Actualidades

Bolivia’s “Evo Phenomenon”: From Identity to What?

By

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I thank God and the Pachamama for having given me this opportunity to conduct the nation.

President Evo Morales in an address to Bolivia’s congress (January 22, 2006)

Everything is brought together not by an indigenismo, but by a way of reading the nation beginning with an indigenous lens.

Vice-president Álvaro García Linera (Gómez Balboa 2006)

At a moment of the coming to power for the first time of an indigenous political project in Bolivia, a predominantly indigenous nation, I consider the significance of the new president, Evo Morales, and his party the MAS (or Movement Towards Socialism), as they help us to understand Bolivia’s current indigenous politics. I am concerned with changing conceptions of how the circumstances of being indigenous can be legitimately represented. It is impossible to refer to a singular “indigenous movement” in Bolivia. But nor is the MAS just one among a variety of indigenous options. Instead, I emphasize how Morales and the MAS epitomize coalitional strategies of indigenous cultural and political engagement—strategies that have effectively expanded the possibilities for indigenous belonging. Put another way, the MAS represents an increasingly pervasive stance of the acceptance of “indigenous” priorities by increasingly large numbers of non-indigenous allies, particularly during the direct action protests of recent years.
An Indigenous President

There is little debate: Bolivia has recently been the scene of dramatic change. Coca and Indigenous leader Evo Morales, of Aymara descent, was elected president in December of 2005 with an unprecedented 54 percent of the popular vote—an outcome that a short time ago would have seemed wildly improbable. Against an immediate backdrop in Bolivia of water wars, gas wars, and tax revolts since 2000,1 the election of Morales has understandably epitomized the winds of change for national and international pundits. Explaining his decision to support Morales, former Aymara presidential candidate Félix Cárdenas noted simply, “I have a commitment to the historical moment of my people” (Padilla 2006). Morales’s mercurial and by now well-known political trajectory—from humble origins in a rural Aymara-speaking community, to coca grower and local union leader, to Bolivia’s first indigenous head of state—has coincided with a sharp upturn of the political efficacy of indigenous and popular movements in Bolivia. It is also coincident with widespread popular recognition of the apparent exhaustion of the neoliberal paradigm instituted in 1985, and with the virtual collapse of the monopoly by the country’s traditional political class, as exercised through the exclusionary deal making of political parties during more than twenty years of so-called “pacted democracy.” Bolivia, in short, is living a fundamentally transformational moment.

Figure 1 The president-elect Evo Morales thanks indigenous leaders of CONAMAQ for their support.
La Patria, January 19, 2006.
Morales, or Evo, as he prefers to be called, wasted little time putting an indelibly indigenous stamp on his administration in ways both symbolic and substantive. He appointed people with an indigenous background to 14 of 16 cabinet posts, and made it mandatory for civil servants to speak one of Bolivia’s three widely spoken indigenous languages: Quechua, Aymara or Guaraní. He has eliminated the formerly autonomous Ministry of Indigenous Affairs—with its discriminatory focus on the “Indian problem”—and folded it into the new Ministry of Justice, headed by Casimira Rodríguez, pollera-wearing head of Bolivia’s Domestic Worker’s Union. The newly formed Vice-Ministry of Community Justice has begun to work on plans to implement more thoroughgoing multicultural legislation, with a campaign to legally recognize traditional indigenous collective practices of community justice as a viable alternative to the court system (see Cultural Survival 2006). And most of the new president’s key initiatives, such as the decriminalization of coca, have been publicly justified in terms of an historical analysis that understands Bolivia’s indigenous peoples as the main protagonists and in response to the “demands” advanced by largely indigenous social movements in recent years.

What is more, president Morales has moved swiftly—as he puts it—to “refound” the Bolivian state on a new footing. In his first six months in office, he has used the government as an instrument of social change to begin dismantling the country’s recent neoliberal legacy. This includes the repeal of the Supreme Decree 21060, which elevated the adoption of free market principles to policy. He has nationalized the country’s oil and gas industries, instituted a program to redistribute underutilized land to previously landless beneficiaries, begun to further thicken Bolivia’s existing “multicultural” legislation, and shepherded a national referendum process to rewrite Bolivia’s constitution and to reverse the marginalization and victimization of its indigenous demographic majority. These measures promise to raise the hackles of Bolivia’s business elite concentrated in the eastern lowland region of Santa Cruz, and perhaps to further polarize an already polarized nation. But they have also provoked animated debate over the meaning and extent of “nationalization,” who the beneficiaries of reform will in fact be, and what Morales’s “indigenous” leadership will mean for the future direction of the country.

