SPECIAL ISSUE

INTERCULTURALISM
A COMPARATIVE LEXICON
Editor: Silvia Bagni

Camilla De Ambroggi

Multiculturalism

Abstract

Within the interdisciplinary project "Interculturalism: A Comparative Lexicon", this article aims to analyse the concept of multiculturalism from an anthropological perspective. To do so, the article first focuses on the ways in which multicultural policies have been implemented in different Latin American countries, particularly with regard to indigenous peoples. It then examines a specific case from the Bolivian context to show how indigenous peoples have responded to multicultural policies. Finally, it highlights the tensions inherent in the concept of multiculturalism by analysing it from the perspective of various indigenous intellectuals.

Keywords: multiculturalism, indigenous struggles, Latin-American constitutions, Bolivia.

Summary: 1. Culture and Multiculturalism in Latin America – 2. Multiculturalism in Bolivia – 3. Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the *Indio Permitido* – 4. Indigenous Multiculturalism Beyond Multicultural Policies

1. Culture and Multiculturalism in Latin America

Anthropology has long scrutinized the concept of culture, exposing its inherent ambiguity and its impossible delimitation. The culture of any group, people, or social set cannot be rigidly defined according to fixed schemes and homogeneous signifiers, as it consists of symbolic systems and interpretations of reality continually reshaped by the subjects themselves through dynamic interactions with others. The impossibility of delimiting this concept has even led, in many cases, to its abandonment in anthropological analysis, as it is heuristically useless for describing any type of social

process in a globalized world of rapid and continuous interactions and relationships[1]. If we start from this indefiniteness of the concept of culture, even the terms 'multiculturalism' must be abandoned as it is inadequate to describe a constantly changing reality: if there is no fixed and homogeneous culture, but it always depends on a set of relationships, then there are no different cultures in dialogue with each other. Nevertheless, this term is widely used both in the sociological and legal fields to describe interactions between various social groups or between social groups and the state[2]. Thus, we must consider how the term multiculturalism can be used to 'simplify' a complex reality and whether this simplification serves as a strategic tool to secure greater rights for minority sectors or if it instead leads to an artificial delimitation of these sectors that necessarily reproduces hierarchies and power dynamics.

In order to explore these tensions inherent in the concept of multiculturalism, it is helpful to start with a concrete case. In this sense, the point is not to develop a universal theory of the applicability of the multicultural paradigm, but rather to reveal how its applicability depends on how it operates and is enacted in a specific context, and how its meaning can change depending on which subjects reclaim it. In other words, the aim is to show the differences and rifts between an institutional perspective on the concept of multiculturalism and an anthropological perspective that starts from the point of view of the same people to whom multicultural policies are applied. The case discussed here is, therefore, the application of multiculturalism concerning indigenous populations in Latin America, focusing particularly on the Bolivian context and on the indigenous response to the multicultural policies.

The "multicultural dilemma"[3] has been a defining feature of Latin America since the early days of independent republics when the Creole elite of European descent sought to establish national unity while representing the diverse Latin American population. Initially, the prevailing model to homogenize differences into a unitary citizenship in most new Latin American states in the early 20th century was *mestizaje*; this model idealized the *mestizo* as the embodiment of the modern state's citizen. *Mestizaje* portrayed this figure as combining the noblest attributes of both the 'European race' and the 'indigenous races'[4]. Actually, as pointed out by various authors, *mestizaje* was primarily an integrationist rhetoric that obscured the underlying racism, patriarchy, and colonialism inherent in Latin American society[5]. Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, for example, conceptualizes *mestizaje* as a form of concealed violence (*violencia encubierta*), a discursive practice that conceals the ongoing colonial violence perpetrated during the colonization period; furthermore, she underlies how behind the figure of the *mestizo* lies the systematic rape of indigenous women by Europeans[6]. *Mestizaje*, according to her, functioned as an ideological superstructure that influenced the economic structure of Latin American countries, reshaping identities and altering organizational and economic processes within indigenous communities to integrate them into the capitalist economy. Indigenous people who migrated to cities for work often abandoned their native language, traditional clothing, and even adopted Spanish

---

[1] It can be said that the concept of culture is the cornerstone from which the discipline itself started; it would therefore be impossible to report here on the semantic transformations and countless readings of this concept made by different authors at different historical moments. For a general overview see: Remotti (2014).

[2] See in this regard the entry *Multiculturalism* by E. Ceccherini (2008: 486-500).

[3] Zapata (2019: 18).

[4] For a classic texts on *mestizaje* see: Vasconcelos (1948 [1925]). For a general overview see: Mallon (1996: 170-81); Miller (2004).

