

Andean Ethno-cultural Politics and their Effects on Social Violence: Evidence and Hypothesis from the Bolivian Case

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Abstract

Although ethnic-related issues and their disruptive potential have been widely explored in peace and conflict academic literature, little attention has been paid to the recent shift towards 'the indigenous' in Latin American politics. This is mainly due to the fact that, so far, no major ethnically-based armed conflict has taken place in the region. However, other forms of conflictivity are proliferating. This paper demonstrates how social conflicts are increasing due to the implementation of a set of normative and institutional reforms linking ethnic identities with systems of resources and rights allocation. Relying upon extensive fieldwork in Bolivia, it focuses on the relationship between the implementation of a new plurinational model of state and citizenship, and the recent conflicts over land and natural resources, revealing how the new normative framework contributes to social fragmentation. Although the possibility of a scenario of generalized conflict cannot be excluded a priori, we offer some hypotheses concerning specific characteristics of Latin America and particularly the Bolivian context, which could help contain ethnic conflicts.

Keywords: Ethno-cultural Politics; Identity; Conflict; Bolivia; Land.

Introduction

In Latin America, the debate on ethno-cultural diversity has been catalyzed by the 'indigenous issue',¹ especially in countries where the proportions of autochthonous pre-Colombian population are

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¹ We will use the term *indigenous* broadly to define those social groups in Latin America that self-identify or are classified according to ethnic categories based on their pre-colonial origin. We will use the term *indigenism* or *indigenist* to describe those cultural and political movements born in the 80s and 90s due to strong exogenous influence from international cooperation and anthropologists. Finally, the term *indian* or *indianism* will be used to indicate a political and intellectual current developed during the 1960s and 1970s based on subaltern reappropriation of the colonialist vocabulary to support their own narrative of social struggle. The regional and international debates on Latin America are dominated by a narrative in which the idea of indigenous is central and separated from the conceptual universe related to 'ethnicity' and the 'ethnic'. This could be considered the result of different regional configurations of dominant lexical categories as well as an important element in the construction of social and political narratives. Our hypothesis is that the widespread use of the term 'indigenous' and the absence

relatively high. These countries include: Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia and Brazil. The shift in these contexts was the result of a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors.

In some cases, in response to intense mobilization of indigenous social sectors, the governments concluded that the old model of assimilation was not appropriate or viable given the historical and demographic specificities in their national contexts, and that a renegotiation of the social pact was inevitable. However, those social mobilizations were often carried out under the influence of external actors, in particular international organizations and cooperation agencies, and some Latin Americanist academic circles.

At the same time the subsequent reforms at the normative and institutional levels, as well as the governments' attitude towards this issue, were deeply conditioned by a new international logic. This logic was based on some striking assumptions, namely: that the issues regarding the treatment of ethno-cultural diversity became "matters of legitimate international concern and consequently do not constitute exclusively an affair of the respective state;"² and that the indigenous issue, which has always had a unique standing within international law³, had to be addressed through a series of special measures. In principle, these measures constituted exceptions to many of the post-war international rules regarding ethno-cultural minorities: namely, the recognition of land claims, language rights and customary law and their aspirations "to exercise control over their own institutions."⁴ The most current international instrument, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, focuses on the individual and collective rights of indigenous groups. It emphasizes the importance of guaranteeing them the right to maintain their institutions, cultures and traditions, and to pursue development according to their own needs and aspirations.

The new international status of Latin American ethno-cultural groups heightened a sort of 'indigenous paradox' based on the 'exceptionality' of those groups compared to minorities in other world regions (such as Africa and ex-Soviet countries). This paradox consists in the widespread agreement (a sort of 'common sense') that certain Latin American groups that claim a pre-colonial autochthonous origin (for whom the term 'indigenous' works as a sort of proper name⁵) must be: (a) recognized, i.e. acknowledged and accepted as different ethno-cultural units within the nation-states; (b) protected from 'external' interferences, in particular from the state and transnational companies;

of the 'ethnic-related' linguistic universe is an attempt to connote positively the identity of autochthonous collectivities, differentiating Latin American identitarian and cultural plurality from the 'bad reputation' of the bellicose autochthonous groups of the African continent, or from Balkans, Caucasus and central Asia minorities, and even from their historically closer North American brothers. The creation of these semantic barriers and differentiations would favor the development of relatively autonomous debates around common theoretical and practical issues, such as the institutional and judicial management of cultural diversity and the prevention and transformation of identity-based conflicts, while weakening historical and cross-regional perspectives.

² Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Meeting of Experts on National Minorities*. Geneva, 19 July 1991. Available at: www.osce.org/item/14125.html.

³ For the differences between 'indigenous people' and 'national minorities' and their normative and everyday usages, see Kymlicka, Will (2007). *Multicultural Odysseys. Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 13.

⁴ International Labor Organization (1989). *169 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of the International Labor Organization*.

⁵ The paradox is also evident in the clear differences between the semiotic and symbolic universes commonly associated with terms such as 'indigenous', 'ethnic group', 'cultural minority', and 'tribe' in different world regions.

(c) entitled to special rights and privileged access to certain (natural) resources. These postulates are justified by various assumptions. Among others: indigenous peoples possess a unique cultural patrimony that is worthy of protection; they should be compensated for the exploitation and exclusion that they have suffered since the colonial epoch; they hold a particular moral stand which is legitimated by their 'authenticity' and their peculiar way of living (e.g. supposedly being more respectful of the environment).

The international acceptance of the special status of indigenous minorities was mainly due to the lack of strong *realpolitik* arguments. Indeed, Latin American states did not perceive a real threat to their territorial integrity and sovereignty from granting a certain degree of autonomy to indigenous groups. Although international security issues are not entirely absent in relation to indigenous claims,⁶ they pale in comparison to the major moral arguments, which advocate for the recognition, protection and empowerment of autochthonous minorities. In general, these groups have no irredentist goals,⁷ they represent the most vulnerable socio-economic sectors of Latin American societies,⁸ and their trans-border networks are still weak and mainly symbolic.⁹ At the same time, it is evident that, for the very same reasons, it would be impossible to extend international norms on self government and special rights to national minorities worldwide. Despite the moral and political contradictions this would imply, this issue still lacks consideration within the current debate.¹⁰

The move toward the recognition of ethno-cultural diversity in Latin America opened up spaces for participation and voice as well as access to a particular set of rights and resources for historically marginalized sectors of the population.¹¹ However, questions about the long-term sustainability and risks of these culturally-based solutions have yet to be addressed, especially in terms of conflict and social fragmentation. In fact, while the indigenous struggles in the region have often been considered one of multiculturalism's "most successful stories,"¹² both by international organizations, governments and

⁶ Lee Van Cott, Donna (1996). *500 Years of Confrontation: Indigenous Rights and State Security Policy in Latin America*. Institute for National Strategic Studies, McNair Paper No 53.

