

Indigenous Political Engagement: A Second, More Meaningful Chance at Incorporation

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The rise of indigenous peoples as important new social and political actors is a positive trend in Latin American democracies. Indigenous peoples' interests have long been excluded from national political agendas, that is, until the 1990s when indigenous peoples began to mobilize on a variety of fronts in defense of their rights. Contemporary indigenous-movement struggles represent an opportunity to address the indigenous question, in much the same way that worker organization and protest in early twentieth-century Latin America prompted ruling elites to respond to the social question (Collier and Collier 1991). Indigenous peoples were first incorporated into the polity as national peasants in the mid-twentieth century through corporatist measures that imposed a unidirectional relationship between the state and indigenous groups. In the current era, the emergence of autonomous forms of organizing and mobilizing on the part of indigenous groups has challenged existing models of citizenship, democracy, and the state in Latin America. In the cases of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009), the constitutional recognition of plurinationality can be said to represent a second phase of indigenous incorporation, with the potential to develop a bilateral or government-to-government relationship between the state and indigenous groups. The demand for plurinationality that is spreading in Latin America may be a means to transform exclusionary state structures. This will surely benefit the region's indigenous peoples as well as serve the interests of the broader society.

Indigenous peoples are a marginalized majority in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru and a significant minority in most other Latin American countries. National attempts to link this excluded segment of the population to the state have generally followed on the heels of major crises.

According to Drake and Hershberg (2006), Latin America faced two such crises in the twentieth century; both precipitated by economic disruptions that upset the existing contract between state and society. The first of the major crises occurred in the 1930s with the Great Depression, the impacts of which were felt worldwide, and the second in the 1980s owing to the international debt crisis. In both instances, economic dislocations opened the door to new models of development, growth, distribution, participation, and inclusion in the region. The 1930s crisis led to inward-looking development, redistribution, and import-substitution industrialization (ISI) as a means to decrease Latin America's economic dependency. The state-led model of development was accompanied by corporatist measures that offered a modicum of popular inclusion into national life, though according to the terms set out by the state. The 1980s crisis led to free-market reforms as part of the general shift to the neoliberal economic model. The multicultural policies that accompanied the market-led development model privileged policies of recognition over those of redistribution as a means of managing difference (Hale 2002). Although state-sponsored corporatism and multiculturalism proposed distinct models of state-society relations, both approaches sought to reshape society along the lines desired by governing elites. They also both targeted indigenous peoples as the problem in need of change.

The latest bid for indigenous incorporation was prompted by the massive tide of protest against neoliberalism that, in some cases, managed to topple successive national governments in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Silva 2009). The imposition of neoliberal-inspired policies of stabilization and adjustment has had dramatic social, political, and economic

consequences in the region. Free-market reforms have weakened many of their obvious opponents, particularly the labor movement. Empirical evidence indicates that the number of general strikes across Latin America has diminished substantially since peaking in the late 1980s. As noted by Kurtz (2004), there was a flurry of resistance on the part of organized labor at the time of initial liberalization, but once the reforms were consolidated, the mobilizing capacity of the labor movement declined remarkably. Noninstitutionalized forms of resistance, such as riots and antigovernment demonstrations, follow a trend similar to that of labor resistance up until the late 1990s. Then a gap between the two emerges, as strikes continue to decline and riots and demonstrations increase. By the end of the 1990s, a second wave of resistance against neoliberalism had emerged around new types of claims and demands and employing new repertoires of action (Rice 2012). Indigenous peoples have been at the forefront of this new wave of resistance.