[5] See for example: Segato (2010). Rivera Cusicanui (2010); Wade (2000).

[6] Rivera Cusicanui (2010: 65 ff.). In this regard, see also a classic text about unequal gendered power relations embedded in the concept of *mestizaje*: Montecino (1991).

surnames to assimilate into urban labor markets[7]. Anthropologist Peter Wade also shows how *mestizaje* was nothing more than a process of "whitening" the indigenous population in order to erase its most anachronistic features; this process functioned not only as a rhetorical ideology but also as a material social practice, imposing a hierarchical racial order in Latin American countries that systematically excluded those who did not conform to this model[8].

It wasn't until the 1970s that this homogenizing paradigm began to be challenged in favor of a model that celebrated the inherent differences within Latin America. This new model aimed not to erase the traditional characteristics of indigenous populations but to value them as part of a multicultural state. Actually, the term multiculturalism gained prominence in Latin America only after 1989 when the United Nations agency of the International Labor Organization (ILO) established the Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (No. 169). This convention recognized the rights of indigenous populations to maintain and develop their identity, language, religion, and control over their institutions, ways of life, and territorial economy, while urging governments to "develop, with the participation of the peoples concerned, coordinated and systematic action to protect the rights of these peoples and ensure respect for their integrity"[9]. However, this legal instrument was not merely a UN concession but the result of a mobilization process that, since the 1970s, brought indigenous subjects onto the political stage, demanding greater recognition of their cultural differences within the state and the end of the *mestizaje* paradigm.

The turning point of this mobilization process was the Second Meeting of Barbados in 1977. In the First Meeting of Barbados in 1971, indeed, the issue of indigenous rights was addressed only with the participation of NGO technicians, anthropologists, and human rights experts; on the other hand, this second meeting, although still funded by NGOs and anthropologists, saw the active participation of about twenty indigenous organizations from twelve Latin American countries[10]. In the resulting Declaration of Barbados II, indigenous people themselves denounced the physical, social, political, economic, and cultural domination they had endured for 500 years through various forms, ranging from colonial domination to the *mestizaje* integrationist policies of modern states. This document was a political manifesto that not only celebrated indigenous cultural specificity but also called for an end to the economic and political subordination that indigenous peoples experienced[11]. From this moment, various international institutions, NGOs, and religious foundations sponsored countless meetings between Latin American indigenous organizations, which began to bring their demands to international courts and intergovernmental organizations[12]. It was through this process of increasing indigenous mobilization that even institutions like the UN were compelled to introduce protective instruments for these populations.

In the years following the signing of Convention 169, an increasing number of Latin American countries began to ratify it, adopting the term multiculturalism to describe the state model and introducing specific rights for indigenous populations into their constitutions. Indigenous people constitute approximately 8-10% of the total population of Latin America, or about 40 million people.

---

[7] Rivera Cusicanui (2010: 130-1)
[8] Wade (2000: 97 ff.)
[9] ILO, No 169 (1989: Art 2).
[10] Zapata and Oliva (2019: 325)
[11] Zapata (2013: 147)
[12] Brysk (2000).

However, the percentages vary considerably from one state to another: from almost none in Uruguay and most Caribbean islands to a quarter or a third of the population in Ecuador and Peru, up to about 60% of the population in Bolivia and Guatemala[13]. Clearly, this different percentage impacted on the measures taken by various states to include indigenous people in the citizenship model, as well as on the bargaining power of indigenous organizations in claiming shares of state power. The success of the multicultural model, therefore, depended on the trajectories of indigenous movements, varying across different countries, as shown in Table 1. States such as Colombia and Bolivia, where indigenous mobilizations were strong, ratified the Convention in 1991, recognizing specific rights for indigenous people, including access to bilingual education, indigenous justice systems, and collective land rights. In countries like Argentina and Venezuela, with weaker indigenous bargaining power, recognition was limited to education and justice; in these countries the ILO Convention was ratified only in 2000. In Chile, a country where indigenous groups were heavily criminalized during Pinochet dictatorship and faced systematic exclusion from political power, it was not until 2008 that the Convention was ratified and applied in a Mapuche justice case. However, as will be seen in the article, even in countries that were late in ratifying the Convention, indigenous resistance movements were already spreading in the 1990s, asserting their own cultural specificity and succeeding in getting States to institutionalize and recognize certain multicultural rights.