⁷ Even if there are groups that define themselves in terms of 'nations', in general, their claims refer rather to local autonomous government and special rights within existing states. Martuccelli, Danilo (2009). *Universalismo y Particularismo: Mentiras Culturalistas y Disoluciones Sociológicas*. In: Tenti Fanfani, Emilio (ed.). *Diversidad Cultural, Desigualdad Social y Estrategias de Políticas Educativas*. Buenos Aires: IIEP/UNESCO, p. 47.

⁸ Zúñiga García-Falces, Nieves (2008). *Afrontar la Pobreza Indígena. Circunstancia*, Vol. 6, No.17. Available at: http://www.ortegayasset.edu/fog/ver/796/circunstancia/ano-vi---n-17---septiembre-2008/ensayos/afrontar-la-pobreza-indigena#*.

⁹ Le Bot, Yvon (2009). *La Grande Révolte Indienne*. Paris: Robert Leffort, 16.

¹⁰ Kymlicka, 2007, p. 278.

¹¹ Lee Van Cott, Donna (2003). *Institutional Change and Ethnic Parties in South America. Latin American Politics and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 1-39; Zuazo, Moira (2009). *¿Cómo Nació el MAS? La Ruralización de la Política en Bolivia*. La Paz: Fundación Ebert.

¹² The Latin American debate on the 'indigenous issue' was highly influenced by the so-called theories of recognition (Taylor, Charles (1999). *The Politics of Recognition*. In: Taylor, Charles and Habermas, Jürgen (eds). (1999). *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994; Kymlicka, Will (2001). *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Honneth, Axel (1996) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge: Polity Press), which introduced a key thesis of contemporary political philosophy, that our identity is shaped by recognition or its absence. In other words, our identity needs recognition to be defined and completed. This intellectual debate has helped shape new moral and legal norms concerning ethno-cultural diversity, both at the international level and in many national contexts. For example, multiculturalism, which could be considered one of the most important terms at stake in this debate, has not only a descriptive meaning that defines the simultaneous presence in a given territory of individuals belonging to different cultures, but is also often used in reference to specific institutional and political

academic scholars,¹³ they conceal a more complicated and nuanced reality. After almost three decades of dominance by this new international paradigm, and given the rise of leftist governments (namely in Bolivia and Ecuador) which made the ethno-cultural dimension a key component of their new national-popular projects,¹⁴ an examination of the shadow lines and side-effects of these processes is required in order to uncover implicit assumptions, misleading interpretations, and unintended consequences.

Although ethnic-related issues and their disruptive potential have been widely explored by peace and conflict studies, the recent shift of Latin American politics towards 'the indigenous' has not received much attention within this body of literature, mainly because there are no major 'ethnically-based' armed conflicts in the region. However, as we will argue in this paper, other forms of social conflictivity are persisting and, in certain cases, increasing, as a result of the implementation of a set of normative and institutional reforms, which directly link ethnic identities and cultural belonging with systems of resources and rights allocation. On the one hand, these changes satisfied international standards and raised complacent evaluations of multilateral organizations. On the other hand, they incentivized instrumental and functional uses of ethno-cultural categories (often in correspondence to socio-economic kind of claims), and played a key role in shaping identity-building and collective organization processes, eventually increasing fragmentation and social conflictivity. These effects are particularly evident in contexts characterized by relatively weak state institutions, wide socio-economic gaps, a high proportion of autochthonous population, and few legitimated spaces for political negotiation and bargaining.

Given the sensitivity of the theoretical aspects around the concept of 'identity' a few remarks are in order. This work focuses on the collective dimension of identities and, in particular, on their dynamic and inter-relational traits. In contrast with essentialist and primordialist explications that conceive identities as immutable, objective and unique essences, sociologic constructivism and relational theories state that every identity is socially built, through dynamic and continuous processes¹⁵. In particular, some scholars, and mainly Fredrik Barth¹⁶ emphasize the relational dimension of identity-building in terms of 'limits' and 'boundaries', where interrelations among groups mold the descriptive categories of their members, generating identities that are at the same time objective and subjective. In other words, identity is a way through which human groups organize their relationships and exchanges, and it is thus always dialectically related to the 'other', and to the context in which it is

arrangements or a theoretical and normative model of coexistence among cultures (Wieviorka, Michel (1998). *Is Multiculturalism the Solution? Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Vol. 21, No. 5, p.882; Inglis, Christine (1996) *Multiculturalism: New Policy Responses to Diversity*. Most: UNESCO, p. 49). On a critic to the politics of recognition moving from the Latin American case see Fontana, Lorenza and Sparti, Davide (2012) "Identità indotte: l'uso politico del riconoscimento in Bolivia", *Studi Culturali*, 9 (2), pp. 175-200.

¹³ Kymlicka, 2007, p. 19.

¹⁴ For a rich and multifaceted discussion of the Latin American way towards multiculturalism see Christian Gros & Dumoulin Kervran, David (eds.) (2012). *Le Multiculturalisme. Un Modèle Latino-américain? 'Au Concret'*. Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle. In the introduction, the authors formulate the hypothesis of the existence of a "Latin American multicultural *doxa*" that developed in spite of important international interferences.

¹⁵ Cuhe, Denys (1996). *La Notion de Culture dans les Sciences Sociales*. Paris: La Découverte, p. 101; Sparti, Davide (2010). *L'Identità Incompiuta*. Bologna: Il Mulino, p. 31.

¹⁶ Barth, Fredrik ((1998) [1969]) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The social Organization of Culture Difference*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

inserted. In a broader sense, the political dimension of identities could be expressed both from the demand side (content), as pointed out by Tilly's definition of political identity¹⁷, as well as from the structural characteristics of identities (form), which would be mobilized for strategic purposes. The latter has been the focus of the so called 'instrumentalist' current, which conceives identity, and especially ethnicity, as a resource which individuals and groups use to satisfy tactical needs¹⁸. However, in this framework, we are not relying on the assumption that an 'instrumental' use of identity is something regressive, or that it would necessarily lead to conflict. In fact, there exist also cases in which the identitarian restructuring establishes a successful symbiosis with imported or imposed ways of living, as suggested by the work of Comaroff on the commodification of ethnic identity¹⁹. Nor do we support a pure 'instrumental' interpretation of (ethnic) identities, where the latter should *only* be considered a tool accessed under certain opportunity structures. As anthropological and sociological works have shown, identities are also a set of deeply held but perhaps unconscious beliefs, practices, logics, and sensibilities that emerge and recede from consciousness, sometimes asserting itself almost as an overt ideology and other times receding to an unspoken or barely understood sense or affect. Indeed we considered that, whatever (exogenous or endogenous) reasons trigger a cultural and identitarian change, the effects on social groups and individuals will be real. In other words, the instrumental use of a certain identity would potentially lead to a deep transformation of societies, linked to a process of the interiorization and appropriation of the new identity. People would thus behave not 'as if they were' but 'since they are' new identitarian beings.