In Ecuador and Bolivia, indigenous movements have artfully linked indigenous peoples' demands to issues of political and economic inclusion for the masses to produce powerful movements that draw support from a broad spectrum of society. In addition to their larger indigenous populations, the success of these countries' indigenous movements is the result of their two-pronged strategy based on opposition in the streets and in parliament. By forming their own electoral vehicles, indigenous peoples have been able to participate in formal politics on their own terms as part of a strategy of "autonomy in participation." In Ecuador, the Movement for Plurinational Unity Pachakutik–New Country (MUPP-NP) party was a major organizational force behind the winning electoral coalition in the presidential race

of 2002. Since then, however, the party has lost much of its appeal owing to a complex set of factors, including its ill-fated electoral alliance and its perceived shift to a more ethnicist stance. The left-turn administration of Rafael Correa (2007–present) has now taken up most of the political space formerly occupied by the Pachakutik party. In Bolivia, the indigenous-based Movement toward Socialism (MAS) party led by Evo Morales managed to obtain a majority vote in the presidential election of December 2005, a feat that had not been achieved by any Bolivian party since the transition to democracy in the early 1980s. President Morales has since been reelected by an even wider margin in the December 2009 elections. The emergence of indigenous parties and movements has prompted society to rethink the meaning of democracy itself and how best to govern in the context of ethnic pluralism.

Recent constitutional reforms in Ecuador and Bolivia have sought to repair the relationship between indigenous peoples and the state by formally recognizing and affirming cultural rights in society as well as the plurinational character of the state (Nolte and Schilling-Vacaflor 2012). The constitutional recognition of plurinationality marks a watershed moment in indigenous-state relations in Latin America. It represents an opportunity for governments to reconceptualize their political relationship with indigenous peoples as sovereign and self-determining peoples or nations. The goal of indigenous movements is not just to take control of state power but to transform the nature of that power. Plurinationality challenges previous governmental attempts to divide indigenous peoples, to categorize them in ways that obscure their ethnicity, to discount them from national policy debates, and to

denigrate them as obstacles to development. In other words, it means doing government differently. A plurinational state recognizes the plurality of cultural, legal, and political systems that exist within a nation-state and places them on an equal footing. It is the first step in the long process of the political empowerment of the region's indigenous populations. Without question, this historic accomplishment has been the result of the independent organizing and mobilizing efforts of indigenous movements in the two countries and their capacity to bridge protest and electoral coalitions.

The new constitutional texts of Ecuador and Bolivia incorporate indigenous rights to an extent unparalleled in the region. Yet significant challenges remain in bringing its promises to fruition. First, the process is heavily dependent on the political will of the president to support reforms to enhance the plurinational state. President Correa, in particular, has been reluctant to cede authority to indigenous groups. The concentration of executive power, in both cases, is at odds with the exercise of local power by self-governing indigenous bodies (Gargarella 2013). Second, the dismantling of inherited state structures, institutions, and practices is fraught with difficulties. The situation is more precarious in Ecuador, where the plurinational nature of its constitution is comparatively limited. For instance, whereas the Bolivian Constitution recognizes all 36 indigenous languages as official languages of the state (art. 5), indigenous languages in Ecuador are recognized only in the sphere of intercultural relations (art. 2). Finally, there are serious tensions between indigenous autonomy and the resource-dependent, state-led model of development pursued by the governments of Bolivia and Ecuador. This dynamic has produced significant clashes between governments and

indigenous communities over issues of natural resource extraction and state-sponsored development projects within indigenous territories. The experiences of Ecuador and Bolivia indicate that while the latest period of constitution making in support of indigenous rights in Latin America represents a rupture with previous models of indigenous-state relations, it has yet to transform state power.