Country	Date of Constitution/ recognition	Collective land rights	Self-govern. rights	Cultural rights	Customary law	Rep. in central govt	Affirmation of distinct status	Ratified ILO 169	Affirm. action	Total number
Argentina	1994	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	2000	N	5
Belize	1981	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	0
Bolivia	1995	Y	Y, L	Y	Y	N	Y	1991	N	5.5
Brazil	1988	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	2002	Y	6
Chile	1993 by statute	N	N	N	Y, L	N	N	N	N	1
Colombia	1991	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	1991	Y	8
Costa Rica	Laws passed in 1977/93/99	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	1993	N	3
Ecuador	1998	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	1998	N	7
El Salvador	1983/91–2	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	1
Guatemala	1986	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	1996	N	5
Guyana	1980/96	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	1
Honduras	1982	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	1995	N	4
Mexico	1917/92/2001	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	1990	N	6
Nicaragua	1987/95	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	5
Panama	1972/83/93–4	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	6
Paraguay	1992	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	1993	N	6
Peru	1993/2003–4	Y, weakened in 1993	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	1994	N	5
Suriname	1987	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	0
Venezuela	1999	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	2002	N	7

Table 1: Multicultural policies for indigenous peoples in Latin America. Y= yes (rights applied); N = no (rights not applied); L = limited (rights applied in specific areas). The table is updated to 2006, in more recent years states such as Bolivia and Ecuador have introduced additional rights for indigenous peoples while countries such as Chile and Nicaragua have ratified Convention 169.

Source: Van Cott (2006: 274).

In any case, this Convention provided a significant impetus to indigenous political activism, becoming a potent tool in the 1990s for demanding a redefinition of state-indigenous relations. Nonetheless, it's crucial to note that during these years, Latin America adhered to the so-called Washington Consensus, a set of economic guidelines promoted by institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, aimed at stabilizing the economies of developing nations. These policies, based on

---

[13] Van Cott (2006: 272).

opening national economies to private investments and trade liberalization, had substantial consequences in indigenous territories, where resources increasingly faced expropriation by private industries and multinational corporations [14]. The recognition of certain rights for indigenous populations was thus situated in a context where the majority of Latin American states relied on IMF loans for economic stability, and these loans came with certain conditions. In this regard, Maristella Svampa points out that the emergence of multiculturalism in Latin America differs from its origins and development in European countries and North America. This is due to both the neoliberal context and the pressure exerted by indigenous movements, which played a central role in implementing multiculturalism on the South American continent[15].

Examining multicultural policies in Latin America, therefore, involves analyzing how they fit into a context where global dynamics and actors were increasingly eroding state sovereignty. Simultaneously, it entails understanding how indigenous communities inserted themselves into this loss of state sovereignty to demand greater political participation.

2. Multiculturalism in Bolivia

The Bolivian case is particularly significant in illustrating both the strengths and limitations of multiculturalism. Bolivia was among the first countries to ratify Convention 169, thanks to extensive indigenous mobilizations during the 1990s. These mobilizations continued to exert pressure on the state to implement the rights outlined in the Convention, in a context where the Bolivian economy remained tightly linked to IMF structural adjustment programs, and major state-owned industries had already been fully privatized[16].

The ratification of the Convention was among the demands of the historic March for Territory and Dignity (*Marcha Indígena por el Territorio y la Dignidad*) in 1990. Initiated by indigenous organizations in the Beni region to protest against private logging companies deforesting their land, the March soon evolved into a nationwide mobilization against neoliberal policies that resulted in resource expropriation in indigenous territories. The March, initially comprising around 300 indigenous people, commenced on August 16, 1990, in the city of Trinidad. The aim was to reach La Paz and deliver a document outlining indigenous demands to the government. Within a remarkably short time, all indigenous organizations in the country joined the March, as did trade unions and left-wing political parties. Much of society expressed solidarity by sending food and medicine to the marchers during their journey and supporting their demands. When the March arrived in La Paz on September 17, after 34 days of walking, there were almost a thousand participants: for the first time in history, the indigenous peoples triumphantly entered Plaza Murillo, where the government is located, amidst the support of the people of La Paz, who welcomed them with a huge celebration. Faced with such a demonstration of the march's ability to mobilise, the governments of those years were forced to respond to indigenous

---

[14] Harvey (2005).

[15] Svampa (2016: 97).