The circumstances responsible for the success of Morales and the MAS are part of an ongoing relocation of the cultural terms of indigenous agency in Bolivia. Historically, the participation of indigenous peoples in the Bolivian nation-state—including after 1952—has largely been limited to the subject of elite indigenismo dedicated to the imaginative incorporation of an indigenous cultural legacy into the foundational myths of successive “creole” nationalisms (see Salmón 1997). Often contending directly with the state, more recent indigenous political activisms in Bolivia have variously represented themselves as a unitary constituency, a locatable identity (associated with territory), or through the use of strategic essentialisms of
different sorts (see Ticona Alejo 2000; Albó 2002). As a calculated departure from past indigenous projects, the MAS is more circumstantial, issue-driven, coalitional, articulatory and instrumental in others’ struggles rather than as an insistently autonomous project that has finally come into its own in the person of Bolivia’s newly minted Aymara president. If this makes Evo no less “indigenous,” it does encourage a reconsideration of how we think about cultural projects of identity as these routinely underwrite indigenous movements in Bolivia and in Latin America.

Indigenous Representation?

Morales, at least, presents himself as the representative of indigenous priorities. Last year, he concluded his campaign in the ruins of Tiwanaku, donning a blue MAS-colored Aymara-style poncho and lluch’u (cap) to ask the favor of “our ancestors.” On election night, he addressed the country’s indigenous majority and proclaimed: “For the first time we are the president” (Shultz 2006). Soon afterward, he presided over a celebration of his victory in the Chapare among the Six Federations of coca growers in Eterazama, where nine years before he was tear-gassed and shot at. During the fiesta “a cholita”—part of the folkloric musical group Rakaypampa—sang “Now we are the government. With the poor, the workers, and the professional class, we enter the presidential palace” (Navia 2005). The day before his official inauguration, Evo returned to Tiwanaku for an indigenous ceremony of investiture, an act reminiscent of a similar ceremony carried by the first Aymara vice-president, Victor Hugo Cárdenas, in 1993. In the presence of tens of thousands of people, many waving whipalas, and hundreds of indigenous representatives from throughout Bolivia and Latin America, Morales received blessings from Aymara yatiris (ritualists) and accepted a traditional staff of authority, after which he offered thanks to “God and the Pachamama.” Upon the conclusion of his inauguration the next day, a ch’alla was conducted inside the governor’s palace in the Plaza Murillo which is located in a part of the city that until not long ago was closed to indigenous people. Several days later, now back in La Paz, Evo inaugurated the annual Alasitas festival, where he was hailed as “the great Ekeko of Bolivia” by the city’s mayor. And so it has gone.

If the symbolic politics framing Morales’s indigenous heritage have become more elaborated in conjunction with his electoral victory, they have been a very public part of protests, rallies, marches, speeches, and campaigns in which he has participated for years. If perhaps too colla-centric, what goes largely unremarked about these many symbols of an Andean indigenous identity is their generic character. The absence of a particular cultural referent is in contrast to the highly elaborated ritual practices of rural ayllu, with their intimately genealogical relationship to particular places and local histories (see Abercrombie 1998). The symbolic politics of the MAS does not even exclusively refer to “indigenous” Bolivia.
per se, since the majority of cultural references that compose these spectacles also resonate in the everyday lives of the urban poor, working, popular, and even middle classes of Bolivia.

The symbolic content of grassroots political rallies and marches, for example, significantly overlaps with that of the yearly urban festival parades of Gran Poder in La Paz, Carnival in Oruro, or Urkupiña in Quillacollo, part of which includes a tradition of parody and criticism of the politics of the day. But the analysis of these “folkloric” events tends to draw sharp distinctions between the urban and rural, the indigenous and non-indigenous, where participation in large-scale urban cultural events has been equated with the appropriation of indigenous trappings by non-indigenous urban mestizos, and as part of the consolidation of a mestizo national identity (e.g. Lagos 1993). However, as the similarities of political protest rallies to urban festivals suggest, participation in both is also an opportunity to register dissatisfaction with the political status quo as part of the act of reclaiming an Andean cultural heritage in an urban context. The generic properties of the MAS’s cultural politics have cross-class relevance and widen the appeal of cultural heritage as the basis for a political call for enfranchisement. When Evo refers to Bolivia’s social movements, he prefers the term “indigenous and popular.”

