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The “Meaning” of Being Indigenous in a Multicultural World

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Introduction

In 1992 and again in 1995 the indigenous people of the highlands and the lowlands of Bolivia marched to the Capital, La Paz. The lowland groups had to march for weeks, climbing the mountains to the capital, which lies at an altitude of 3500 m's, the highland groups met with the lowland groups, and the indigenous groups entered La Paz jointly.

The people in this demonstration gathered as *indigenous people* first and foremost. They are also poor, oppressed peasants without political influence, but on this occasion they protested as indigenous, and their goal is to obtain rights *as* indigenous people.

The indigenous people of Bolivia lived through a history of exclusion and oppression in the Bolivian State, both before and after independence in 1825. Even so, there has been a long tradition for popular protest and manifestations in Bolivia. This has especially been true within the last 60 years. In 1952 Bolivia experienced a popular revolution, that overthrew the oligarchic government, which consisted of white mine- and hacienda-owners.

Social Change

In the 1930's and 1940' social processes emerged, which led to a growing consciousness of the unequal division of wealth in the Bolivia society, especially among university students in the major cities (Klein, 1993). They formed a movement together with the peasant movement, which was also in a process of formation, and the “National and Revolutionary Movement” (MNR: Movimiento Nacional y Revolucionario) was born. The MNR was leading the revolution in 1952, which got support from many layers of the Bolivian society. It was fairly peaceful. The elite rulers were overthrown, and a new government was formed on the basis of the MNR movement. One of the first tasks for the revolutionary government was to nationalise the mining industry, which was the major income

generating industry of the country, and to divide some of the Hacienda land to the small peasants in the rural areas. The MNR government thus became very popular and had a broad support within the majority of the population.

The discourse of the revolutionary movement was within the Marxist class analysis and the revolution was seen as a sign of protest located in class struggle. After 1952, the rural population was categorised as “Campesinos”, and a rural union was formed rooted in the class discourse and seeing the peasants as first and foremost workers of the rural areas. Everybody wanted to distance themselves from the derogatory word of “Indio” – Indian. This had been used in a process of oppression process since the arrival of the Spaniards, and nobody among the indigenous population of Bolivia wanted to be regarded as an "indio".

After the revolution most of Bolivia’s indigenous population either lived in the rural areas, or became well-paid mine workers, with a strong union, which managed to negotiate well with the MNR government. The revolutionary Movement of MNR became institutionalised into a party of the same name, and soon began to act according to former political culture in Bolivia, meaning, that corruption became more and more common.

This was one of the causes that were behind the development towards the present change from Class Discourse to Ethnic Discourse in the Bolivian protest movements and actions. Until the mid-1980’s the protesters used the class struggle in trying to obtain their demands, which most often was social security and decent wages. And they were often very successful in obtaining their goals, since the Bolivian government was dependent on the support of especially the workers in the mining areas. In the rural areas, the new holders of former hacienda land lived as small-scale freehold farmers or in original indigenous communities with their own social organisation – the *ayllu*¹.

Economic and Social Crisis

In the mid-1980’s the tin-price dropped significantly on the world market. Tin had been Bolivia’s primary export good. This of course created enormous problems in Bolivia, where IMF and the World Bank entered, among other things with a structural adjustment programme, which managed to control

the inflation, but worsened the social situation due to cuts in the social sectors. From “below” there was increasing protests from indigenous people in the rural areas, who had been completely marginalised in the Bolivian society. The shifting governments did not invest anything in the rural areas, once the agricultural reform of 1953 had split up some of the former haciendas. Making a life for a family in the rural areas of the ex-haciendas was increasingly more difficult. And the people who lived in the original organisation of the ayllu experienced cuts on their land and difficulties in selling their products due to poor means of transportation and very bad roads in the rural areas.

The scene was set for changes in many layers of the Bolivian society by the end of the 1980’s. Also from outside Bolivia there were factors, which spurred the processes for change. For example: In 1992 the UN year of indigenous people was initiated. This was prolonged to a decade for indigenous peoples, which has helped bringing forth the problems and wishes of the indigenous people of the world on a global level (Brysk, 1994; Della Porta, 1999). Donors became increasingly more interested in the topic of indigenous people and began to put indigenous peoples’ rights on the agenda for their development work in the poor countries of the world.