Bolivia constitutes an interesting case study to explore the nexus between the implementation of a normative and institutional apparatus inspired by multicultural and plurinational ideologies, and the consequences on identity-building, social fragmentation and conflict. The following section of this paper will present an overview of socio-political reforms from the 1990s until the second mandate of Evo Morales (began in 2010) which have shaped a new plurinational model of state and citizenship. Relying upon extensive fieldwork in the Andean country,²⁰ in the third section, we will focus on the relationship between the changes in the agrarian law and recent conflicts over land and natural resources as an example of the interdependence between the new ethnic-oriented norms and the effects on the social body in terms of conflict. Historical, empirical, and discursive evidence from different social actors will be used to support our hypothesis that the new ethno-cultural paradigm has introduced incentives favouring an instrumental mobilization of ethno-cultural identities by social groups. This in turn has triggered new conflictive dynamics at the local level. To exemplify this process, we will focus on two

¹⁷ Tilly, Charles (2005). *Identities, Boundaries and Social Ties*. Boulder: Paradigm

¹⁸ Baud, Michael; Koonings, Kees; Oostindie, Pert; Ouweneel, Arij; Silva, Patricio (eds.) (1996). *Etnicidad como Estrategia en América Latina y el Caribe*. Quito: Abya-Yala.

¹⁹ Comaroff John & Comaroff, Jean (2009). *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago: Chicago University Press

²⁰ The empirical research was carried out between January 2010 and June 2011 and includes: semi-directed interviews with almost eighty persons and eight research workshops with political actors, members of international organizations, national, local leaders and grassroots of the main social movements, as well as Bolivian intellectuals and journalists. These two main sources of empirical data were complemented by participative observations during meetings of unions and indigenous organizations, and in the framework of governmental institutions. A large part of them were carried out in La Paz, while complementary fieldwork was realized in the cities of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Sucre and Cochabamba, and in the rural regions of Apolo (Franz Tamayo province) and Quila Quila (Oropeza province).

cases of land and resource conflicts between the government and indigenous organizations, as well as among different rural movements (peasant vs. indigenous).

In a context characterized by high social tensions and the growing ethnicization of politics and instrumentalization of ethnic identities, a possible scenario involving generalized conflict could not be excluded *a priori*. However, despite these risk factors, in the fourth section, we will argue that, in Bolivia, and in Latin America in general, it remains unlikely that ethno-cultural conflicts will become a serious national security concern or a source of widespread violence. In other words, the intellectual and analytical exercise here shifts away from the more traditional question: 'why are we facing an ethnic conflict?', to query 'why are we not confronted with a more generalized ethnic conflict, given the presence of environmental conditions that potentially favour its explosion?' Our answer will be based on a set of hypotheses concerning some specific characteristics of Latin America and, in particular, the Bolivian context, which serve as counter-forces, eventually containing the explosion of generalized ethnic fights: the heritage and the memory of dictatorships, the transformation in the regional geopolitical landscape and the growing importance of new supra-state institutions, the democratic consolidation and the improvement of socio-economic conditions, and the strength of para-institutional political and mediation channels.

The Bolivian 'Cultural Revolution'

Bolivia is situated between the Andean and the Amazonian region, in the heart of South America. It has about 10 million inhabitants, one of the highest levels of social income inequality in the world (according to the World Bank, its Gini index was 58.2 in 2009) and the greatest proportion of a rural population on the American subcontinent. Bolivia has a diverse and vulnerable geography, which includes extreme ecosystems such as the Andean highlands (which range from 3000 to 5000 meters high), the Amazonian region, and the arid pampas of the Chaco (generally called the lowlands). According to the Bolivian National Institute of Statistics, about half of the Bolivian population is poor (51.3%), while 26% is living under the extreme poverty threshold. Moreover, according to the National Census of 2001, 6 out of 10 citizens declared themselves members of an autochthonous group.²¹

Since the large electoral victory of Evo Morales, the Aymara²², coca-leaf producers' union leader in 2005, Bolivia has experienced a historic transition popularly known as a *proceso de cambio* (process of change) or a *revolución cultural* (cultural revolution). After the failure of the corporatist model of the 52 National Revolution and the neoliberal projects of the 1980s and 1990s, this new political phase represents the latest attempt to address, under a culturalist flag, the structural problems stemming from the as-yet unresolved weaknesses of the modern nation-state typical of postcolonial countries. Its recipe is to address the *longue durée* (prolonged) crisis, the endemically weak conditions of statehood and citizenship, through the implementation of a project whose key word is neither politics nor economics but culture, or more precisely pluri-culture.

²¹ www.ine.gov.bo

²² A native ethnic group in the Andes region of South America.

Given the historical difficulties of imposing the nation-state model within post-colonial contexts traditional institutional instruments were discarded in favour of alternative models which would be more 'comfortable' for the autochthon reality. In this sense, the political process has been labelled as anti-modern and post-modern, although it could be considered an effort to address some of the main challenges of modernity itself. In particular: the conjugation of universal values and cultural relativisms, and the recognition of equality within differences. This may explain why the Andean country has raised so much attention and expectations worldwide. In fact, the Bolivian experience forms part of a wider trend that can be observed in different regions around the world where, for a few decades now, the resurgence of identitarian claims – whether ethnically, religiously or culturally connoted – has been gaining ground. These struggles are often perceived as challenges to the stability of the social and political order based on the nation-state. In particular, concerns are rising over whether the democratic nation would still be able to sustainably "control, through the rational ambition of citizenship, the inevitable conflicts provoked by the resources division", as well as "the behaviours inspired by the feelings of belonging or identification to ethnic communities."²³

The roots of the upswing of Evo Morales and his party, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movements towards Socialism, or MAS), can be found in the political crisis that, between 2000 and 2005, exploded through a series of massive conflicts between the lower classes and the neoliberal elites in the government (the so-called Water War, the Coca War and the Gas War).²⁴ Since Morales' electoral victory in 2005, a new national strategy towards development and democratization has been forged - whose key words are decolonization, nationalization and pluralism. Unlike past popular mobilizations, one of the key traits of the recent Bolivian political process is the important legislative and institutional reforms that backed it. Not only are the image and imaginary of the Bolivian nation changing, but its institutional and legal apparatus as well.

