movement in Latin America can be traced back to 1992, the anniversary of the 'discovery' of the Americas.¹ The reaction by indigenous movements against what was in essence an invasion and a conquest stimulated a rethinking of the continent's history and a new attention to its native peoples.

From that date onwards, indigenous groups have mobilized in different ways and with different results in many Latin American countries. In this paper, I focus on the movements that have formed in the Andean region, in particular in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, which represent the strongest form of indigenous mobilization and one that is posing a serious alternative to the dominant economic model. They represent a protest against mainstream development by contesting its inability to include human, social, cultural, gender and ecological needs.

In some of these countries, indigenous movements have become strong enough to lead to the election of an indigenous president or have a prominent role in national politics. In others, they are still an opposition to neo-liberal governments, yet an opposition that is managing to influence those governments' decisions.

The rise of the indigenous movement

As I write this paper, the indigenous movement in Peru has obtained an historic victory over the government of Alan García. After days of protest, that left at least 34 people killed and dozens disappeared,² Laws 1090 and 1064, which allowed for mining, oil, logging and agribusiness companies to operate on indigenous communal lands in the Amazon, were repealed, and Prime Minister Yehude Simon announced his resignation. These happenings are all the more significant as Peru is the Andean country where historically the indigenous movement has been weakest. They are a sign that there is a growing movement in the Andean region, which emerged as a result of decades of neo-liberal policies and in particular of the Free Trade Agreements with the US.

The strength acquired by the indigenous movement in Latin America became even more evident during the World Social Forum 2009. This was held in Belém, a Brazilian city at the heart of the Amazon, to signify the strong link between criticism of the global financial order and the threat posed by this system to the environment. The indigenous movement was at the forefront of the gathering and assumed a prominent role. The Declaration of Indigenous Peoples that was issued at the end of the WSF calls for a global restructuring of the whole capitalistic, Eurocentric and Uni-National state system and for unity between Mother Earth, society and culture. The link between the shortcomings of the global financial order and climate change is felt particularly by indigenous communities who, not only rely on nature for their livelihoods, but also have a strong cultural link to the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth).

Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru: Different trajectories, same destination?

But what are the origins of this movement that is emerging more and more as an alternative to our dominant way of life? The reaction to the offensive of capital and the encroachment of transnationals into ancestral territories has certainly played a big role. Indigenous movements in Bolivia and

Ecuador started developing in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the neo-liberal policies adopted by their respective governments. The indigenous movement of Ecuador is certainly the most advanced. With the founding of the CONAIE in 1986 and the political party *Pachacutik-Nuevo País* in 1996, and the organization of a series of popular uprisings, it managed to position itself on the political stage, making its demands more and more heard and contributing to the resignation of the President Jamil Mahuad in 2000. Although in Bolivia the movement has always been more fragmented and the struggle against neo-liberal measures has been articulated more along class lines, nonetheless indigenous people, who represent 70 percent of the population, managed to mobilize themselves and have a strong impact on the country's political system. In 2005, Bolivia was the first Latin American country to elect an indigenous president, Evo Morales.³

In Peru, even if the census estimates suggest that indigenous people make up about 45 percent of the entire population, the Quechua and Aymara people from the highlands have not been able to mobilize. However, the indigenous living in the Amazon mobilized around the *Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana* and the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Amazónicas del Perú*, under the increased presence of mining and oil companies on their lands. The lack of strength of the Peruvian indigenous people can in part be explained by the *indigenista* policies adopted by the State, which aimed at the 'elimination' of the Indian, deemed backward and illiterate, and his assimilation into an urban and educated society. The rejection of the term *indio* by indigenous people has led to the common belief that indigenous people in Peru do not exist anymore (de la Cadena, 2001). The most illustrious example of *cholo*, the indigenous who gets educated and assimilated into urban society, thus ceasing to be an Indian, was Alejandro Toledo, president of Peru from 2001 to 2006. During his presidency, Toledo, and even more so his American anthropologist wife, built up an indigenous narrative that aimed at celebrating the glorious past of the Incas and the cultural heritage of the natives.

However, this somewhat artificial effort to rebuild an indigenous identity by co-opting unorganized groups, did not work in the face of internal divisions of indigenous movements and a lack of spontaneous activity.

Under the successes of the movement in neighbouring countries, ties with continental networks and the strict neo-liberal policies adopted by the government of Alan García, Peruvian indigenous groups are now emerging as a new force, capable of stopping invasive development projects and of defending their own rights. The same is happening in Colombia, where, although according to official estimates indigenous people only represent 2 percent of the population, they are seriously questioning the neo-liberal project of the Uribe government and have managed to successfully oppose some of the most damaging policies of the state. In October 2008, 30 000 indigenous people staged a huge protest, the *Minga* (a Quechua term for collective work for the common good) of Indigenous and Popular Resistance. For weeks and weeks, they marched from La María, in the Cauca region to the city of Cali, blocking main arteries and demanding that President Uribe listen to their demands. As in the case of Peru, the mobilization of indigenous people in Colombia stems from the government's policies, which have implied the use of communal land for extractive projects, the pollution of the environment where indigenous people live, and the commodification of goods such as water and biodiversity. This is all the more worrying as the government constantly fails to comply with its duty to consult indigenous communities over development or infrastructure plans on their lands, as mandated by ILO Convention 169 and the UN Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous People adopted in 2007. Apart from being the staunchest allies of the USA in the region and being in the final stages of adopting a Free Trade Agreement with that country, Peru and Colombia also bear similarities as they tend to criminalize indigenous protesters and treat them as subversives and terrorists. This characterization has become much easier in the framework of the 'War on Terror' in the aftermath of September 11.