[16] As early as 1985, through what became known as *Nueva Politica Economica*, the Bolivian government had privatised the oil company YPFB, the energy company ENDE, the mining company COMIBOL, the telephone company ENTEL and the pension services. It also It also sacked thousands of public servants. See: Postero (2015: 290-2).

demands. In 1991, President Jaime Paz Zamora could do nothing but ratify Convention 169[17]. In 1994, his successor, Sánchez de Lozada, amended the Constitution, recognizing in the first article the multiethnic and pluricultural nature of the state and guaranteeing, in Article 171, the collective rights to land, culture, authority, and forms of organization for indigenous populations[18]. The March for Territory and Dignity marked a milestone in Bolivian indigenous movements, serving as a foundational moment in a continuing process of politicization. It was the first time that indigenous demands forcefully entered the public sphere, aligning with the demands of other popular sectors for a change in the state model. This March was so successful that the practice of the Indigenous March became a recognized form of protest, often used by indigenous peoples to assert their demands. Between 1990 and 2022, eleven Indigenous Marches took place. However, Bolivia continued to remain deeply entangled in the Washington Consensus and reliant on IMF loans for economic stability. Therefore, Lozada had to find a way to restrain indigenous mobilizations, which were increasingly demanding an end to resource expropriation in indigenous territories.

To effectively reconcile the state's promotion of multiculturalism with the obligations imposed by Washington, the president initiated a rhetoric suggesting that privatization of state industries and trade liberalization would facilitate the creation of a state in which indigenous communities could actively participate in development plans and decision-making within their territories. The objective was, therefore, to make indigenous communities fully functional and integrated into the neoliberal state model. This is evident, for example, in Law No. 1715, known as the INRA Law (*Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria*). This law was approved by Lozada in 1996 following a second Indigenous March where indigenous people demanded effective control over their territories, which, despite constitutional recognition, continued to face expropriation. The INRA law aimed to enhance the system of land redistribution and administration in favor of indigenous communities and establish a cadastral registry. However, it ended up regulating and defining access criteria to land for indigenous populations according to schemes that did not substantially alter the power dynamics of the territory.

Until then, indigenous communities had undefined boundaries, and their inhabitants had to adhere to the laws of the municipality or region in which they were located. Through the INRA Law, the legal entity of *Tierras Comunitarias de Origen* (TCO) was established; this entity, for the first time in history, defined the spatial and legal limits of indigenous territories. The TCO also ensured that indigenous peoples could autonomously administer state and private resources according to their 'customs'. However, to access the legal status of TCO and manage their resources, indigenous communities had to adhere to the general constitutional norms of the state[19]. The INRA Law thus created a hierarchy between constitutional rights and indigenous rights, which were admissible only if subjected to state control. In practice, this meant that TCOs had to ensure the entry of industries into their territory when authorized by the state, while the taxes received by the state from these industries were only minimally redistributed within the TCOs. Furthermore, this redistribution encouraged internal disputes within communities or between different communities to secure the limited available resources.

Indigenous rights were therefore guaranteed only to the extent that the state could use them as tools for territorial discipline and governance, regulating the legal personality and economic capacity

---

[17] López and Makaran (2018: 75).
[18] Constitución política de Bolivia (1994: Art. 1, 171).
[19] Ley 1715 (1996: Art. 3, c.III).

of indigenous territories. What were previously constantly evolving indigenous communities, created and recreated through exchanges between populations, relations with other subjects, and the re-signification of organizational practices, were now administratively defined and circumscribed. Their territories were transformed from community resources into mere commodities for trade and acquisition. Lozada's objective with the INRA Law was to acknowledge moderate cultural rights while stifling the more radical demands that emerged in the marches, thereby neutralizing both the mobilization capacity of indigenous people and the political relationships between indigenous groups and leftist factions. In this sense, the valorization of cultural difference within the state was functional in offering indigenous people a form of compensation in the face of the expropriation of broader political and social rights through neoliberal policies. Thus, the state delimited indigenous demands in an identity-based manner, depowering them by abstracting the cultural element from economic conditions. In the meantime, the president further opened the country to foreign investments and privatized the last remaining state-owned companies, especially those that were becoming highly valuable on the global market, such as the YBFB petroleum company. He then reduced the taxes owed to the state by private industries operating in Bolivia from 50% to 18% and completely privatized the hydrocarbon sector in 1996[20].

This process, in which the promotion of multiculturalism translated into a mere folkloric valorization of the culture and tradition of native populations as long as it did not challenge neoliberal economic policies, is a phenomenon that, to varying degrees, has occurred throughout the continent. Several authors have even started using the term "neoliberal multiculturalism" to describe how multiculturalism has become interconnected and closely linked to the neoliberal restructuring of the state[21]. Additionally, several indigenous intellectuals in recent years have pointed out the problematic nature of the multicultural approach. For example, Kichwa intellectual and leader of the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, Floresmilo Simbaña, noted how multicultural policies led to the abandonment of a leftist perspective within indigenous movements. This, in turn, resulted in their weakening and distancing from the rest of society in favor of identity recognition policies[22]. Mapuche anthropologist Enrique Antileo, on the other hand, argued that multiculturalism was a new form of colonialist politics in a context marked by neoliberalism, essentially reproducing the *mestizaje* paradigm through symbolic celebration of indigenous people, relegating them to the margins of state power[23].