Jesuit anthropologist Xavier Albó (2006) suggests the combined effect of these ceremonies to be one of “ethnogenesis.” He notes the many placards at Tiwanaku that read: “We have returned and we are millions.” This is a reference to the final words of neo-Inca rebel Tupaj Katari—“I will return and I will be millions”—just before he was executed by the Spanish in 1781. These words were further uttered by Morales himself when, as a congressman, he was expelled from the legislature in 2002 in response to the riots in the Sacaba coca market. Throughout the protest efforts of recent years and during his campaign, Morales has often equated “refounding Bolivia” with “making a pachakuti,” a millennial concept locating the future in the past. Felipe Quispe, whose political party is called the Pachakuti Indigenous Movement (MIP), describes the successful indigenous-led protest efforts as “history repeating itself.” David Choquehuanca—also an Aymara, longtime indigenous activist, and now Morales’s Minister of Foreign Affairs—talks of Morales’s victory as the return of Tupaj Katari. He has declared, “We are now in the era of pachakuti.” Bolivia’s new narrative of nationhood, it should be clear, has switched from an assimilationist to an indigenous one. But it has also been transformed from a foundational origin myth to a future-narrative. If Evo’s pachakuti talk is alienating to some Bolivians, it offers an opportunity for collaboration to move beyond the neoliberal paradigm, which is a shared interest of many Bolivians. In this, Evo and the MAS can be compared to the indigenous Nasa activists in Colombia with whom Joanne Rappaport has collaborated (2005:38), and for whom “culture is more of a political utopia than a concrete and preexisting thing.”
As I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Albro, in press), the interpretation of political goals using cosmological language is characteristic of organic indigenous intellectuals, both as a way to critique the state and as a largely utopian recovery of popular sovereignty as an ideal. If “recovery” of a uniquely Andean cosmovision is very much part of a self-conscious cultural strategy of indigenous identity politics in Bolivia (see Stephenson 2002), it is also the product of a closer working relationship, both nationally and internationally, between indigenous NGOs, academics, activists, and politicians than in decades past. An important part of this has been the well-reported internationalization of indigenous rights, in which Bolivia has been an active participant (see Brysk 2000). Space does not permit an adequate elaboration of this important point. But to the extent that cultural heritage has become the product of NGOs’ and activists’ interventions, it has also been transformed into a rights-based, discursive, and mass-mediated cultural heritage resource—something more easily “claimable” as part of a potentially sustainable future by a rapidly growing popular and urban public.

More attention should be given to what this means for the location of indigenous cultural belonging. Evo’s electoral victory was celebrated by indigenous representatives throughout the hemisphere as a watershed event. For example, Rigoberta Menchú issued a statement of support, saying that Morales “will always be able to count on his indigenous brothers and sisters” (Cevallos 2005). Many of them were on hand for his Tiwanaku investiture. In his Tiwanaku speech, Evo claimed his triumph signified a “new year for the native people [pueblos originarios] of the world,” “not just Bolivia.” He also referred to the “500 years of Resistance” campaign, spearheaded by Menchú and others in 1992 and in which Evo has participated, suggesting that it was at an end. The day prior to this speech, Morales helped inaugurate the “First Meeting of the Indigenous Authorities of America,” held at the Fondo Indígena, an NGO based in La Paz and dedicated to self-development of indigenous peoples by the promotion of indigenous rights, cultures and identities. At this event, Evo was named “president of the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala,” that is, of the Americas. He is, without a doubt, an international indigenous figure.

For his part, Morales introduced himself as “born in the Aymara nation” and as “born into union politics in a Quechua zone.” He also underscored his long participation and his debt to the “permanent international debates” in transnational indigenous circles (Fondo Indígena 2006). If Evo has worked hard to remain “organically” related to Bolivia’s social movements, he takes up a different approach to his own indigenous belonging. He tacks back and forth among points of reference—Aymara, Quechua, pan-indigenous—as different genealogical, political, and intellectual bases of solidarity. As with “500 years of resistance,” Evo also regularly appropriates well-known stock phrases from other indigenous and social justice causes. In his public addresses about Bolivia’s future, Morales has jury-rigged the
mantra of the World Social Forum, asserting “a new integration is possible” (Hayden 2006). He has also borrowed some of the better-known lines of sub-comandante Marcos and Mexico’s Zapatistas, as when saying, for example, that he will “govern obeying the people” (obedecer mandando). Rather than writing off such statements as mere political rhetoric, I want to take seriously the indigenous agency of Evo’s struggle not in the terms of a unitary “local” subject, but rather as fundamentally trans-local, as transactionally engaging other indigenous and non-indigenous struggles, and as enjoying plural sources of solidarity and legitimacy. “Indigenous” locations in Bolivia are becoming more diverse (see Canessa 2006).

The Neoliberal and the Indigenous

After his election, Morales proposed the creation of a People’s High Command (Estado Mayor del Pueblo), to be composed of social movement and party leaders representing several dozen organizations. The Estado Mayor would make “rapid and urgent decisions” about government policy (Bolpress 2006a). Evo’s suggestion resurrects an umbrella organization that helped coordinate the activities of multiple protesting fronts during the tax revolt in early 2003, and makes explicit his intentions to institute a “government of the pueblo.” In fact the local branches of the MAS are simply the “general assemblies” of the different representative social sectors and movements. This is important because it helps us to understand the extent to which the organizational form of the MAS is in fact significantly a creature of the Bolivian state’s decentralizing and multicultural measures instituted in the 1990s, as one aspect of its overall neoliberal policies.

Administrative decentralization was an important part of the state’s strategy of “neoliberal multiculturalism” in the 1990s (Hale 2005). The 1994 Popular Participation Law (PPL) gave local municipalities direct control over their own budgets. It also granted legal recognition to traditional forms of local political organization—including urban neighborhood associations, agrarian unions and indigenous ayllus—which it recognized as legally equivalent “territorial base organizations” (OTBs). The PPL thus created a legal precedent of the validity of “customary law” (usos y costumbres). This made sense in neoliberal terms, since the PPL helped to downsize the public sector and was thought to promote civil society NGOs as new agents of privatization now working directly with local municipalities (see Gill 2000). And yet, the state’s own legal recognition of the cultural rights of these diverse local associations as OTBs created an incentive for these groups to advance claims in cultural terms. In the process, state-based multiculturalism opened a “new space for political action” (Kohl and Farthing 2006:144).

