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Shaping of Belonging: Recreating Space, Reclaiming Place

Paper for SIEF Conference 17-21 April, 2011, Lisbon, Portugal: People make places – ways of feeling the world

Abstract

Coming to office in 2005 the Bolivian President, Evo Morales said in his inauguration speech:

“The indigenous people have been marginalised with the foundation of Bolivia in 1825 therefore the indigenous people will now claim the right to recreate Bolivia”¹

This pinpoints the processes on shaping identity in indigenous peoples’ social movements in Bolivia. Indigenous people are now aiming at ‘taking back’ Bolivia on many levels. This paper will focus on the shaping of social movements and how this shaping has included a redefinition of being indigenous and a redefinition of being Bolivian. This implies a strategic use of indigenous culture forming an alliance with international actors at a point in history when focus on indigenous rights has been emphasized. An increased focus on indigenous people and their identity, culture and ‘belonging’ to territories can be seen in government reforms in the 1990’s and in recent policies after Evo Morales took office in 2005.

Indigenous social movements have been active in protests against increasing gas and water prices. These manifestations have had political goals, but have also been effective in shaping identity and belonging to Bolivia as a place. The paper explores the interconnection of social movements’ activities and search for identity with international discourse on culture and rights, in this case especially the connection between the ‘space’ for identity expressed by indigenous leaders in international discourse and Bolivia as the ‘place’ where indigenous identity is located.

¹ “Se marginó la participación de los pueblos indígenas originarios en la fundación de Bolivia en el año 1825, por eso los pueblos indígenas originarios reclaman refundar Bolivia.” (La Razon, 22/1 2006).

Introduction

In the mid-1990's the Bolivian government headed by industrial tycoon and president, Gonzales Sanchez de Lozada initiated new policies that (in their discourse) aimed at including indigenous people in the Bolivian State in a way not experienced earlier. Among the reforms was one on popular participation, which aimed at including until then marginalised parts of the population as citizens, a reform on education opening up for giving possibilities for indigenous languages to be included in school curriculum. A land reform was opening up for giving collective rights to land. These were 'multicultural reforms' (Postero 2007) meaning reforms with attempted social and cultural aims. Along with the social reforms came a reform of privatization, which initiated a process of privatization of state assets' continuing the neoliberal politics from the 1980s where structural adjustment reforms were established throughout Latin America. The combination of these two types of reforms has been called 'neoliberal multiculturalism' (Postero 2007). Elsewhere I (together with co-author Håvard Haarstad) argue that the social reforms were needed in order to create social stability to facilitate attraction of foreign direct investment (Haarstad & Andersson 2009). The State's interest in introducing reforms which acknowledge indigenous peoples' claims has thus had political reasons. But this cannot alone explain the political processes and change that many Latin American countries have experienced. This paper will seek to analyse the role of indigenous peoples' social movements' use of cultural and identity policies in obtaining social reforms that grants overall social and political rights. The paper will be a case study of culture and identity policies traced in contemporary Bolivian social processes. The key concepts for the paper will be culture, identity, policies, social movements and social change.

Background

Bolivia is country, which has experienced many changes. The struggles for gaining independence from Spain in 1825 were headed by the local elite 'criollo' class. 'Criollo' was a term describing the descendants of the Spaniards, but born in the colony. These people did not have equal rights as Spaniards coming to the colonies from Spain. This created an opposition to colonial rule and was the main force against the Spanish King and his colonies. After a period of independence wars all of Latin America gained independence from Spain and Portugal. The new ruling elite continued the policies of the colony with minor adjustments giving privileges to an upper class who dominated

the income generating assets of land and mines. For the indigenous people not much was changed by independence. So when Evo Morales in his inauguration speech talks about the 'marginalisation since 1825' and 'the right to recreate Bolivia' he is referring to indigenous people being marginalised from economic and social influence in the colony and in the independent state until 1952. With the revolution in 1952 indigenous people briefly gained some rights through the unions, but these processes were rolled back as party politics took over and social movements gradually lost formal power in the revolutionary movement, which transformed to a political party.