I have suggested in this essay that the emergence of powerful indigenous rights movements in Latin America should be viewed as an opportunity to deepen the region's democracies. The political exclusion of indigenous peoples, especially in countries with substantial indigenous populations, has undoubtedly contributed to the weakness of party systems and the lack of effective representation of the popular sectors by the region's democracies. The promotion of indigenous rights and representation does not undermine democracy or the state; it may in fact strengthen them. In the context of a hostile political environment, indigenous peoples have chosen to participate in political institutions and to attempt to bring about change from within. They have done so not through assimilation but by politicizing ethnic identities. Nevertheless, the appeals of indigenous movements and parties have tended to be inclusionary rather than exclusionary. For these reasons, indigenous mobilization plays a much-needed role in broadening democratic representation and participation for the masses. Indigenous political engagement is challenging Latin America's exclusionary state structures and the failure to incorporate, represent, and respond to large segments of the population. The meaningful incorporation of indigenous peoples into democratic nation-states will require a focus on transforming the state to better serve and

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reflect the interests of society, instead of the other way around.

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Desde que Evo Morales asumió la presidencia boliviana el 22 de enero de 2006 —primero en las ruinas de Tiwanaku y al día siguiente en la ceremonia oficial en el Parlamento— Bolivia vive una serie de transformaciones que retoman una tradición profundamente inscripta en su cultura política: el antiliberalismo, sustentado en un ejercicio corporativo de la ciudadanía. Pero desde antes de este nuevo ciclo político, iniciado a partir de fuertes convulsiones sociales, esta nación andino-amazónica viene experimentando una reconfiguración de su estructura social, mediante procesos de movilidad social ascendente, especialmente transitados por sectores comerciales populares de origen indígena-mestizo. En ese marco, Bolivia vive, a su escala, un proceso de inclusión socio-simbólica mediante el consumo similar a otros países de la región, que constituye una de las fuentes de legitimidad del “nacional-populismo” vigente. En gran medida, estos procesos de desborde económico popular están asociados a redes de “globalización desde abajo”, motorizada por los vínculos crecientes con China¹.

Una faceta interesante de estos procesos es que los mismos no son lineales, y las interconexiones entre dimensiones materiales y simbólicas presentan pliegues y recovecos que no siempre resultan fáciles de descifrar en tiempo real. La llamada “emergencia indígena” combina, sin duda, tendencias a la revalorización de la autoestima étnico-cultural con contratendencias a una modernización que conlleva una matriz de consumo globalizada, inclusive en la esfera cultural. La llamada “ola coreana” es uno de sus componentes². Ahí están, por ejemplo, las populares telenovelas del país asiático y el exitoso k-pop que atrae a miles de jóvenes bolivianos de extracción popular³. En ese marco, no puede sorprendernos que los procesos de indianización y

desindianización de la sociedad sean contextualizados, inestables y a menudo contradictorios⁴.

Un ejemplo de ello es el último Censo de población de Bolivia, realizado el 21 de noviembre de 2012, cuyos resultados se conocieron este año. De manera sorprendente —y paradójica si asumimos que Bolivia está regida por un gobierno indianista— la población mayor de 15 años que se autoidentifica con un pueblo originario bajó del 62 por ciento (según el censo de 2001) al 42 por ciento actual. Aún no existen explicaciones exhaustivas de estos cambios, sino hipótesis provisionales. Hay varias entradas posibles, aunque aún son especulaciones más o menos sustentadas mientras no contemos con estudios y datos más desagregados.

Desde las aceras liberales y nacionalistas está operando una suerte de “venganza del mestizaje”: a partir de la lectura algo apresurada de que quienes no se identificaron con ningún pueblo originario se considerarían automáticamente como mestizos, se propone revertir el Estado plurinacional y retornar a la República (mestiza) de Bolivia. Desde el indianismo/katarismo opositor se especula con teorías conspirativas: como el gobierno del MAS “es antiindígena” habría buscado que la población indígena se reduzca para impulsar su proyecto “nacionalista recolonizador” (la polémica carretera por el TIPNIS sería un ejemplo de ello)⁵. Como se ve, hay opciones para todos los menús.

Otro argumento es el “aumento de la clase media” o de las autopercepciones de pertenecer a ella que surgen de algunos estudios. Varios gobiernos de la región junto al Banco Mundial están contribuyendo a alimentar el mito de la *clases mediarización* del mundo. En Brasil,