The Bolivian case thus illustrates how the specificity of multicultural policies in Latin America stems from the fact that they were an institutional response to the emergence of heterogeneous actors demanding a redefinition of the state model on the political scene. However, this response often neutralized the revolutionary potential of indigenous people in favor of their representative and identity-based inclusion within the state model.

---

[20] [20] For a discussion of Lozada's economic and social policies and the role of the IMF in Bolivia see: Webber (2011: 135 ff); Gamarra (1996); Schultz (2005).
[21] Hale (2005); Postero (2007); Van Cott (2006).
[22] Zapata (2019).
[23] *Ivi*: 82

3. Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the *Indio Permitido*

Another issue related to the multicultural model of access to rights in Latin America concerns the role assumed by NGOs in mediating between indigenous people and the neoliberal state. The importance of NGOs in financing meetings between various Latin American indigenous organizations, like the *Reunión de Barbados*, and in advocating for their causes on the international stage has already been mentioned. As the multicultural model gained prominence across the continent, the role of NGOs became even more crucial, as they became indispensable actors in both promoting multiculturalism and maintaining a moderate form of multicultural rights that would not disrupt the neoliberal model significantly. It was not sufficient for states to merely guarantee specific rights for indigenous populations; in most cases, indigenous individuals needed education about these rights, and their organizational structures had to conform to the constitutional norms of the state. Here is where NGOs came into play, often creating a dependency of indigenous people on their funding and mediation to access these rights[24].

Using the Bolivian case as an example, the process for registering collective lands within TCOs involved a complex bureaucratic procedure to officially delineate territories that were previously undefined and to manage the redistributed resources. In many indigenous communities, there were no individuals or leaders with the technical expertise to navigate this process. Therefore, it was only with the support of NGOs that various indigenous territories could initiate the process of obtaining property titles for their lands as TCOs[25]. During this support process, NGOs also began organizing educational programs within communities to inform indigenous people about their rights as citizens and to highlight the opportunities that the INRA Law provided for their political inclusion. These programs covered topics such as indigenous empowerment, civic and environmental education, and rights education, and even included political training for indigenous leaders. However, these programs often disregarded the methods and principles underlying community organization and, more often than not, exacerbated divisions and conflicts rather than promoting a genuinely egalitarian process of knowledge and resource sharing within indigenous territories. A common outcome of this was the growing disconnect between the 'educated leaders' who represented indigenous communities and could pursue political careers and grassroots community members who, in many cases, couldn't access to those lines of mobility and continued to live in extreme poverty. While this process enabled indigenous populations to have their land rights recognized, it didn't fundamentally alter the real economic and social conditions for the majority of indigenous people in these territories. Consequently, the state's model for administering rights as instruments for controlling the indigenous population gained full legitimacy, and NGOs multiplied as agents of rural development in the country. In 1980, there were approximately a hundred NGOs in Bolivia, but by the late 1990s, the number had soared to around a thousand, with most of them being funded by entities like the Catholic Church or directly by organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF[26].

According to various authors, NGOs during this period served as functional actors in the neoliberal restructuring of the state, compensating for the absence of a social state by providing

---

[24] For an in-depth look at the role of NGOs in indigenous organizations see: Bebbington (1993); Van Niekerk (1994).

[25] From 1996 to 2005, with the help of NGOs, 8,400,752 hectares of indigenous land were cadastrated as TCO, most of it in the departments of Beni and Santa Cruz, see: McKay (2018: 109).

[26] Kohl and Farthing (2006: 76-7)