If the government’s New Economic Policy of 1985 profoundly compromised the political effectiveness of the COB to mobilize grassroots opposition at the national
level, the neoliberal period has intensified the political relevance of local associational life, in a variety of ways. In both rural and urban contexts, local unions and residential associations (or *juntas vecinales*) became critical extensions of peoples’ everyday tactics of survival. As the public sector shrank and the informal economy expanded, migration to cities rose and neighborhood associations became gateways for rural-to-urban migrants. As Goldstein (2004) shows for Villa Sebastián Pagador on the outskirts of Cochabamba, local associations functioned as self-help cooperatives, as valuable sources of social networks, and as points of entry into the informal economy. They also constituted important means to lobby for municipal services and resources, functioned as partners for rights-based development NGOs, and served as an organizational basis for “citizen security,” among other things.

In rural zones that lack a large government presence, strong local unions were further politicized during this period. In the Chapare the agrarian union was already the collective institution of local governance and problem-solving. The PPL gave coca growers a legitimate way to enter municipal politics, while at the same time, expanding the role of OTBs. By the late 1990s the MAS controlled the municipal politics of the Chapare. The organizational boundary between union and municipal politics often seemed nonexistent. In addition to becoming an important legal and institutional vehicle for cultural claim-making for grassroots groups, the union-municipality nexus became a space for collective decision-making in assembly, and a space of encounter for different popular political traditions. Most notable in the Chapare was the mix of the coca grower tradition of agrarian unionism with the radical vanguardist tradition of in-migrating ex-miners, casualties of the government’s austerity measures. The MAS continues to reflect such a convergence of distinct political experiences. Similar convergences of formerly distinct political identities also characterized the increased relevance of local residential associations in El Alto, a pole of social protest during the same period (see Arbona and Kohl 2004).

In an escalating environment of popular protest, local associations (juntas, unions, or ayllus) were the basis for coordinating the large-scale mobilizations of the Water War in 2000 in Cochabamba, and of the Gas War in 2003, and second Water War in 2005 in El Alto (see Albro 2005 and Lazar 2006), in the form of protest marches, rallies, or blockades. As the coca grower base of the MAS has come to epitomize the anti-imperial rejection of neoliberalism for other protesting sectors, the MAS has been able to build up alliances through an associational politics of the face-to-face assembly that is shared by different OTBs. The state’s legal politics of multicultural recognition throughout the 1990s—in the terms of the PPL and related measures—has been instrumental in helping to determine the scale and form of cultural claims advanced by the MAS and by others, as the claims of neoliberal “indigenous citizens” (see Postero in press). The greater importance of OTBs
also helped to facilitate mutual recognition of shared deprivations in Bolivia’s neoliberal economy among constituent social movement networks that now significantly compose the MAS party.

The Politics of (Mis) Recognition?

Morales’s victory at the polls has kept international attention upon Bolivia, which has been steady at least since the 2000 Water War. Perhaps most remarkable are the persistent cross-currents about what to make of Bolivia’s impressive social ferment during the past six years. Opinions vary. Anti-economic globalization activists have celebrated Bolivia’s popular protests as victorious shots across the bow in the struggle to change the rules of global economic governance in ways that counterbalance the behavior of often rapacious transnational corporate interests.¹³ Evo’s strongly worded condemnations of capitalism have met with approval among social justice activists. Regional indigenous solidarity networks have feted Morales as the new torch bearer for a possible early 21st century decolonization and reversal of fortune for the hemisphere’s indigenous peoples. Concerned commentators in the United States and elsewhere have rushed to characterize the “Evo phenomenon” as a worrisome sign of the resurgence of a radical, anti-American and—they suggest—demagogic Left in Latin America, which is allied with Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, and which will disrupt orderly democratization in the region. At the same time, other critics insist that Morales and the MAS have simply added an indigenous veneer to what amounts to little more than the perpetuation of an essentially neoliberal status quo.¹⁴ These accounts are not easily reconcilable, and the activity of identifying what exactly the MAS’s project entails continues to be a favorite of Bolivian political analysts of all political persuasions.

Persistent suspicions about the MAS are voiced by indigenous leaders, activists, NGOs and other organizations. This includes regular concerns raised over Morales’s indigenous credentials, given his center-Left politics. Aymara leader Felipe Quispe, with whom Morales has contended over the years for control of the CSUTCB (Confederación Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia),¹⁵ flatly maintains, “Evo is not an Indian. He’s a socialist” (Ross 2006). Of the MAS, Quispe explains: “MAS is a hybrid, a mixture. They are not the expression of the indigenous nation. They are from the middle class and the sour destitute Left. MAS is like a whorehouse where leftist prostitutes work. We are different. We are indigenists” (La Razón 2005). The indigenous ayllu movement, CONAMAQ (Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas de Qullasuyu),¹⁶ has already accused president Morales of selling out the indigenous cause and declared him “enemy of the indigenous movement” (CONAMAQ 2006). What I will call “indianist” currents in Bolivia maintain sharp cultural and historical distinctions
between “indigenous” and “colonial” societies. From the indianist point of view, Evo’s political project has made too many fundamental accommodations to Bolivia’s colonial legacy, including—in the first place—opting to participate in the legislative process of the state.