Indigenous people form between 60 and 80% of the population and are thereby the majority of the population in Bolivia. Politically, economically and socially they have been cut off from influence until recently. This has of course created a form of mistrust in this part of the population toward government policies. It was very observable when the government in the 1990s made reforms which aimed at including the formerly marginalised rural and indigenous population in a citizen building process with reforms on decentralisation popular participation, land and education. This could be analysed as an example of 'neoliberal multiculturalism' (Postero 2007) and it could similarly be regarded as a way of creating social tranquillity in order to attract foreign direct investment (Haarstad & Andersson, 2009). Social movements, among these especially the unions, have over time been very active in protesting against repressive government policies.

Social movements in Bolivia

Social movements have played an important role in contemporary Bolivian politics. For centuries indigenous people have been marginalised from state power which has been in the possession of the white and mestizo elite of big cities and the owners of big haciendas. In 1952 Bolivia had a revolution led by MNR (Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario) which mobilised especially indigenous peasants and slave workers from the haciendas. After successfully overthrowing the mining and hacienda oligarchy who until then had governed Bolivia, the MNR government nationalised mines and haciendas. This nationalisation created two strong unions: The miners union and the peasant workers union. The different unions in Bolivia were gathered in COB (Central Obrero Boliviano), which was the central workers union. COB gained influence in the MNR government and for a time in the post revolution years the unions and the MNR were governing Bolivia. This was the first time that social movements had direct influence on State power in Bolivia.

The MNR abandoned the revolutionary policies after some time and stiffened into an elitist party leaving space for former power holders to form their parties and opening up for politics now generally ridden by corruption (Crabtree, 2005). As a consequence, the social movements, until the 1990's primarily the unions, turned against the shifting governments and became an important social actor in internal policies in Bolivia. The unions could literally shut down the country by blocking roads and communication channels and by massive protests and demonstrations in the capital La Paz and other major cities. This was an often used strategy in the many strikes and protests against the government and military dictators² from 1960 to present day.

The discourse within the unions was based on class based rhetoric and lay within class politics, production and distribution. The social struggle was directed at getting better working conditions, especially after the neoliberal politics were introduced throughout Latin America with the structural adjustment programmes in the 1980 to the emphasis on privatization of state assets through the 1990's. But other processes were taking place along with neoliberal development programs headed by the World Bank and IMF. A growing attention was internationally being directed towards a rights based approach and, interesting for the arguments in this paper, an increasing interest was directed towards indigenous rights, as a result of this the UN established the Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues, which has resulted in a declaration for indigenous people³. Mayo (2005) argues 'new social movements' actions are often located within the democracy discourse and within the rights based approach (as opposed to 'old social movements' - meaning movements taking point of departure in class based society). New social movements put emphasis upon issues of identity, ideology and culture, issues of social integration and social and cultural reproduction, rather than upon the material issues around production and distribution that had been seen as the bread and butter of class conflict in capitalist societies (Mayo 2005). In Bolivia this change is experienced in the social movements as well. One example could be the coca producers union, which was headed by Evo Morales. Slowly the discourse within this union changed from discussions lying within class society to issues concerning indigenous people and indigenous peoples' rights. This was done by linking to the culture and identity theme which is inherent in traditions connected to the coca leaf.

Culture and Identity Policies

² Bolivia has world record in dictators, often these were military dictators.

³ www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html

Coca leaves have been used traditionally for centuries in the Andean areas of South America. In the case of the coca producers' labour union the link to culture and identity – and in this case indigenous identity - proved effective in gaining influence nationally and it became the platform from which Evo Morales was able to lead his campaign for presidency.

Not only the coca producers' union was linking to culture and tradition in their struggle for better conditions for their members. The democracy and rights based approach that new social movements often link to was very present in Bolivian society from the 1990's and forward. Many achievements were made by indigenous people from the reform process initiated by Sanchez de Lozada in the mid 1990's to present day where rights and democracy are very high on the political agenda.

In one specific case, it has been very important to show continuity with the past in terms of cultural identity: On the issue of rights to land. In order to bestow indigenous people rights to the land they cultivate there have been changes in the way right to land is issued. In the years after the 1952 revolution land was redistributed to former slave workers of the haciendas as individual plots of land. This land was given to peasants who were members of the peasant labour union connecting to the discourse of the MNR leaders and the revolution within the class based society. Indigenous people in Bolivia have, however, historically formed social organisations (ex. the 'ayllu), which were based on common ownership to land. In the post colonial state of Bolivia there has never politically been opened up for collective ownership to land. After the independence from Spain the local elite seized the big estates and were owners of these until the 1952 revolution. Land which was not fertile enough to be included in the big estates remained in indigenous ownership, but the social and productive structure of the ayllu (and other indigenous forms of organisations) was destroyed and common ownership to land was torn apart. Still some of the Bolivian indigenous groups have maintained an 'amputated' form of social organisation connected to collective land use. In the ayllus of Northern Potosí for example, social organisation and cultural identity have been closely connected. Cultural identity as belonging to an indigenous group has, however, until very recently been something that stigmatized this part of the population. The stigmatization has been carried out as racial discourse by political and economic elites of the major cities. Being 'indian' was in their view the same as being 'backwards and traditional (in a negative meaning).