The new Constitution approved by referendum in January 2009 is the most important example of the renovation of the legal and institutional paradigm. Among the most important points, it ratifies the recognition of 36 native indigenous peoples,²⁵ and it introduces a radical change by substituting the geopolitical paradigm of the unitarian, republican state with a plurinational state. Under this framework, new forms of territorial autonomies (indigenous, municipal, departmental and regional) were formed, elections of local authorities are permitted using customary norms, and communitarian justice within the 'native indigenous peasant' juridical framework gained equal weight with respect to the more traditional justice system.²⁶

²³ Schnapper, Dominique (1994). *La Communauté des Citoyens. Sur l'Idée Moderne de Nation*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 185.

²⁴ Dangl, Benjamin (2007). *The Price of Fire. Resource Wars and Social Movements in Bolivia*. Edinburgh, Oakland, West Virginia: AK Press.

²⁵ Among the most important consequences, native languages become official in their respective areas of influence, and it is compulsory for public employers to learn at least one of them.

²⁶ For the *Pacto de Unidad* (Unity Pact) – the umbrella organization that gathered indigenous peasant movements and that constituted the main corporative grassroots of the government – the Plurinational State "is a model of political organization for the decolonization of our nations and peoples, reaffirming, recuperating and strengthening out territorial autonomy (...). For the construction and consolidation of the plurinational State, the principles of juridical pluralism, unity, complementarity, reciprocity, equity, solidarity and the moral and ethic principle to stop all kind of corruption are fundamentals" (Proposal for a new Political Constitution "Por un Estado Plurinacional y la

In part, these political changes represent a deepening of the neoliberal agenda of reforms implemented during the 1990s, which promoted some important institutional innovations. Among them: the formal recognition of the multicultural nature of the Bolivian state, administrative decentralization through the institution of mayors' popular elections and municipalities' financial autonomy (Popular Participation Law), and the creation of the *Tierras Comunitarias de Origen* (Native Communitarian Lands, or TCOs), i.e. great extensions of land attributed on the basis of autochthonous origin claimed by certain social groups, especially in the Amazonian region. Those opportunities were cashed by rural leaders that started to occupy, firstly, local political positions and, afterwards, party delegations within the National Congress, paving the way for a rural-based movement such as MAS.²⁷

The implementation of legislative initiatives of the neoliberal governments during the 1990s was benefited by the fundamental support of bilateral and multilateral cooperation agencies. Influenced by international debate and the new normative approach and a wave of intellectual fascination about indigenous issues, international cooperation programs and *ad hoc* multilateral organizations²⁸ with an ethno-developmentist focus multiplied. In Bolivia, one of the most important and effective of these was the Danish development cooperation (DANIDA) program *Support to the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which aimed to foster the "recognition and implementation of the rights of indigenous peoples, in combination with the active and democratic participation of the indigenous population in an economic and political development process."²⁹

These normative changes led to a reconfiguration of the political space and of its actors, emphasizing their ethno-cultural features, which triggered a process of political ethnicization.³⁰ Not only are they the basis of a new relationship between ethnicity and class³¹ and of the rise of new culturally-based regional movements,³² but they also promoted a new citizenship ideal. For the first time in history, the indigenous issue was treated as a problem of citizenship rights.³³ If the nationalist revolution of 1952 inaugurated in Bolivia a regime of corporatist citizenship, the return of democracy in 1982 after a convulsive series of *golpes* marked the shift towards a regime of neoliberal citizenship. The trend toward identity-based citizenship in the following period was influenced by both the 'multicultural revolution' and the 'indigenous paradox' consolidation. Within this framework, we would like to highlight the

Autodeterminación de los Pueblos y las Naciones Indígenas, Originarias y Campesinas", Sucre, 5th August 2006, quoted in Stefanoni, Pablo (2012). Bolivia Hoy: Rupturas, Inercias y Desafíos. *Bolivian Studies Journal*, Vol. 18, p. 29).

²⁷ Stefanoni, Pablo, 2012, p.7.

²⁸ One of the most important is the Fund for the Development of Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean (*Fondo para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas de América Latina y El Caribe*), which is a hispano-american cooperation program created in 1992 specializing in the "promotion of self-development and the recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples" (www.fondoindigena.org).

²⁹ DANIDA & IWGIA (2010). *The Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Cooperation between Denmark and Bolivia (2005-2009)*. La Paz: DANIDA/IWGIA, p.12.

³⁰ Lavaud, Jean-Pierre (2006). *Bolivie : Vers L'Anarchie Segmentaire ? L'Ethnicisation' de la Vie Politique*. *Hérodote*, Vol. 4, No. 123, p. 62-81 ; Stefanoni, Pablo (2010). "Que Hacer con los Indios..." *Y Otros Traumas Irresueltos de la Colonialidad*. La Paz: Plural, 2010; Le Bot, 2009.

³¹ Author, 2012.

³² Miguel Centellas (2010). Savina Cuéllar and Bolivia's New Regionalism. *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 161-176.

³³ Martuccelli, 2009, p. 46.

introduction, from the 1990s onward, of: (1) identity and ethnic-related criteria as a basis for rights' attribution; (2) the nexus between identity and resource allocation.

These two points are clearly exemplified by the new set of norms which regulates land tenure and, in part, the management of natural resources. The Law 1715 (or Law of the *Instituto Nacional de la Reforma Agraria*, National Institute of the Agrarian Reform, or INRA) of 1996 introduced a distinction between individual and collective land property rights, and defined a new type of land tenure: the TCO. This norm indirectly formalizes for the first time the idea of territory as indivisible, collective, non-mortgageable and tax-free unit.³⁴ By restricting acquisition, sale and inheritance, it implies certain limitations to private property rights and hence accumulation.³⁵ Another important point of this Law was its attempt to resolve the problem of overlapping titles, mainly provoked by bad institutional management during the implementation of the first agrarian reform of 1953. The principles of exclusivity and exclusiveness of land property rights were established, forcing many community members to choose between individual or collective titling. This system did not generate major problems in the lowlands where indigenous peoples generally opted for TCOs, but it was inadequate for land property and management in the Andean and valley regions, where problems and conflicts triggered by the INRA Law still lack a definite solution.