Academic interpreters—myself included—have hedged their bets with regard to Morales’s cultural commitments as well. Some have described him either as an “indo-mestizo” (Gustafson 2002), or as an indigenous-descended leader of the coca growers—who are taken to be a mestizo-ized peasant movement (Ross 2006). Still others have emphasized his merely strategic appropriation of indigenous trappings (Albro 2005), or have situated him at the crux of the next “national-popular project” (Hylton and Thomson 2005). The skepticism concerning Evo’s identity also accompanies a concern for authenticity, as a measure of representativity and justification of political legitimacy. But this fundamentally misconceives the project of Morales and the MAS. The demand for authenticity—intrinsic to many indigenous political currents in Bolivia—is presented from the point of view of a historically unitary cultural and political subject. Morales and the MAS, however, have put forward a form of governance at once “democratic, plural, participative, communitarian, and representative, based on the diversity of the people” (MAS-IPSP 2006)—a decidedly mixed legacy. How might this make sense from an indigenous point of view?

Of Two Bolivias?

One way to do this is through a comparison of the two initiatives, the MAS and the MIP (Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti), which seem to be going in opposite directions. The MAS is now the dominant political force in Bolivia. It has the largest constituency and controls both the congress and the presidency. After modest success in the 2002 elections, Quispe and the MIP did not fare well in 2005, obtaining a little more than two percent of the vote. While Quispe has been a critical figure in the mobilization of protest since 2000, his political project seems to be losing its steam. Indeed, if the MIP is programmatically separatist, the MAS has successfully developed an articulatory role as a point of overlap or convergence for what one analyst astutely calls a “reciprocal exchange of legitimacies” with other social movements (do Alto 2005:18). The emphasis on political “reciprocity” is notable since the MAS, as well as other indigenous movements, identify reciprocity as a characteristically indigenous political value.

In 1973 Tiwanaku was the scene for another landmark in the history of Bolivia’s indigenous politics: the Tiwanaku Manifesto. This was the first systematic attempt to synthesize various indianist currents in the form of katarismo. Indeed, the Manifesto was written by a loose set of mostly Aymara cultural activists who eventually
developed several political options in the late 1970s. Katarismo led to the formation of the CSUTCB, which has served as an institutional basis for indigenous political mobilization in Bolivia up to the present (see Albó 1987). The Manifesto sought to infuse indigenous efforts to organize politically with their own class consciousness, articulating class with ethnicity in the process. Contrary to the assimilationist basis of the post-1952 Bolivian state, the Manifesto asserted that there was “no integration of cultures in Bolivia.” Instead, it promoted the need for “Aymara and Quechua people” to become an “autonomous force.” As Albó (1987:413), and many others, have pointed out, the ideological contribution of katarismo was its reclaiming of a “unifying and mobilizing historical memory” as the basis of Aymara cultural and political resilience.

Felipe Quispe’s MIP is an heir apparent to katarismo. And Quispe’s discourse is a close approximation to that of the kataristas. He often emphasizes the importance of “restoring our historical past” by which he means “pre-Hispanic.” MIP’s political program begins with an account of the “beheading of the system of our original nation” since 1492. It also sets as its basic goal the “reconstitution of historic Qollasuyu,” the name given to the part of the Inca Empire that is now Bolivia. The MIP categorically rejects capitalism, democracy, and political parties as foreign impositions. Instead, it intends to reestablish the “social model of the ayllu,” embodied in the cosmic principle of “harmonious life”—“suma qamaña” in Aymara or “sumaj kawsay” in Quechua (MIP 2005). The program of Quispe and of the MIP is one of indigenous self-determination that includes the reclamation of territory. As Quispe has repeatedly said, “We want to govern ourselves” (Vinelli 2001:21).

Quispe’s is an uncompromising identity politics. He cites as influences Warisata school teacher Avelino Siñani, as well as Reinaga, and kataristas such as Jenaro Flores. He refers to “two Bolivias:” the one of the Indians and the one of the q’aras (non-Indians). He often talks of the importance of “re-Indianizing” mostly poor people of indigenous descent, such as urban workers, rural school teachers, and trades people, who have internalized middle class and mestizo aspirations. As he commented when I interviewed him in 2002: “I would like to put our own ideology in the Indian’s cerebrum.” For Quispe and the MIP, identity-formation is an “integrated and unique” process that is associated, in Aymara, with the ajayu—the spirit, soul, or life-force. For our purpose, it is enough to note the radical discontinuity between Quispe’s world and post-colonial Bolivia, as well as the construction of a unitary and personally remembered Aymara cultural identity that is constituted in an historical longue durée.

