

Bolivians in Buenos Aires: Human Rights, Immigration, and Democratic Participation

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Argentina's population increased mainly through European and Arab immigration between 1850 and 1950 (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States of America, and Uruguay are also included in this group). However, over the past 60 years, people coming from neighboring countries have taken the lead. Some of them have mixed with the local population, a few have become rich, but not one has been recognized as equal by the Argentinian society, unless they have adopted the lifestyle of the Argentinian elite.¹

This is especially the case of Bolivian immigrants living in the country for the last 50 years. They often experience upward social and economic mobility, but they get no recognition. Some of those who work in horticulture in suburban areas have gained social acknowledgment in the *comunidades* (communes) where they live, but their compatriots working in the apparel industry in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA in Spanish), get no public recognition. Most of the people working in this sector are brutally exploited, and they are mostly ignored in the public sphere.² However, because discrimination limits the development of citizenship, my main concern here will be to clarify why Bolivian immigrants in the AMBA do not gain social and political acknowledgment (Brubaker 1989; Herrera Carassou 2006; Koopmans 2003; Koopmans, and Statham 2000; López Sala 2006; Massey et al. 2008; and Zapata Barrero 2001).³

In international migration research there exists a broad discussion about the conditions for the access of immigrant communities to active citizenship. Some European studies and my own research underline the role of "intercultural mediators," those persons and/or groups

who can "translate" the necessities and demands of subaltern peoples into the codes of the dominant culture with the aim of negotiating for them (Manjuk, Manolcheva and Vior 2004a, and 2004b; Vior and Bosse 2005; Vior 2006, and 2012; and Dreidemie and Vior 2011). This focalization pays special attention to the "contact zones" (Pratt 2011) between both cultures, where intercultural mediators act.

According to the latest National Population Census (2010), 345,272 Bolivians live in Argentina. However, considering those community members who have taken Argentinian citizenship, others who were not counted, and the children of Bolivian origin born in Argentina (who according to law are Argentinians), the census estimates the actual size of this community to be 1.3 million people.

Just over 55 percent of the Bolivian population in Argentina lives in the AMBA (Castillo and Gurrieri 2012, 22), but the better part of it is concentrated in a small territorial strip that originates in the neighboring district of La Matanza, in the west, which enters Buenos Aires City through the west and southwest communes and ends in the west quarters of Flores and Floresta, where Argentina's garment wholesaler trade is concentrated. The population of Bolivian origin living in the city can be thus estimated at around 150,000 (Halperin Weisburd 2012).

Hyperexploitation (including self-exploitation) and slave labor emerged in Argentina's garment industry at the end of the twentieth century under the influence of cheap Chinese imports. The closure of many production facilities caused by these imports forced the transition to "nonvertical" production methods. In 2002, after the collapse of the Argentinian economy, the peso was devalued and

spontaneous market protection arose, which allowed the reindustrialization of the country. The dominant garment enterprises, however, have retained control over design, marketing, image, patterns, and tailoring, while they outsource garment-making, ironing, and finishing to workshops and facilitators; these, in turn, subcontract to home workers or to other workshops (Adúriz 2009). Workshop owners, distributors, and wholesalers keep 80 percent of the sector's entire earnings (Lieutier 2010, 49). Given this context, the workers accept their exploitation, hoping to open their own sweatshop sometime in the future. In the City of Buenos Aires there are approximately 5,000 garment workshops, of which only 20 percent are licensed (Adúriz 2009).⁴ This production system relies on a network built by the city government, traffickers, the police, and the numerous small radio stations regularly heard in the workshops and which contribute very decisively to the isolation of the community.

In the last ten years the Bolivian community in the City of Buenos Aires has become considerably politicized. But this general political mobilization has not resulted in better community articulation or greater or more effective participation of the community in Argentinian politics (Caggiano 2014; Cantor 2013; Goldberg 2013; Modolo 2014; and Pizarro 2009). The patronage characteristics of the Argentinian political system and the limitations of the migration policy are the main causes for this shortcoming on the state's side.⁵ In addition, the irregular status of many immigrants, the rivalry between community leaders, and an "obstructive" communitarian leadership hinder the organization of the community.

The Federation of Bolivian Civic Associations in Argentina (FACBOL in

Spanish), founded in 1995, claims to represent the community as a whole, but the intertwining of its leaders with the sweatshop owners has led in recent years to harsh clashes among them over money.⁶ FACBOL is also the link between the Bolivian community and the PRO (Propuesta Republicana) party led by the conservative city mayor Mauricio Macri.⁷ FACBOL's president is Alfredo Ayala, who uses his connections in politics, business, and policy for controlling the community's representation.⁸ He and his group aim to achieve a downward adjustment of the standards and norms for the operation of industrial premises, and to prevent the workers from organizing themselves in unions.