Thirteen years later, the historical territorial *querelle* was one of the key points at stake within the Constitutional Assembly. Following a long and complicated negotiation, some of those principles were constitutionalized, such as the definition of the maximum extension of individual agrarian property (5.000 hectares) - at least for properties bought in the future - and the division between property's macro-types: individual (small, medium and business) and collective (native intercultural communities, peasant communities, and *Territorios Indígenas Originarios Campesinos*, Native Indigenous Peasant Territories, or TIOCs, i.e. the old TCOs).³⁶

Closely related with TIOCs are the *Autonomías Indígenas Originarias Campesinas* (Native Indigenous Peasant Autonomies, or AIOCs). Their definition is rooted in Article 2 of the Constitution that introduces the possibility of 'partial' self-determination for the 'native indigenous peasant' (*indígena originario campesino*)³⁷ communities. Unlike all other constitutional forms of autonomy (municipal, departmental and regional), AIOC can be formed without being held on other pre-existent political-administrative divisions. In this sense, AIOC is complemented by two other fundamental sets of rights of the 'native indigenous peasant' groups: the Routines and Customs Jurisdiction and the Land and Territory Jurisdiction, both included in the new constitutional framework. These instruments are meant to guarantee the territorial "exercise of a political, juridical and economic system according to [its inhabitants'] world view" (Art. 18). Despite its good intentions, this legal framework for allocating key resources such as land and other natural commodities generates serious problems of social

³⁴ Fundación Tierra (2009). *Reconfigurando Territorios*. La Paz: Fundación Tierra, p. 39.

³⁵ Regalsky, Pablo (2010). Political Processes and the Reconfiguration of the State in Bolivia. *Latin American Perspectives*. Vol. 37, No. 3, p. 43.

³⁶ Fundación Tierra, 2009, p. 13.

³⁷ The merging category of 'native indigenous peasant' included in the new Constitution could be interpreted as a key discursive tool within the process of identity construction, in the context of the reshaping of a new Masista 'imagined community', which gathers all the main rural sectors within a unique concept (indigenist, peasant and native movements) (Author, 2013).

fragmentation and conflict at the local level, namely through the institutionalization of a link between strategic goods and spaces of power, and social groups' identities and cultural belonging.

Evidences From Rural Bolivia: the Ethno-cultural Land Conflicts

Land conflicts could be defined as "social facts in which at least two parties are involved, the roots of which are different interests over the property rights to land: the right to use the land, to manage the land, to generate an income from the land, to exclude others from the land, to transfer it and the right to compensation for it."³⁸ Moreover, other factors could foment these conflicts, such as organizational differences, fights for natural resources control, issues of power and identity-building, which are reflected in the land as a productive and social good. The main cause of land conflicts in Bolivia is the scarcity of this good due to various factors: population growth, inheritance management that divides properties (*minifundio*), the loss of soil fertility and land productivity, and the intensive exploitation of natural resources. Adding to this already fragile situation is a highly unequal system of land distribution among families and social groups.³⁹

As in many other countries in Latin America, in Bolivia the agrarian issue has been at the core of unsolved tensions and cyclical struggles since the conformation of the modern state 200 years ago. The problems related to the control, property and exploitation of the land have been the motors and the flags of the most important social mobilizations in the region, and social movements have historically been the articulator of those fights.⁴⁰

Over the last two decades, new axes of social tensions came to articulate the fights for land. Beyond the well-known conflicts between rural communities and big land-owners, other forms of confrontation are gaining importance. These are conflicts between social organizations themselves, particularly indigenist-native movements and peasant unions. The former includes the lowlands indigenist movements which gather around the *Central de los Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia* (Confederation of Indigenous People of Bolivia, or CIDOB) and the highlands native movements represented by the *Consejo Nacional of Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu* (National Council of Ayllus and Markas of the Qullasuyu, or CONAMAQ). Both organizations could be considered representative of social and political movements, with strong exogenous influences (from international cooperation and anthropologists), which make appeal to 'authenticity' and to specific cultural identities with the aim of defending the claims and rights of autochthonous populations. The latter, i.e. the peasant union movement, emerged in Bolivia after the national revolution of 52, when the corporate structure was used as a mechanism to foster political participation and even citizenship, accompanied by a process of *mestizaje*, which gave precedence to classism over ethnic identity as collective self-identification structures. The national peasant syndicate (*Confederación Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia*, Unique Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia, CSUTCB), however, is not a homogeneous

³⁸ Wehrmann, Babette (2008). *Land Conflicts. A Practical Guide to Dealing with Land Dispute*, Eschboen: GT, p. 21.

³⁹ According to INRA's approximate data (2006), in Bolivia the 91% of the land would be in the hands of big landowners, while the 71% of the population would count only on the 9% of the land (www.inra.gov.bo)

⁴⁰ Thomson, Sinclair & Hylton, Forrest (2007). *Revolutionary Horizons: Past and Present in Bolivian Politics*. London and New York: Verso, p. 7.

movement, since it includes various streams often in tension with each other. This is particularly true of its wing closest to indianism, a Marxist stream and an important delegation of coca growers and colonizers (the peasants of Quechua or Ayamara origin moving from the highlands to more favourable environmental conditions in the valleys and plains of the East). From the 90s, the multiplication of conflictive foci inaugurated a new tense pattern in the relationship between peasant and indigenous movements, which would increasingly characterize corporatist dynamic and political equilibria in the following period.

The rise of these conflicts coincided with the implementation of an institutional and normative framework that, as we have seen, strengthened the link between identity and ethnic belonging, and systems of resource allocation, made possible in part by the massive injection of funds from the international cooperation for the effective implementation of the new policies. This historical convergence, together with empirical evidences and discursive elements from the actors themselves, support the hypothesis that the new paradigm introduced new incentives favouring an instrumental mobilization of ethno-cultural identities by social groups, eventually triggering new conflictive dynamics at the local level.

Looking at the Bolivian rural geopolitical map, conflicts between social organizations are often rooted in the intermediary fault lines between the Andean and the Amazonian regions, where disarticulations between identitarian patterns are stronger. These areas have the potential to become collision zones between TCOs and peasant and *cocalero* communities. In an effort to control the land and mobilize the majority of the population, both indigenist and peasant organizations have tried to strengthen their respective corporatist structures in the rural areas and, in some cases, they conducted 'conversion campaigns' to attract local communities' inhabitants, appealing to the strong corporatist sense of social organization within the Bolivian rural population, to the ambivalence and fluidity of identity, and to economic resources scarcity. Regarding this phenomenon, a former advisor of the native organization CONAMAQ says:

There are leaders who enter the peasant territories to convince people. They go and position native authorities where once there was the peasant union (...). For many leaders of CONAMAQ, reconstitution means to gain the peasant communities that, before, were part of their ancestral territories. This is exactly the root of the ideological and political conflicts that exist in the local ambit. The members of the peasant federation do not want to be reconverted into indigenous.⁴¹

In some cases, the existent situation is quite clear in terms of identitarian and cultural characteristics, such as in many areas of the highlands, where Aymara and Quechua peoples have preserved their language, culture and traditional organizational structures, although with a certain degree of adaptation to the union system.⁴² In other areas, where indigenist groups were generally smaller and more vulnerable to external shocks, the loss of cultural traits, routines and customs, and native languages is more frequent. Here, the process of identitarian revitalization has been more complex, and sometimes ended up being what could be more properly defined as ethnogenesis, becoming the object of questioning and criticisms by the rival sectors. In this context, we define these

⁴¹ Interview with an official of the Ministry of Autonomies and former advisor of CONAMAQ, La Paz, 20 June 2010.