Two of the reforms of the 1990 were the decentralisation reform and the popular participation reform. Both were directing power and money to local levels. Through the popular participation

reform indigenous people increasingly voted and were elected to municipal governments, very much in contradiction to earlier times, where indigenous (and poor) people in Bolivia were held away from power by way of different strategies by the elites in power.

“The right to vote does not necessarily ensure democracy as such. Political parties can monopolize political processes in an un-democratic way. Voting is frequently seen as a capitulation to a centralized system that shows only contempt for local needs and desires” (Stolle- McAllister 2005:6)

The situation described by Stolle-McAllister here has been true for Bolivia before the election of Evo Morales as president. Former presidents were elected by a very small part of the population due to many inhabitants of the rural areas not having access to being registered as voters.

“In Bolivia political elites designed institutional rules with the intention of containing persistent party system fragmentation and to defend their space in the political system against challenger parties that emerged in the 1990’s” (Van Cott, 2005:24)

Once the MAS party succeeded in being registered as political party its presidential candidate and now president, Evo Morales, did indeed gain legitimacy since 60% voted for him at the latest elections. But seeing an indigenous person as head of state has not been a process that has been without opposition. Many urban dwellers and elite groups have not counted on indigenous persons as equals, as mentioned before. As the quote below shows, in 2000 there was a great resistance in a town in Norte de Potosí after the election of the (indigenous) mayor:

“Not only in town XX, but in all of Bolivia, the people in the rural areas are still regarded as someone not able to take the responsibility as an (municipal) authority. In Bolivia we are very racist, there is no respect towards the inter-cultural aspect. So many years have passed where the people from the rural areas have been discriminated by the people from the urban areas. They really don’t respect us, they even say: “How can an Indian be a mayor!” When I was about to begin there was a strong opposition. People said: Instead of being a town, it will transform into a village”. But with all that we are doing we are breaking this pattern. We also try to making the inter-cultural aspect respected at all levels. In all of the country we have always been marginalised, but it is interesting to note that the Indian and the campesino have the same capacity as the city-dweller, we are the

same, but still the people of the urban areas do not accept this” (Mayor, and belonging to the indigenous population, town XX, Norte de Potosí, October 2000⁴).

‘Place’

Creating new identities on the basis of new social movements is an area where ‘place’ becomes important. Culture and identity for indigenous people is connected to ‘place’ – territory. This has been obvious in the most recent land reform where land has been given back to indigenous communities in the form of territories - not individual plots, which was the format for redistributing land after the 1952 revolution, but territories owned mutually by members of an indigenous social organisation. Linking land rights (place) to culture and identity is part of a process of creating citizens with ownership to the state – a way of shaping belonging and fitting policies to indigenous culture. It is also a way of ‘taking back’ or recreating Bolivia in the image of indigenous people and not only within urban elites’ image. These policies have been enforced by Evo Morales and the MAS⁵ government, but some of the ideas were in fact initiated already in the mid-1990s under Gonzales Sanchez de Lozada. One could argue that the two different governments (de Lozada’s and Morales’) have different aims and goals, but the methods of involving formerly marginalised groups have been somewhat similar.

Social Change

“Ethnic groups are interest groups competing for resources, and they mobilize language, rituals, and other aspects of culture to do so”. (Urban, G. & J. Sherzer 1991:4).

This quote grasps the key understanding of ethnicity – and thereby culture and identity - of this paper. That is ethnicity, culture and identity as basis for a strategy that can be used by social movements and governments alike. Seeing indigenous groups and their social movements as actors with a strategy makes a fruitful point of departure for understanding processes of social change. In order to link to the title of this paper: “recreating space and reclaiming space”, the recreation of space is within policies and their discourses: From a racist discourse regarding indigenous people in the 18th, 19th and beginning of the 20th century to the unionist discourse of the post 1952 revolution years to today’s political concentration on issues related to indigenous people by the Morales

⁴ Author’s fieldwork in Norte de Potosí, Bolivia, September/October 2000)

⁵ Political party: Movimiento al Socialismo

government. The reclaiming of space is first and foremost recreating Bolivia and reclaiming Bolivian territory for formerly marginalised indigenous groups. But it is also recreating Bolivian politics in new ways which has nothing to do with earlier era's political exclusion of a majority of the country's population.