emergency policies of technical and financial support. These policies not only failed to bring about structural transformations to improve living conditions in rural areas but also made the development of these territories entirely subservient to NGOs projects and funding[27]. This process was such that anthropologists Charles Hale and Rosamel Millaman coined the concept of the *indio permitido* (allowed indigenous individual) to describe the changes imposed on indigenous individuals by NGOs[28]. Indeed, the projects and support of NGOs aimed to 'educate' indigenous people about accessing the new rights introduced by the multicultural state, reinforcing the neoliberal notion of indigenous citizenship. In this view, indigenous people could enjoy their cultural rights only as long as these rights did not conflict with the neoliberal restructuring and the definition of their territory in line with the Washington Consensus. Therefore, the *indio permitido* was a subject who could feel free to express his/her cultural difference but should not exceed these identity and cultural boundaries in his/her activism; the struggle had to be reduced to the level of state recognition of rights and could not undermine the structure that guaranteed them. Furthermore, these policies temporally and spatially confined indigenous people to spaces outside of contemporary society, relegating them to rural areas and framing their ancestral heritage as the basis for rights access. These overlooked the fact that many indigenous individuals lived in urban areas and, in many cases, no longer spoke their native language. Even among those residing in rural communities, many had adopted lifestyles that no longer mirrored an ancestral past or unchanging tradition. Multicultural rights, therefore, reduced indigenous people to minorities, portraying them as "noble savages finally recognized", pushing them to perpetuate that folkloric otherness as the sole means of accessing state protection[29]. It was in this context that the terms "ecologically noble savage", coined by Kent Redford, and "ecological native", described by anthropologist Astrid Ulloa, emerged[30]. These concepts critically referred to the way in which, during those years, the promotion of indigenous identity was framed as an alternative to modern capitalist logic. Indigenous people were portrayed as innocent groups outside of history, living in perfect harmony with their environment according to non-destructive community principles[31]. According to Aymara intellectual Carlos Macusaya, this association of indigenous people with their environment created an exoticized image of indigenous individuals as authentic defenders of Mother Earth based on their ancestral worldviews and their connection with nature: this image was then internalized by indigenous populations through the educational efforts of NGOs[32]. Even today, this pure and utopian image of indigenous people is widely reproduced, both by international organizations as a category for accessing rights and by indigenous people themselves as a means of replicating that functional otherness to gain

---

[27] *Ivi*: 78; Postero (2007: 168 ff.)

[28] This term draws from a seminar by Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. Hale and Millaman (2005: 300).

[29] Brighenti and Gago (2013: 102)

[30] Redford (1990: 24-29); Ulloa (2003).

[31] The process of convergence between indigenous and environmental rights is dense with contradictory dynamics. The rhetoric that has portrayed indigenous peoples as authentic defenders of the land by virtue of their culture and traditions is a process involving multiple actors, ranging from indigenous peoples themselves to international NGOs, from the UN to Catholic organisations. For a general overview see: Brysk (2000); Conklin and Graham (1995: 695-710); Varese (1991: 13-17).

[32] Zapata (2019: 87).

more rights[33]. In his work *Pachamamadas; apariencia y dominación*, Macusaya directly addresses Aymara indigenous people, cautioning them against the dangers of uncritically accepting these postulates, which he defines as *pachamamadas* (*Pachamama* worship). This term emphasizes the rhetoric of *Pachamama* defence prevalent among Andean populations. According to Macusaya, these postulates tend to dehistoricize indigenous people, promoting fictional and falsified worldviews that ultimately nullify and "sterilize" the political and resistance potential of indigenous people rather than fostering it[34].

4. Indigenous Multiculturalism Beyond Multicultural Policies

The limitations of the multicultural model in Latin America that have been analyzed here are amply evident; still, it is important to note that, albeit in a contradictory manner, the recognition of certain rights for native populations has opened up possibilities for action and access to political power that were previously non-existent for indigenous people on the continent. In Bolivia, for example, the fact that TCOs were considered autonomous legal entities, albeit still under state protection, sparked a debate within the indigenous movement on the utility of forming political parties. The parties were indeed useful to represent indigenous peoples in parliament and secure seats for them in municipalities where various indigenous communities met the requirements for TCO recognition. The debate was not without contradictions and tensions between indigenous organizations that supported parliamentary representation and others that feared that entering parliament would push the indigenous movement toward more moderate positions, forcing it to comply with the rules of the neoliberal state[35]. Nonetheless, despite the conflicts, this debate generated political ferment that led to the proliferation of indigenous organizations. It was in this context, for example, that Evo Morales founded the *Movimiento al Socialismo*, a party that would later bring the first indigenous president to power in 2005.

The political transformation brought about by multicultural reforms allowed indigenous people to access unprecedented political spaces. This process was widespread across much of the continent. In Colombia, for example, the ratification of Convention 169 in 1991 led to the participation of three representatives from indigenous organizations in the National Constituent Assembly to draft the new constitution[36]. Despite the dominance of the neoliberal bloc in the Constituent Assembly, indigenous representatives succeeded in securing important recognition for indigenous territories as legal entities with the authority to manage education, political offices, and justice according to customary practices[37]. Additionally, they secured two reserved seats in the senate[38]. In Ecuador, the multiculturalism debate strengthened the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador* (CONAIE), bringing together various indigenous organizations in the country. In 1995, then, the political party *Movimiento de Unidad*

---

[33] The reproduction of these exoticised images of indigenous peoples was also evident at COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021, where 28 indigenous representatives were invited to participate as holders of specific knowledge crucial to slowing climate change.