The MAS presents a very different picture of reality. Its emergence can be traced to a more immediate set of circumstances and experiences—the low intensity drug war waged since the mid-1980s in the Chapare by the Bolivian government and with United States backing. The MAS, as a political instrument, is the direct result of years of coca grower organizing through networked local agrarian unions.
Morales has served as the general secretary of the MAS’s Six Federations of the Tropics since 1988, and was recently elected again while already serving as Bolivia’s president. As Evo commented on his union post: “I feel more like a union leader than a president” (Bolpress 2006b). His decision to wear two hats is precedent-setting, but also revealing about the MAS itself, as a political instrument that refuses to divert from its “social movement” credentials. This was true throughout the campaign process, as well, during which the MAS operated less like a party and more like what Álvaro García Linera has called a “social network of electoral mobilization” (Stefanoni 2005:20), with each social sector choosing its own candidate for the MAS according to its own principles. Masista leaders, in fact, routinely switch back and forth between their responsibilities as party leaders and their role as local union representatives. While the MAS is, of course, not immune from political manipulations, it appears to offer another option from established patterns of political party “militancy,” as dependent upon relationships of patronage and clientage.

In ideological terms, the MAS has been something of a puzzle. Even sympathizers agree that as a “conglomeration of organizations, it does not enjoy grass roots ideological consistency” (Gómez Balboa 2006). If recalcitrant indianists accuse Evo of having fallen in with the “pseudo-intellectuals” of the traditional Left, masista leaders feel that it “cannot be described as either communist or socialist or even communitarian” (Stefanoni 2005:21). While conducting field work in the mid-1990s in Quillacollo, I interviewed dozens of politically active men who offered stories of alienation from a “dogmatic and patronizing” Left that “ignored our cultural realities.” But the MAS is an atypical mix of leftist and indianist currents that previously kept their distance from each other.24 An informal survey of public statements by Morales and other masista representatives over the last several years registers regular approving references to: Tupaj Katari, Bartolina Sisa,25 Fausto Reinaga, and other indianist figures; Ché Guevara, Fidel Castro, Venezuela’s chavismo, and other bell weathers of the Latin American Left; 1992’s anti-quincentenary campaign and luminaries of the hemisphere’s pan-indigenism like subcomandante Marcos or Rigoberta Menchú; Luis Espinal,26 Adolfo Pérez Esquivel27 and the international human rights movement; Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz28 and other Bolivian “nationalist” reformers; as well as the discourse of democracy. But these references do not provide a clear ideological map of the MAS, and I suggest the MAS is not best understood in ideological terms.

A comparison of the views Quispe and Morales have on Marx helps clarify this. For Quispe, “class struggle is not the only motor of history.” If he partnered with “urban Marxists” in the late-1980s, founding the Ayllus Rojos, he now describes these people as “over the hill Marxists who didn’t understand our culture” (Guamán 2001:22). When pushed to better define his relationship to Marxism, Quispe suggested that Marx used “the communitarian form of the ayllus” as the basis for his own writings (Vinelli 2001:22). Evo’s relationship to Marx is quite different. A key MAS campaign manager
explains that the MAS is not a revolutionary party nor has it developed a Marxist doctrine: “Our ideology is under construction; it is not defined and it is fed by different forces, movements, and distinct actors” (Buxton 2005). When asked if he would describe himself as a Marxist, Evo’s answer is sharp: “What is Marxism . . .? I can talk about Marxism but what importance does it have . . .? Don’t speak to me about Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, we lose time. Here it is about understanding and living our problems in order to propose solutions” (Fuentes 2005). While Quispe “Indianizes” Marx, Evo does not see Marx as relevant for the immediacy of his concerns.

The historical analysis of Quispe and the MIP begins with the long-term history of European colonialism. The point of departure for Evo and the MAS is the short-term history of post-1985 state-driven neoliberalism and the popular responses to it. The MAS’s “Ten Point Program” is largely devoid of any ideological positioning. With its disdain for ideological content, tactical flexibility, rejection of a traditional party structure, reliance upon extra-political sources of legitimacy, successful cross-sector alliances, emphasis on “works” over “ideas,” and use of Andean cultural frames, the MAS is significantly continuous with the neo-popular moment of the late 1980s in Bolivia, which opened up a political space for the MAS to emerge. As with the earlier neo-populism, the success of the MAS has depended upon occupying multiple cultural locations on the political map instead of being rooted in fixed positions with sharply defined constituencies. Each represents successive steps in the process of transformation of indigenous movements into central protagonists of a new national-popular project in Bolivia: a project that would resemble neither a mestizo past nor a separate indigenous future.

From Identity to . . .?

The success of Evo Morales and the MAS suggests that it is time to rethink how indigenous politics are represented in Bolivia, and perhaps in Latin America, beyond the fundamental recognition of indigenous identity. Since the 1960s, indigenous politics in Bolivia have shared objectives with other regional indigenous movements, including political and cultural autonomy and self-determination as a distinct “nation” or “nations” within a plurinational Bolivia (see Diaz-Polanco 1997). The Tiwanaku Manifesto of 1973 characteristically assumed that the advancement of the country’s indigenous peoples “must spring from our own values.” Explanations of the political “return of the Indian” by academics and others have understood this injunction in terms of a “cultural politics of identity” (e.g., Hale 1997) enacted by states, indigenous leaders and organizations and other activists. But the MAS—as an irreducibly plural, transactional, and coalitional indigenous instrument—complicates this picture.