In Bolivia 75 % or more of the population are regarded as indigenous. And also, which is more interesting: They now regard themselves as indigenous again. People of the rural areas are changing their self-image and now use the term “indígena” about themselves instead of “campesino”. The notion “indígena” is linked to tradition, history culture and original rights to land, and is thus useful struggle for rights, especially to territory (Albó et.al, 1990, Ticona, 1995).

The demand for territories has been central to indigenous movements in Bolivia. The right to territory important for the indigenous people *as* indigenous, since it is the territory which is one of the key references to identity and ethnicity.

Indigenous people have for long demanded territories, but for obvious reasons the nation-states where the indigenous people live, have not wanted to grant indigenous people the rights to land, which often has important natural resources (Van Cott, 1994).

¹ The ayllu is a form of social organisation, which includes both real and invented family ties and mutual ownership to land. Social organisation and mutual cultivation of land is closely inter-linked. This form of social organisation dates back to

“Being indigenous – or ethnic”

Ethnicity and cultural identity are notions that are highly debated today. The most significant schools of thought among anthropologists in this discussion are the primordialists and the instrumentalists (Eller 1999, p.14). The difference between the two lies in the point of origin in the analysis. Primordialists see ethnicity and ethnic groups as “unchanging”. The group is seen as uniform and continuous. “Tribe” is a word used to describe such a unit.

In development theory ethnic groups have often been rejected as representatives of “traditional societies” which were in a process of dissolving. This is especially true within the modernisation theories. This view on traditional societies represents the primordial view on ethnic groups.

But there are other ways of seeing ethnic groups. They can be seen as movements with a strategy. Part of this strategy could be “activating” the ethnicity to achieve goals, which lie within the interests of the ethnic group. The Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth advocates for this more instrumentalist view on ethnic groups (Barth, 1969).

Ethnic groups do fight a class struggle today. They are oppressed and marginalised groups dominated by other classes. But most of them do not find any use of the Marxist class struggle discourse². They do not organise in unions, but in indigenous movements. They do not demand individual rights to land, but collective rights to territory³.

The peasant union in Bolivia, (CSUTCB), formerly used a class discourse in their demands to the Bolivian government. They normally have claimed individual land and rights to land for their members, who they regarded as subsistence peasants with each their own plot of land. Due to Bolivia’s history with social organisations that existed and organised the population collectively, the notion territory today makes more sense to the indigenous peasants of the areas.

before the arrival of the Spaniards in the Andean area.

² Marxist analysis, on the other hand, often tend to “dismiss cultural analysis because it does not pay sufficient attention to the domain of material forces. This tension between political economy and cultural analysis is in part due to the fact that culture is erroneously regarded as something ethereal or insubstantial by comparison with the material processes of economic production” Tucker, 1996, p.8.

³ “The territory includes the land surface, the underground and the air above, and encompasses all the natural resources that can be found there (minerals, oil, forests) The territory is an aspect of the people who live there, and of their cultural identity. They can not be separated.” (Ticona et. Al, 1995, p.214 (my translation))

This is why the peasant union replaced “land” with “territory” in their declaration from the congress in 1994. The peasant union embarked on a more “ethnic” course from then on in order to try to include the “indigenous” discourse in the fight for rights..

Democratisation

In the mid-90’s the Bolivian government embarked on a reform process, that aimed at changing the power structures and land rights on the local level. Economic and politic power had over time been centralised in the capital and major cities of the country. The rural areas, where 80% of the population lives had not received any attention from the central government. This was possible as long as the nationalised mines and big industries secured income to the state. As mentioned before, this changed in mid -1980’s first of all with the fall of the tin prices. The state had to find new means of income. The Bolivian society consists of a very small upper class, hardly any middle class and a large percentage of the population living in poverty in the urban and rural areas. Bolivia is the poorest country in South America.