⁴² Rivera Cusicanqui, Silvia (1984). *Oprimidos pero no Vencidos*. La Paz: Aruwiyiri/Yachaywasi, p. 178.

phenomena as processes of creation of new identities where members of a collective recognize and affirm themselves as different from other group members and from the social environment. These contemporary ethnogenesis usually have an active component: a group of individuals, already in a position of leadership, deliberately and directly 'engineer' separate identities, often as mechanisms to resolve political problems, occupy spaces of power, and gain access to resources. Some cultural markers are recuperated from a state of latency, ethnically connoted or invented anew to delimitate the new social frontiers.

An emblematic case in this sense is that of the Leco people of Apolo, in the Amazonian region of La Paz department, in North-West Bolivia.⁴³ This conflict is an interesting example of a new disarticulating polarization that has arisen among an originally homogeneous population, rooted in a process of ethnogenesis. The inflexion point could be identified soon after the approval of the INRA Law in 1997, with the foundation of the Leco Indigenous People Organization (CIPLA) and its effort to revitalize indigenous identity among the local population. This implied a reconfiguration of local equilibriums with the emergence of a new collective subject, whose creation could be interpreted as an endogenous answer to hetero-driven incentives. The conflict is fuelled by opposite and incompatible visions on the temporality marked by this inflexion point.

For the peasants, 'before' is the time when the Leco people did not exist, while the 'after' is when the 'false Lecos' appear. An epoch in which Lecos were 'real' and 'true' is acknowledged – in the Pre-Inca era – but afterwards they became extinct. This would imply the definitive dearth of the people and thus the organization that now 'identifies itself' and 'names itself' as the Leco possesses no real or true existence. It is 'false', 'supposed'. Consequently, it is unacceptable for contemporary Lecos to claim recognition or collective rights. Moreover, the peasants perceive the Leco emergence as a threat and consider themselves the legitimate inhabitants of Apolo, raising primordialist arguments that link the peasant identity with blood, origins and other meta-ethnic types of narrative frames.

Those people that now are Lecos come from the peasant movement. They got dressed up as chunchos⁴⁴, as louts, they've got photos taken and, with those pictures, started to say that there are Lecos here! But there aren't! The government is listening to the lies that the supposed Lecos have presented. Right now I can put some leaves on, I take some pictures of myself and I am Leco! This is what they've done. And with that they think that they are native, and we are not. But of course we are native!⁴⁵

Lecos also refers to 'before' and 'after' times, but they interpret the inflexion point as a moment of liberation, through a break with a past of repression and cultural domination. The 'after' time is a new present in which the oppressed gain a new form and substance. Indeed, the Leco identity is not just the remnant of the Pre-Inca skeleton, but one which includes other elements that differ from the past. Moreover, for the Lecos, an issue of identity legitimacy is at stake. Since the peasant identity is a result of colonization, it has to be considered abusive, with less legitimacy than the indigenous identity, the latter

⁴³ On the process of ethnogenesis of the Leco and Tacana indigenous people see: Dudley, Meredith (2005). *Tierras e Identidades en la Intersección del Altiplano y la Amazonía: La Reivindicación de los Lecos de Apolo*. In: Robins, Nicholas (ed.). *Cambio y Continuidad en Bolivia: etnicidad, cultura e identidad*. La Paz: Plural; Herrera, Enrique; Cárdenas, Cléverth; Terceros, Elva (2004). *Identidades y Territorios Indígenas. Estrategias Identitarias de los Tacanas y Ayoreo frente a la Ley INRA*. La Paz: PIEB; Author, 2010.

⁴⁴ Inhabitants of a silvan region far from the western civilization. It is often used with a negative meaning.

⁴⁵ Workshop with members of the Peasant Federation of the Puchahui community, Puchahui, Apolo, Franz Tamayo.

thus becoming the only legitimated one. Peasants would therefore be oppressed, dominated by their own self-identification and should go through a process of emancipation to find their true identity, i.e. the Leco.

From that day in which we started to rescue all our routines and customs, we are true indigenous brothers with identity (...). The misunderstanding problem with the peasant brother is that they are also indigenous, they are native, but they don't recognize their true identity yet.⁴⁶

Both peasants and indigenous establish their own historical truth through a discursive interpretation of the inflexion point, which corresponds to the ethnogenesis moment, and, from that, they build dogmatic narratives of 'self' and 'other' based on the dichotomy of false versus true. This phenomenon greatly depends on a hetero-directed political process that introduces incentives for the ethnicization (or more specifically, indigenization) of collective identities (both in terms of national institutional framework and available funds from international cooperation agencies). At the same time, it is the result of the groups' instrumental use of identities to guarantee access to economic resources (particularly the land) and spaces of power and legitimacy. In this sense, identity-based narratives become a political tool, functional to the development of the conflict.

Another recent and internationally famous example of conflict between social movements is the one that was triggered by the government's decision to build a road across the indigenous territory and natural protected area of the *Territorio Indígena Parque Natural Isiboro Sécuré* (Indigenous Territory National Park Isiboro Sécuré, or TIPNIS), in central Bolivia. This was the first national conflict in which social organizations and the government have been heavily confronted, after a decade of alliance and collaboration. In August 2011, the lowlands indigenist movement together with other national and international ecologist organizations, began a march throughout the country to protest against the construction of the road. Since the beginning of the mobilizations, the peasant movement, led by the coca-growers' syndicate, which occupy the nearby areas around the park, declared their opposition to the mobilization and kept their loyalty to the government. They organized a counter-march in La Paz, accusing the indigenous of betrayal of the *Proceso de Cambio* and of connivance with imperialist powers.

In this conflict, each sector puts in place its particularistic strategies and the identitarian issue becomes a key element in the fight. On one side, the indigenous movement references the well-known environmentalist discourse, according to which they would be the *Pachamama*⁴⁷ paladins, nodding to the global ecologist movement, weaving a new alliance with the Bolivian urban middle class, and confronting a government that is no longer one led by the first 'indigenous President', but a neo-developmentalistic bureaucracy at the service of transnational enterprises. On the other side, the *cocaleros* and peasants strengthen their alliance with the MAS, and adopt a developmentalist and classist discourse, occupying a classic rhetorical space that had remained relatively empty over the last two decades, after the worker movement's and the left parties' crisis.

⁴⁶ Interview with the Great Capitan of the CIPLA, La Paz, 28 July 2010.