[34] Macusaya (2016: 10-11)

[35] On the details of this debate within indigenous organizations, see: Van Cott (2005: 49-98).

[36] Van Cott (2006: 290)

[37] Constitución Política de Colombia (1991: Art. 246, 286, 330).

[38] *Ivi*, Art. 171

Plurinacional Pachakutik was established. This party effectively merged indigenous demands with those of other marginalized societal sectors, offering a broader critique of Washington's structural adjustment plans. This was akin to what the Indigenous March had accomplished in Bolivia, and the *Pachakutik* became the central nucleus of opposition to the neoliberal government of Sixto Durán-Ballén[39]. When a Constituent Assembly was convened in 1997 to draft a new constitution, *Pachakutik*, unlike Colombia where only three indigenous representatives were involved, emerged as the third most influential political force in the Assembly. It successfully incorporated indigenous issues, with substantial support from leftist parties[40].

In other instances, the success of multiculturalism was primarily shaped by state political processes. In Venezuela, for instance, the election of Hugo Chávez significantly weakened the country's neoliberal elites and its reliance on Washington. Thus, even though the indigenous movement was not particularly powerful or visible in the political landscape, five indigenous representatives participated in the Assembly tasked with drafting the new constitution of 1999. This contributed to making it one of the most progressive constitutions regarding indigenous rights in the entire continent[41]. This was made possible because the neoliberal bloc within the Assembly was already a minority, and Chávez's state-led and centralized economic model favored the recognition of indigenous sovereignty over their territories in line with state laws. This also included the right to preserve and develop indigenous culture, language, education, and forms of justice[42].

Moreover, Charles Hale and Rosamel Milliman, in their analysis introducing the concept of the *indio permitido*, illustrate how the demand for multicultural policies by indigenous people played a pivotal role in ending dictatorial regimes in countries like Chile (in 1990) and Guatemala (in 1985), as well as in revitalizing indigenous movement in post-dictatorship years. The Pinochet regime in Chile and the military regimes in Guatemala fiercely repressed indigenous movements and sold off and parcelled out their territories. Still, in both countries, indigenous cultural demands, which emphasized respect for language, spirituality, and traditions, were initially considered politically inconsequential by the military regimes; cultural demands were seen as less threatening compared to the demands of anti-dictatorship movements. On the contrary, opposition political forces recognized the political potential of these cultural demands and found valuable allies in various indigenous organizations, contributing to the eventual downfall of dictatorial rule. This context led to the rise of cultural resistance, with indigenous activists initially operating clandestinely but soon gaining prominence within various opposition movements, establishing more organized structures. In Chile, for example, the Mapuche people formed the *Centro Cultural Mapuche*. In Guatemala, organizations like the *Coordinadora Nacional Indígena Campesina* and the *Comité de Unidad Campesina* emerged, participating in resistance and guerrilla movements against the dictatorship. During the democratic transition, the alliance between leftist forces and indigenous organizations in both countries resulted in classic multicultural representation policies: in Chile, the *Acuerdo Imperial* promoted by the government of Patricio Aylwin saw several Mapuche leaders entering parliament; in Guatemala, the government of Vinicio Cerezo ratified Convention 169 in 1996 and implemented various measures to protect and revitalize Maya culture, such as establishing the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala and the Fondo Indígena de*

---

[39] On the trajectory of CONAIE and its role in Ecuadorian politics in the 1990s see: Petras and Veltmeyer (2005: 138-74).
[40] Van Cott (2006: 291).
[41] *Ivi*, 292.
[42] Constitución Política de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (1999: Art. 119-126).

Guatemala[43]. So, despite the identity retreat that occurred in the post-dictatorship years, which led to the definition of the category of the *indio permitido* within the state and a distancing of some indigenous sectors from left-wing parties, the cultural claims during the dictatorship years still allowed indigenous movements not to succumb under the weight of repression. These claims also allowed indigenous groups to establish an organizational structure capable of negotiating state power shares with the return of democracy.

Ultimately, from an anthropological perspective, the point is not to unequivocally support or reject the multicultural paradigm. Rather, it's essential to critically examine how it is implemented, revealing both the hierarchies it perpetuates within indigenous communities and the continuities with colonial subordination dynamics. It's also important to assess the opportunities it provides for some indigenous individuals to access state power and engage in political mobilization, while others may not enjoy the same benefits. Returning to the initial considerations on the indefiniteness of culture, this analysis underscores that indigenous communities are not homogenous entities characterized by an unchanging culture reproduced uniformly. Instead, they contain internal inequalities – between leaders and grassroots members, men and women, young and old – that also influence how culture is experienced and sustained. The culture of an indigenous community is inseparable from the broader political, economic, and social context it exists within. It results from an ongoing, long-term relational process with other actors in civil society and the state, leading to constant re-signification and adaptation of what is defined as "indigenous tradition". This is why multiculturalism, from an institutional perspective, always conceals the trap of essentialization: that is, in legitimising certain cultural rights, it always runs the risk of reducing and normalising the different needs and interests present among the heterogeneous indigenous population. In this process it can led also to the transposition of indigenous subjects into a plane of absolute otherness.