Even with innovative efforts to map out the fluidity of “an interactive view of identity as a collage of conflicting meanings,” where the production of indigenous identity
is multi-sited, and the work of cultural difference is “constructed, contested, negotiated, imposed, imputed, resisted, and redefined” in lively debates within a given movement (Warren 1998:72–73), the attention of activists and observers has remained fixed on stubborn assertions of the particularity of indigenous subjecthood—including tracing processes of “de-Indianization” and “re-Indianization” over time, and alongside multiple ways of being indigenous in the present. The potential identity crisis often diagnosed as being at the heart of the MAS does not deauthenticate it, I suggest, as a legitimate expression of indigenous interests. But as the MAS illustrates rather well, the repeated popular protests in Bolivia of the last six years are not best understood through the equation of cultural facts of “identity” with the political goals of “autonomy,” in exclusive reference to “indigenous peoples” as a unique political subject position. Instead, the MAS challenges us with describing and make sense of what a thoroughly plural indigenous project looks like both inside and out.

Academic accounts of Andean Bolivia might match up too well with assumptions of more radically Indianist political projects. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s (1993) work is a widely used scholarly and activist point of reference. Her analysis of Bolivia’s “internal colonialism,” nevertheless, shares characteristics of Quispe’s rhetoric of “two Bolivias.” Rivera’s project seeks to avoid the dichotomous trap of an ahistorical essentialization of the Indian and the European, while also seeking to distance itself from the common “melting pot” assumptions of mestizaje. Instead, she traces out the polarizing and hierarchizing work of a “caste structure” that works as a cultural substrate that, à la Foucault, segregates, excludes, and subordinates, perpetuating the “colonial cycle” (1993:33). More recently, Hylton and Thomson (2005:45) have described the “underlying dynamics” of Bolivia’s protests as just the “latest cycle of resistance” in the last 200 years, and as derived from a “subaltern political history” originating in a “matrix of indigenous community politics.” In fact, Evo, too, has also referred to Bolivia’s “internal colonialism” (Padgett 2006), but in the present tense, and not as a foundational truth in the way it is for Quispe, for the project of the restoration of the ayllus, or for that matter, for the caracoles project of the Zapatistas.

My point is not to deny, of course, that indigenous groups in Bolivia and in other parts of the world advance grievances as indigenous peoples. Nor is it to ignore that to be an “Indian” increases the likelihood of impoverishment, discrimination, or second-class citizenship in most cases. Nor am I suggesting that “self-determination” is no longer the goal of many indigenous movements, including in Bolivia. Indigenous “identity” remains a central, if problematic, concern of these movements. Joanne Rappaport (2005) has recently shown that the frontier between inside and outside, if fluid, is a critically important space to traverse for indigenous activists in Colombia. But I am concerned with the complacency that the interpretations of indigenous projects often exhibit vis à vis what Charles Taylor (1989) has called the “ethics of authenticity.” If we grant that authenticities are constructed as strategies and as
policies (Ramos 1998), we nevertheless still pursue identification of what Taylor called the “inner voice” of indigenous cultural projects and their interpreters—that is, interpretations of indigenous identity privileged as a function of their proximity to sources of indigenous distinctiveness—sometimes too much so.

For the Bolivian case, this is expressed through a focus on indigenous credentials, and with interpretations of indigenous projects as aligned with unitary historical subjects. It is not coincidental that the social movements that have most publicly broken with Morales and the MAS—Quispe, CONAMAQ, and the COB—have also been more intransigent in defending what COB leader Jaime Solares has called its “independence of class” (Econoticias 2006). As a cultural analysis, this reflects the priority of “possessing an identity” (Jackson and Warren 2005:561)—as a person, a community, or a grassroots group—over the transactional exchanges, the convergences of experience, and the efforts of translation informing indigenous-based coalition building in Bolivia in the present. A concern with multiple ways of being “indigenous” is a start in the right direction. But to understand indigenous agency and belonging, as expressed by the MAS, is to trace out how indigenous cultural politics have become instrumental to solve other kinds of problems, for other projects and for multiple political subjects. With the MAS, indigenous agency is distributed within and across the projects of the coca growers, of multicultural state legislation, of a renovated Left, of new nationalisms, in cities, in the politics of assembly, among professionals, of the priorities of NGOs, and of everyday survival during the neoliberal era in Bolivia and internationally. Given the plurality of social sectors and networks, of institutions, voices, and ideas composing the MAS—as a loose political coalition—it makes better sense to frame current indigenous developments in Bolivia less in terms of identity and more in relation to an evolving political public.