In the case of forming municipal governments indigenous people have been elected in much greater numbers since the case above from 2000. By embracing the reforms of popular participation and decentralisation indigenous people have gained influence in social policies in terms of themselves and their lives and thereby social change has come about. The land reform granting collective right to land/territories could be seen as a first step towards economic reforms directed at indigenous people that have hitherto lacked in Bolivian politics (Andersson & Haarstad, 2009)

As mentioned in the abstract for this paper there have been disputes over skyrocketing water- and gas prices. Especially the 'Cochabamba water war' in 2000 has been known for including large part of the citizens of Cochabamba. As a condition for a loan from IMF the Bolivian government had to privatize state owned enterprises and one of these were the municipal water company in Cochabamba, SEMAPA. As the international company that took over had to get an economic benefit out of the water distribution, water prices increased to a level that most 'cochabambinos' had difficulties paying. This spurred a collective action including most of the city dwellers and the people of the rural areas surrounding Cochabamba. The city was shut down by demonstrators and the municipal government and representatives from the international corporation were, after several days of conflict and massive demonstrations, pressured to call off the agreement to privatize water supplies and the company left the country.

I think people sometimes forget this wasn't only about throwing Bechtel out, throwing out an international company. There was a second part going on here. A water law that was to be passed in congress, that is a law that affects all of Bolivia. For that reason, campesinos and people outside Cochabamba got involved called our attention to the fact that this law would make all water saleable. In fact, what people said is they would even be able to sell the rain”⁶

⁶ Oscar Olivera in: Watson, Connie: Sell the Rain. How the privatization of water caused riots in Cochabamba, Bolivia. CBC Radio, Feb. 4, 2003:4. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/features/water/bolivia.html>

This kind of collective action was kicked off by a situation where people in Cochabamba all of a sudden were not able to afford water – a basic need. It also draws on the tradition in Bolivia for reacting against unjust policies that has been the reason for many demonstrations and manifestations over the years, either initiated by unions or other social movements or emerging as collective action, like the ‘water war’ in Cochabamba or later gas- and water wars in El Alto, a poorer neighbourhood just outside the capital La Paz.

The water and gas wars forced two presidents to step down and eventually (as one of the processes behind) created the possibilities for Evo Morales to be elected as Bolivia’s first indigenous president. Ethnicity, culture and identity have been very visible in Morales’ campaigns.

In the water and gas wars cultural identity has been very visible. As shown in the quote by one of the leaders for the water war in Cochabamba the protests were both about ‘throwing out an international corporation’ but also about the perceived injustice of government policies. Privatizing a public good like water was taking away the basis for living in Cochabamba. And it was linked to a rights based approach seeing access to water as a human right. For the political elite in Cochabamba – and in Bolivia, and for the international corporation the collective action was both an action carried out within the class based discourse but also within indigenous rights discourse, especially observable in the defence for irrigation systems in rural areas around Cochabamba which were established by communities building on ancient production systems. The State and the international corporation wanted these systems and the irrigation dams connected to be part of the privatized water. So here the class based discourse and the culture based discourse merged to one – a collective action against government and an international corporation.

Conclusion

In contemporary Bolivia culture and identity have become important notions both among indigenous groups’ organisations and in government policies. These changes from former racial and stigmatizing policies comes as a reaction to pressure both from below, indigenous people and their organisations, and above, international organisations, especially the UN, focusing on the rights based approach, and here especially indigenous peoples’ rights. Evo Morales has also stressed that indigenous people, who form the majority of the population, need to step back on the scene and take

back Bolivia – a place that they have de facto been marginalised from for many years. By recreating the space – the discourse about what it is to be Bolivian – the taking back space is also coming along. The ‘new Bolivian citizen’ is a citizen, who is not in- or excluded because of ethnic or cultural background. This is being achieved by way of social processes that especially have been dynamic over the past 20 years, since the reforms of the 1990’s.

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