Indigenous identity today: Back to the past or a new articulation of belonging?

It is interesting to note that indigenous people all over Latin America have developed a language that has enabled them to interact and negotiate with their respective governments. They have adopted a modern political language, without abandoning what de la Cadena (2008) calls *las sombras* (the shadows). These represent the ritual and the mystical elements that characterize their daily lives, a realm that, in western societies, has long disappeared from the domain of politics. This also brings us to the more general question of what indigenous identity means today. Indigenous people are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the American continent; however, they have been profoundly shaped by centuries of colonization and by more modern processes of globalization. As much as they oppose globalization as a homogenizing process, today's indigenous movements are also the result of this process, with its weakening of the nation-state and the strengthening of decentralization processes, let alone its means of information sharing (Pajuelo Teves, 2007).

Identity is something in constant evolution, and global processes contribute to reinvent it and shape it. Indigenous people represent the best example of a process of re-appropriation and reinvention of ideas of community, country and nation. All this has led to the emergence of an 'ethnic' politics that stresses different identities and multiculturalism, but not in opposition or outside the realm of the state. As in the words of an Ecuadorean archbishop, 'The people are not asking for the breakdown of institutions. They are only asking that these should be in the service of the great majority, so that there might be true democracy' (Lucas, 2000: 79). The recognition of a plurinational state has been at the forefront of indigenous movements demands since the 1990s and has been enshrined in recent constitutions. According to sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos

plurinationalism, as a political project, is the most important struggle for indigenous peoples in the region... it represents another conception of law

and democracy, which may take three forms: representative, participative and community democracy.⁴

***El buen vivir* and the new constitutions**

Indigenous movements have been the bearers of a different approach to both democracy and development, and have introduced innovative concepts such as the *sumac kawsay* or *el buen vivir*. This vision, which stands in opposition to our model of development as constant economic growth, often at the expense of people and the environment, has now been enshrined in state constitutions and has received much attention at the WSF 2009. Both the Bolivian constitution and the Ecuadorian constitution, approved respectively in December 2007 and September 2008, introduce concepts that are part of the indigenous *cosmovisión*⁵ and that call for respect of nature, as well as greater harmony between man and the environment. The Ecuadorian constitution in particular introduces, for the first time, the idea of nature as a subject entitled to rights, in the same way as human beings.

These constitutions are totally innovative and bring into the realm of politics *las sombras*, the mystical vision, a totally different knowledge that was denied a voice for so long. However, it remains to be seen how the governments – even the left wing governments of Bolivia and Ecuador – manage to transform these concepts into policies (Escobar, 2009). Unfortunately, these governments still uphold a vision of development based on extractive industries, energy, water intensive usage and rural development that contrast with those alternative conceptions that

are experienced on the ground by the indigenous communities in resistance.

Conclusions

The achievements of the indigenous movements in the Andean region show how different forms of knowledge and cultures are forcing us to look at the world with different eyes. They challenge the Eurocentric model of society and the economy. They force us to rethink development in a way that takes into account the perspective of those that have always been excluded from political decisions and who have suffered the consequences of a top-down approach. Their achievements also show us that, rather than just contesting the existing order, these movements have now reached a stage where they formulate concrete proposals. They do not want to reject modern institutions outright, rather they want to be part of the decision-making process. In the words of Salomon Aguanash, leader of the Peruvian indigenous protesters:

... for a long time now they have ignored and marginalised us as if we belonged to other countries... we are not opposed to development, but it cannot only be designed by the men in suits and ties in the cabinet of ministers...⁶

The diversity and richness that these movements embody is only one example of the richness and diversity that permeates our world. In the words of the Zapatistas, we should aim for 'a world which has room for many worlds'.

Notes

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- 1 For a more detailed account of the indigenous campaign against the celebrations of the discovery of the Americas in 1992 see Hale, 1994. See also Porto-Gonçalves, 2009, <http://otrosbicentenarios.blogspot.com/2009/01/abya-yala-o-descubrimiento-da-america-cw.html>.
- 2 Accurate figures on the dead and the disappeared are difficult to provide. Estimates vary from the official version of 24 police officers and five natives killed to that of the indigenous groups of 50–60 dead and 400 displaced. The protesters also said they witnessed the police throwing bodies from a helicopter in plastic bags.
- 3 Some indigenous sectors in Bolivia do not regard Evo Morales as their leader, rather a representative of the *cocaleros*, the coca growers' movement.
- 4 Upside Down World, 'Peru: Indigenous Organizations Aim for the Presidency', <http://upside-downworld.org/main/content/view/1309/76/>, accessed 23 June 2009.

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- 5 For more information on the concepts of *buen vivir* and indigenous *cosmovisión* see Acosta, 2009 and Walsh, 2009.
6 IPS, 'Q&A: "The Order Was to Kill Us"', <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=47230>, accessed 17 June 2009.

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- Q3 Pajuelo Teves, Ramon (2007) *Reinventando Comunidades Imaginadas. Movimientos Indígenas, Nación y Procesos Sociopolíticos en los Países Centroandinos*, IFEA and IEP.
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