Postscript

Without doubt the most critical test for the Morales presidency will be Bolivia’s upcoming constitutional referendum process, slated to begin in August 2006. Evo and the MAS won a majority in the vote for delegates to the referendum this past July, but not quite enough to be able to unilaterally impose its agenda. Morales has appointed an indigenous woman and a former coca grower leader, Silvia Lazarte, to preside over the referendum process. And he has stressed that the constitutional referendum—which can deliberate for up to a year—will have “absolute power” to determine the nation’s future constitution. However, this process has already been, and will continue to be, complicated by at least two basic factors: the terms of participation in the referendum for Bolivia’s many social movements and the regional autonomy movement led by Santa Cruz. Even as Evo has stressed that the referendum must reflect the priorities of the social movements, he rejected a call to elect referendum delegates using
the customary procedures (usos y costumbres) of traditional groups such as indigenous ayllus, insisting instead upon a “one person, one vote” format. In addition, the Santa Cruz autonomy movement already successfully forestalled repeated calls for a constitutional referendum in 2004, and is very likely to seek to sabotage this effort as well. The referendum process is likely to become a referendum on democracy in Bolivia, and the role of alternative and indigenous forms of political participation in any future democracy. Morales’s legacy is wedded to the referendum process. For this to be successful, Morales has to neutralize the fractional minefield of regionalism, avoid the impression of the “imposition” of a new constitution, and insure that the new magna carta does not simply address indigenous concerns. If Evo emerges from this process as the next populist caudillo, and if the MAS comes to represent an Évismo (like Venezuela’s Chávez) on Bolivia’s new political landscape, the optimism of the present will quickly give way to a disappointing future for all Bolivians.

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Notes

1For an account of these developments see Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing’s recent Impasse in Bolivia: Neoliberal Hegemony and Popular Resistance (2006).

2The pollera is the “traditional” gathered skirts of mostly urban women of indigenous descent in Bolivia.

3The whipala is the flag of indigenous nationalism, first adopted by Aymara kataristas in the late 1970s to express their “unity in diversity.”

4A ch’alla is a ceremonial aspersion of liquid, usually chicha, which forms part of many ritual acts in Bolivia and throughout the Andes.

5Alasitas (literally, “buy me!” in Aymara) is a large urban Aymara festival focused on the purchase of miniature replicas of items that people hope to receive.

6Ekeko is the Aymara god of abundance. The central figure of Alasitas, he is typically depicted as a fat and smiling figure laden with a diversity of goods.

7That is, symbolic reference favors Bolivia’s highland (colla, or originario) rather than lowland (camba, or indígena) indigenous peoples.
The “ayllu” is a traditional and pre-colonial Andean form of territorial, political, and social organization.

The best established and most ambitious indigenous intellectual project in Bolivia is the Taller de Historia Oral Andina (THOA), founded in 1983.

See http://www.barrioflores.net/weblog/archives/2006/02/evo_morales_tiw.html

For Fondo Indígena’s mission statement go to: http://www.fondoindigena.org/quienes/.

For details on the organization of the original Estado Mayor from 2003, see: http://nadir.org/nadir/initiatives/app/free/imf/bolivia/txt/2003/0120_estado_mayor.htm

This is elaborated more fully in my account of Oscar Olivera and the 2000 Water War (Albro 2005).

Sociologist and self-described “anti-imperialist” writer James Petras has adopted this position in his writings on Morales and the MAS (see Petras 2006; see also Fuentes 2006).

The CSUTCB has been the primary basis of “indigenous peasant” political organizing since at least the late 1970s.

Founded in 1997, CONAMAQ seeks the large-scale restoration of the ayllu.

I am using “indianist” to refer broadly to the contemporary inheritors of the separatist indigenous politics and writing of Fausto Reinaga, founder of the Partido Indio in 1962.

The complete Tiwanaku Manifesto is available on the NativeWeb at: http://nativeweb.org

Author’s interview with Felipe Quispe. La Paz, Bolivia. November 12, 2002.

The escuela-ayllu of Warisata was a highly original ten-year educational experiment in Bolivia begun in 1931, based on socialist philosophy and Aymara cultural principles (see Luykx 1999: 45–46).

Author’s interview with Felipe Quispe. La Paz, Bolivia. November 12, 2002.

See MIP’s program of government: http://www.pachakuti.net.

Space does not permit a fuller account of the creation and development of the MAS as a political movement. For more details consult Albro 2005, Albó 2006, and Stefanoni 2003.

For further discussion of this point consult do Alto (2005).

Bartolina Sisa was the wife of Aymara and neo-Inca martyr Tupaj Katari.

Luis Espinal was a Jesuit priest and human rights activist in Bolivia who was tortured and assassinated in 1980.

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel was a human rights activist during Argentina’s Dirty War who spoke on behalf of the “disappeared” and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980.

Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz was a Bolivian writer, politician and founder of a center-left political party. He promoted Bolivia’s economic independence, but was assassinated in 1980.

I am referring to both the UCS (Unidad Cívica Solidaridad) and CONDEPA (Conciencia de Patria), two “neo-popular” parties that appeared unexpectedly on the political horizon in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and experienced immediate if short-lived success, based on their success identifying new popular constituencies (see Mayorga 2002).

In fact Rivera Cusicanqui has recently been working as an advisor to the MAS, helping to shape a new coca policy.

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