The state was in need of income and the amount of taxpayers is very low. There has been no income tax, only tax on goods and property like houses over a certain size. The people in the rural areas have not been registered by any state organisation, so in fact the state had no knowledge of the number of potential taxpayers in many rural areas.

A reform on decentralisation and democratisation called Participación Popular was passed to solve the problems of lack of administrative infrastructure in the rural areas, and as a mean to make the indigenous rural population interested in supporting the state and eventually to pay taxes (Andersson, 1996). The decentralisation and democratisation processes in Bolivia have strong element of multiculturalism⁴ for the first time. This means that the indigenous people in the rural area for the first time are acknowledged as indigenous and are granted rights as indigenous. The democratisation reforms are first and foremost passed in order to make the indigenous rural population support the Bolivian state (Andersson, 1999).

⁴ In 1994 the Bolivian government changed the constitution stating that Bolivia was a multicultural state. This was not acknowledged before, even though there are more than 30 ethnic groups living within Bolivia.

The State has tried to incorporate the indigenous population before. This was after the revolution of 1952, where the many different cultures and ethnic groups of Bolivia all were to be assimilated into the Bolivian society as citizens, equal and free (Albó et.al., 1990). This of course failed. Oppression continued, and the privileged groups continued to rule.

Conclusion

Many factors, both external and internal, have played together to encourage current political and administrative change in Bolivia. The decline of the tin-prices and the subsequent economic crisis, the growing focus on indigenous people and their rights both on the national and international level, the rising indigenous movement in Bolivia, the need for new income to the state, the absence of administration on the local level and the rising poverty in general in Bolivia, all helped to make way for new reforms in Bolivia. All these different factors also helped to move the focus on indigenous peoples' rights *as indigenous*. This has led to an increasing focus on ethnicity and culture, and first and foremost the *right* to live accordingly to ones ethnic culture. This right also includes rights to territory, which means, that indigenous people can make claims to the State as ethnic groups, and achieve rights accordingly. Also indigenous people can participate in local municipal governments as indigenous representatives of their social organisation, which in the Andean area is the ayllu.

To conclude the social well-being of the indigenous people have somewhat improved. Both as a result of actual economic and political reforms, but also because the indigenous people of Bolivia, which means all the different ethnic groups from the Andean area and to the lowlands are now, at least in the laws, acknowledged *as indigenous*. This means that they can live according to their culture and traditions and use their territory according to their way of organising social practices and cultivating the land mutually.

This use of ethnicity as a strategy to obtain rights as indigenous people relates to the instrumental understanding of ethnicity, which was presented above. Ethnicity should not be seen as something "tribal", static, or as a relict from former times. On the contrary ethnicity in this case can be used politically, both on national and on international level. Indigenous people have been very visible

internationally within the last ten years, NGO's , donors and rock stars have been supporting their fight for rights.

Ethnicity or ethnic identity can be enhanced if needed be. There is nothing backwards in using the exotization⁵ of ones cultural identity, if it helps obtaining ones' goals.

This, of course, goes for the leaders of indigenous movements that reach negotiations on the international level. But also on the local level in Bolivia enhancing ethnicity and ethnic identity can lead to obtaining land rights. Since indigenous people are acknowledged in the laws, like for example Participación Popular, they can now use their ethnicity as a strategy towards the state to obtain rights and to obtain authority within municipal governments and rights to territory.

In the Participación Popular, representatives of indigenous people have a right to be on the municipal level. They are directly included in the decision processes on the local level as indigenous group. And they are beginning to make use of this right. The multicultural society is emerging within decision making and administration. These areas were before very elitist and racist.

Regarding land rights many former "campesinos" are reconstructing the former ayllus of the hacienda areas and revitalising culture, tradition and social organisation. If they can prove that they have an indigenous social organisation, traditions and culture, and can date this social organisation back in time, then they will be granted rights to territory by the Bolivian State.

This practice is a major break with former state practices in Bolivia, and it shows the profound and very interesting changes which are currently taking place in Bolivia.

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⁵ "Exotization is part of the external process of differentiation, wherein difference holds an allure or appeal, exercises an attractive force." (Urban & Sherzer, 1991, p.11)

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