⁴⁷ The Mother Earth in the Andean tradition.

Beyond the doubts concerning the opportunity to build a road across a protected area and an in-depth analysis of the arguments of the parties in conflicts, these recent events reflect a tendency towards the primacy of corporatist, sectorial interests over potentially trans-cultural and trans-ethnic social fights. The boundaries between the indigenous and peasant reveal once more their flexibility and capacity to adapt to the contingency of the current political phase. After a period of alliance and mutual support in the face of external enemies' threats – in particular, neoliberalism and oligarchic powers – we have entered a moment of fragmentation and contention among social groups seeking access to the same physical, symbolic and power spaces⁴⁸. This has led to a significant change in social movements' interrelations and their relationship with the government, which are now characterized by new tensions and confrontational dynamics.

Ethno-cultural Policies and Conflict: Preliminary Hypothesis

Both the ethnogenesis in Apolo and the national conflict of the TIPNIS are complex examples which point to the need to avoid simplistic interpretations of social movements, ethno-cultural politics, and social conflicts in Latin America. What emerges from these cases is a highly instrumental use of ethno-cultural identitarian constructions, which are linked to historical and political conjunctures and are influenced by the moves of other actors: the state, other social groups, international cooperation agencies, and the academic community. Ethnicity is thus used as a mutable political tool. This strategic dimension is evident in three phenomena that have been the object of our analysis.

Within the ethnogenesis processes discussed in the Apolo case, the reconstruction of a common history, a mythology, an *ethos* and a sense of belonging is a contemporary dynamic of certain social groups which, responding to exogenous stimuli and adapting to a contingent political context, deliberately choose to adopt ethnicity as the dominant narrative *leitmotiv* within their processes of collective identity-building, and as a strategic tool in the social fight.

The second example is the meta-identitarian ethnicization of the peasant narrative. Corporatist peasant movements have recently experienced a new identitarian and narrative dialectic between a 'classist substance' and an 'ethnic form'. This narrative makes reference to a mode of production – the peasant – as a boundary to delimitate its universe, its 'self' with respect to the 'other', but that in its shape is actually an ethnic meta-identity, in the sense that it refers and builds up a mythology of the origins, a sense of genetic belonging rooted in blood ties, neglecting the idea of class as an objective category of ordering within an economic system. This discursive and identitarian shift could be read, on the one hand, as a functional response to a context in which the cultural and ethnic dimensions are gaining political relevance. On the other hand, it could be considered a tactical tool in the framework of the social struggle with other movements and organizations, which are competing for the same resources and spaces of legitimacy and symbolic affirmation.

⁴⁸ Fontana, Lorenza (2013) "On the Perils and Potentialities of Revolution: Conflict and Collective Action in Contemporary Bolivia", *Latin American Perspectives*, forthcoming.

The third phenomenon refers to the relationship between the relevance and political use of the ethnic issue and some contextual dimensions, in particular: the demographic equilibria and the characteristics of the actors' map. In this sense, evidence that supports the hypothesis of a high degree of ethnic and cultural categories' instrumentalization within the Bolivian context emerges from the analysis of its geopolitical map, where power and alliances' equilibrium along identitarian boundaries vary depending on the dimension that we consider. At the national level, indigenist-native movements and peasant-intercultural-cocalero organizations have been allied during the phase of rise and consolidation of the new political project. They were part of an umbrella organization called *Pacto de Unidad* (Unity Pact) and constituted the main social bases that supported Evo Morales' government. Meanwhile, in many local spaces where indigenous and peasant identities and organizations coexist, in the absence of other relevant 'enemies', finding a situation of polarization and conflict is likely. This suggests that the relevance of ethnic divisions depends on the dimension of the social groups defined by these very divisions with respect to the dimension of the political and social arenas in which those groups are collocated.⁴⁹ In particular, the presence or absence of conflicts depends on the relative weight of each group within the social aggregate that we are considering, and what other actors are on the scene. Within the national political arena, it seemed more convenient, at least until 2009, for indigenist and peasant movements to weave systems of alliance in order to confront other hostile political forces with opposite identitarian referents (the right, the oligarchy, the business sector), so that similarities were emphasized over incompatibilities. In the local space, the balance of powers is very different: the demographic and cultural map is relatively simpler, and the relationship between indigenous and peasant populations, the characteristics of the social aggregate and the political space vary. Particularly in the rural world, indigenous and peasants represent almost the entire population and often overlap. This leads to an instrumental fragmentation that is both organizational and identitarian; such divisions are convenient insofar as they permit certain groups to gain a 'seat' within a political arena and acquire advantages in the competition over the same resources. In this process, boundaries and incompatibilities are strengthened, and the ethnic-identitarian issue is more radicalized.

From a comparative historical perspective, political instrumentalization of ethnic identities could be read as an alarming signal, if we think in particular of the numerous cases in which this process has been accompanied or suddenly followed by some of the bloodiest and long-lasting conflicts in history. Some of the most recent examples: the Holocaust, the culmination of a long process of stigmatization and construction of a diabolic and perverse Jewish identity, the genocide in Rwanda, where identitarian polarization resulted from a colonial institutional design that set up ethnic criteria of power distribution, the everlasting Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or the religious cleansing in Nigeria and Sudan. Questions inevitably emerge on the implicit destructive potential of a context with clear tendencies towards the instrumentalization of ethnicity where institutional incentives are explicitly introduced to

⁴⁹ A similar hypothesis was formulated and proved by Daniel Posner's article (2004) *The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi*. *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 98, No. 4, pp. 529-545.

support this process. The possibility of a radicalization of some foci of tension, or of a scenario of generalized conflict thus cannot be excluded *a priori*.