After having studied Alfredo Ayala and his group, I modified somewhat my perception of the role that intercultural mediators play in the contact zone between host societies and immigrant communities (Dreidemie and Vior 2011). Two types of intercultural mediator can be proposed. "Enabling mediators" (individuals or a group) mostly belong to the subaltern community and include its demands for rights and interests in a coherent discourse that translates them into the language and codes of the mainstream society, aiming to negotiate their implementation. "Obstructive mediators," in contrast, are persons or groups that monopolize the relations between the host society and the immigrant minority. Presenting the immigrant group as opposed to the majority of the host country, these people block the communication channels between both sides in order to confuse their own interests with the community's and to serve some groups in the host community interested in keeping the immigrants outside.

This second type of mediation currently prevails within the Bolivian community in

the City of Buenos Aires, helping both the city elite and the community leadership to avoid political and economic competition in their respective arenas.

Theoretical and empirical studies of the political participation of immigrant communities distinguish three types of political mobilization and/or participation (Koopmans 2003; Koopmans and Statham 2000):

1. Through individual ascent and assimilation to the patterns of the host country's political culture. This path is only open for middle classes, and it does not benefit the community as a whole.
2. Through communitarian mobilization for concrete demands. This type of mobilization is only possible in political systems with strong cultural cleavages.
3. Through the introduction of the cleavages of the home country in the host nation. This type of mobilization and participation responds mostly to regime crises in the home countries, but this type of political participation loses importance as soon as democracy is stabilized back home. Thereafter, the remaining immigrant communities often tend to adopt ghetto representations and conduct.

There are no intercultural political systems in Europe or North America, but some successful local experiences suggest that it is possible to move beyond the limits of the nation-state. If regional integration processes convert nation-states into pluricentric confederations based on the human right to free movement, immigrants will no longer need to assimilate themselves to national values, norms, and symbols in order to become recognized citizens. This

can then open the way to an emerging intercultural citizenship.

Notes

¹ "Recognition" was first introduced in the social sciences by Charles Taylor (Taylor and Gutmann 1994) as a key category for the study of intercultural relations in pluricultural societies.

² Due to the precarious working conditions in some sweatshops in the garment industry, there are often accidents. Most remain unnoticed by the media, but some particularly serious incidents attract public interest, like the 2006 fire in Luis Viale Street in the City of Buenos Aires, where eight people died, and, more recently (April 27, 2015) in Páez Street, where two children lost their lives in a basement fire. The way in which the media cover such events, however, is extremely sensationalist, treating the workers in the garment industry exclusively as "victims" and not as real people who have needs and demands and who are involved in the complex social and cultural framework of the immigrant enclave.

³ "Citizenship" here refers to the economic, social, and political conditions that influence the ability of immigrants to participate in politics and government, as well as the ideological and psychological dispositions of immigrant people that determine their capacity to organize themselves and to put their demands before the state.

⁴ José Zambrano Torrico, president of the recently founded Confederation of Small and Mid-size Bolivian Enterprises in Argentina (Conamype Bol-Ar), in an interview with *El Visor Boliviano* (August first fortnight, 2014, 11), estimated that in Argentina there are 100,000 Bolivian workshops in the garment industry, and that almost 3.7 million people are directly or indirectly employed in the sector. As he did not show the data sources he used for his statement, it seems greatly exaggerated.

⁵ In 2004, at the very beginning of Néstor Kirchner's presidential term, the new Migration Law 25.871-04 was enacted. Article 4 of this law recognizes the human right to migrate. Since then, Argentinian migration policy has considerably simplified the entrance and settlement of migrants (mainly South American) in Argentina, but the authorities have done very little to organize the coexistence of the immigrant communities with mainstream Argentinian society.

⁶ I confirmed this scenario through interviews with members of the Alameda Foundation, a deputy inspector of the Trafficking Squad of the Argentinian Federal Police, and H. Zunini, technical advisor at the Centro Demostrativo de la Indumentaria (CDI, Experimental Center for Clothing), in June 2013; and a long conversation in March 2015 with Juan Carlos Estrada Vásquez (a Bolivian immigrant who worked years ago in illegal workshops, and who now edits the biweekly newspaper *El Visor Boliviano*).

⁷ Propuesta Republicana (Republican Proposal) is a center-right political party in Argentina. It is usually referred to as PRO. PRO was formed as an electoral alliance in 2005 but was transformed into a unitary party on June 3, 2010. Since 2007 it has ruled the City of Buenos Aires. From 2007 to 2015 the city mayor has been the Pro party president, Mauricio Macri. Recently Macri's chief of staff, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, won the election, and on December 10, 2015, he will succeed Macri as city mayor.

⁸ By strengthening the ties within this entrepreneurial elite, and between its members and their business partners, the city government plays an important symbolic role in the patronage of the *morenadas*, the dance blocs that are ubiquitous in the La Paz (Bolivia) Carnival. *Moreno* means brown-skinned, and the *morenadas* mimic the dances of African slaves during colonial times. According to Vásquez, however, participating in the current *morenadas* in Buenos Aires costs each dancer almost US\$20,000. Only the children of garment entrepreneurs can, therefore, hope to take part in these prestigious performances. Even more

important than the *bajadas* (the annual *morenadas* parade at the central Mayo Avenue) are the prior *recepciones* (receptions), i.e., luxury parties in closed halls, to which the organizers invite their business and political contacts.

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