However, in Bolivia, and in Latin America in general, the possibility of widespread ethnic violence is rather improbable.⁵⁰ Some of the factors we mention here provide a partial explanation, while also highlighting the need for future research in this direction: (1) the recent dramatic history of military *coups d'état* and their tragic consequences in terms of loss of life, rights' violations, and catastrophic socio-economic performances contributed to a sort of 'collective learning process'. In a context where party systems remain relatively weak, this fosters a collective commitment to find political outcomes for crisis that could potentially threaten the democratic order. This happened in Bolivia in 2008, but also occurred with slightly different characteristics, levels of violence and socio-political consequences in Ecuador, Argentina, Peru, and Venezuela over the last decade. (2) The achievement of political agreements and compromises often has been possible thanks to another important and relatively recent element related to the new configuration of the Latin American geopolitical landscape. This has been characterized by the rise of new regional powers (in particular Brazil), by the restructuring of strategic balance along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts' axes, and by the consolidation of integration processes and supra-national organizations, namely the *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas* (Union of South American Nations, or UNASUR), the Organization of American State (OAS) and the *Alianza Bolivariana Para los Pueblos de Nuestras Americas* (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas, or ALBA). These intergovernmental institutions played an important, although controversial, role as mediators during recent political crises, such as the '*revolución de los forajidos*' in Ecuador in 2005, the interstate conflict between Ecuador and Colombia in 2008, the Bolivian political crisis in 2008, and after the *golpe* in Honduras in 2010. (3) Moreover, since the end of the dictatorship, a democratic consolidation has occurred all over the region, especially through the strengthening of the rule of law, the increasing spaces for participation in public life and more respect for human rights. At the same time, during the last 15 years the reduction in socio-economic gaps has been improving real conditions and macro-economic indexes in Latin America,⁵¹ even if these processes still maintain certain paradoxical and partial features. (4) The consequences of those unfilled gaps in terms of instability, conflictivity and fragmentation are often managed throughout para-institutional channels, which are efficient as well as problematic mechanisms to control social tensions. They are formed by a network of relationships between the state and social actors that includes both formal and informal spaces, such as traditional communitarian mechanisms of governance, informal hierarchical configurations, as well as personalist and clientelist networks. All these mechanisms work as daily tools of

⁵⁰ In a Chapter of his book *La Grande Révolte Indienne* dedicated to "Identity and Violence", Yvon Le Bot mentions three factors that would be present in the cases in which Latin American indigenous movements turned into violence (notably in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Peru): 1) the impasses of the mode of development (weakening the capacity of redistribution and integration); 2) a violent repression; 3) the implantation of an external actor (the guerrilla) guided by political-military logic that mobilizes social actors with an ethnic dimension (Le Bot, 2009, p.108).

⁵¹ Gasparini, Leonardo & Lustig, Nora (2011). The Rise and Fall of Income Inequality in Latin America. *Tulane Economics Working Paper Series*, working paper 1110. Available at: <http://econ.tulane.edu/RePEc/pdf/tul1110.pdf>; United Nations Development Programme (2010). *Actuar sobre el Futuro: Romper la Transmisión Intergeneracional de la Desigualdad. Informe Regional sobre Desarrollo Humano para América Latina y el Caribe 2010*. New York: UNDP, p. 20; United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2010). *Latin America in the Mirror. Objective and Subjective Dimensions of Social Inequity and Well-being in the Region*. Santiago: ECLAC/AECID/Latinobarómetro, p. 75.

social relations' regulation among individuals, groups and formal institutions, which end up imbued by this very informal logic.⁵² (5) Finally, considering the specificities of the Bolivian case, this country seems to be characterized by a vivacious and persistent conflictive dynamic, with, however, relatively rare picks of radicalization that could lead to unmanageable levels of violence. This would depend on some long-term structural characteristics of Bolivian conflictivity.⁵³ At the same time, another aspect that we consider important, and that would be an interesting subject for a comparative study with other conflicts and world regions, is the characterization of ethno-cultural movements themselves, which, in the Bolivian case, do not mix up, at least not yet, with fundamentalist religious narratives⁵⁴ and are strongly linked with problems of social reproduction (economic and resource claims). These two elements could possibly be factors able to reduce the risk of fundamentalist turns.

Concluding Remarks

Drawing upon the Bolivian case, this paper introduces a critical perspective to ethno-cultural politics, especially as they are applied to the management and allocation of natural resources, and particularly of land. Economic, political and sociological literatures have extensively explored the link between natural resources and conflict as well as the relationship between ethnicity and violence. However a satisfactory multi-level framework that considers the inter-relationships between the three elements – conflict, ethnicity and resources – is still missing. Moreover, scholars have tended to concentrate on other world regions, especially Africa, to find empirical material for their studies, while Latin America has remained a relatively isolated case, due to the 'special' treatment in legal and discursive terms reserved for the 'indigenous issue'. In fact, as we have seen, ethno-cultural groups in Latin America are not assimilated in broader categories that could be applied to other contexts; rather, they are defined through an *ad hoc* set of norms, narratives and imageries, which contributed to the implementation of a fairly permissive politics concerning special rights, spaces of autonomy and control of natural and socio-economic resources. This was possible mainly due to the lack of effective geo-political threats and security-related issues.

However, this paper has shown that the new plurinational model of state and citizenship, based on the introduction of discrimination (even positive) on an identitarian basis, in a context characterized by relatively weak institutions, high ethno-cultural diversity, and deep socio-economic gaps, implies certain factors of risk and has an impact on social fragmentation and conflict. Consequently, the potential for a Pandora's box of ethnic conflictivity cannot be excluded *a priori*. Tensions are generated between pre-existent ethnic and social groups and, more interestingly, they emerges among originally more homogeneous and peaceful populations, as a result of incentives to ethnic identification

⁵² Author et. al., 2011. An interesting perspective on the 'social lace' as key feature of the Latin American societies is contained in Martuccelli, Danilo (2010). *Existen Individuos en el Sur?* Santiago: LOM Ediciones, cap. 12.

⁵³ On Bolivian conflictivity see the analysis and publications of the Fundación UNIR Bolivia and of the *Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Económica y Social* (Research Center on the Social and Economic Reality, or CERES).

⁵⁴ Yet, religious actors, in particular Catholic and Evangelic, play a role in many local conflicts indeed, but as allies of other social forces and not as articulators of the fights. Among others, see Frias Mendoza, Victor Hugo (2002). *Mistis y Mokonchinchas. Mercado, Evangélicos y Política local en Calcha*. La Paz: Instituto Mama Huaco; Spedding, Allison (ed.) (2004). *Gracias a Dios y a las Achachilas*. La Paz: ISEAT.

introduced by the new institutional and legal system. These mechanisms are at the origin of changes, sometimes remarkable, in the map of collective identities and in the corporatist and organizational structure, mainly in the rural areas. Some identities gain strength, others lose relevance, others suffer a restyling according to the new contextual exigencies, and others are almost a brand new result of the conjuncture. Moreover, tensions could come from the lack of clarity of the normative framework, or from a perception of injustice by social groups that are themselves negatively discriminated on an ethnic basis. This is, as we have seen, the case of some land conflicts between peasant unions and indigenist organizations.

Despite this complex situation of social conflict and fragmentation, we have argued that, in Bolivia, and in Latin America in general, the concrete possibility of a worsening of the scenario, in which ethnic-cultural conflicts would become a serious threat for national security and a source of widespread violence, is rather improbable. In this sense, we have formulated some hypotheses concerning the role of the heritage of the memory of dictatorship, the transformation in the regional geopolitical landscape and the growing importance of new suprastate institutions, the democratic consolidation and the improvement of socio-economic conditions, and the strength of para-institutional political and mediation channels.