Therefore, it's particularly important to consider the critiques offered by indigenous intellectuals, such as those already mentioned, including Simbaña, Antileo, and Macusaya. These critiques challenge the integrative narrative of multiculturalism and seek to reframe cultural difference positively by reintegrating the class dimension within indigenous recognition policies. In this sense, another significant example is the re-signification of the Mapuche word *chumpurria*, which originally meant mixture. Mapuche authors and poets, such as Jaime Huenún, David Aniñir Guilitraro, Adriana Paredes Pinda, and Mirabel Mora, have reclaimed and re-signified this term. Previously, *chumpurria* was used negatively to describe indigenous and *mestizo* individuals as 'lazy', 'uncivilized', and 'savage'. In the poems of these authors, the term is instead used to emphasize the inherent difference experienced by urban Mapuche people. This difference, rooted in cultural elements, translates into their subordination in economic and political spheres. For these authors, *chumpurria* thus represents the specific condition of urban indigenous people, which allows them to politicize their experiences and demand an escape from conditions of domination while maintaining their cultural specificity[44].

Similarly, Silvia Rivera Cusincanqui reinterprets the term *chola*. In the early 1920s, *chola* was a derogatory term used in Bolivia to refer to indigenous women who had migrated to La Paz to work in urban markets. According to the Aymara author, the *chola* embodies the symbolic figure that challenges the binary distinctions between indigenous people and modernity, as well as between male-dominated public space and female private space. In the 1940s in Bolivia, the *cholas* played a prominent role in

---

[43] Hale and Millaman (2005: 285-99).
[44] Zapata (2019: 87).

trade unions, creating a strong network between urban and indigenous activists through their dual membership. They pushed for demands that affected working and indigenous women, such as fair wages for domestic work and paid maternity leave in the workplace. *Chola* identity, then, allows indigenous women to re-signify their cultural otherness as a means of political entry into public space. For example, the *pollera*, a skirt historically worn by Spanish women in colonial times, was adopted by *cholas* who migrated to the city to assert their belonging to urban space, and has been transformed into a symbol of indigenous resistance to this day[45]. Through the re-signification of *chola*, Cusicanqui also reinterprets multiculturalism itself using the Aymara concept of *ch'ixi*. According to the author, *ch'ixi* aligns with the Aymara notion of something that simultaneously is and is not, symbolizing an undefined color resulting from the juxtaposition of two opposing or contrasting colors. *Ch'ixi* represents a reality where multiple cultural differences coexist without merging but instead engaging in dialogue, even in a conflicting and antagonistic way. This conflictual coexistence arises because these cultural differences are not reproduced in the same way over time but are constantly readapted and signified to coexist and graft one onto the other[46]. This concept is actually a reformulation of the term *sociedad abigarrada* (motley society) developed by the Bolivian intellectual René Zavaleta Mercado, indicating a society where various economic structures and ideological superstructures coexist without complete correspondence between them. For Zavaleta, the non-correspondence between structures and superstructures does not mean that the capitalist mode of production and the modern temporality that corresponds to it are not hegemonic in Latin American post-colonial countries; rather, the author was concerned with analysing how the coexistence of anachronistic and traditional elements with those introduced by capitalist modernity affected both the processes of nation-state formation and the politicisation of the heterogeneous Latin American population[47]. The *ch'ixi* would thus be a perspective that allows us to observe how indigenous subjects reclaim traditional elements and secularize them within the state paradigm to challenge the very way in which those same traditional elements have historically been used by the state to keep them economically and politically subordinate. The re-signification of indigenous identities, such as *chola* and *chumpurria*, exemplifies this dynamic, which contingently reclaims past elements to transform them into tools of contestation. Multiculturalism, when seen from an indigenous perspective, can thus allow for a shift in the concept of indigeneity from a passive to an insurgent subject; and multicultural policies within the neoliberal context have rather been the institutional response to this insurgency.

Bibliography

Bebbington, A. 1993. *Nongovernmental Organisations and the State in Latin America: Rethinking Roles in Sustainable Agricultural Development*. London and New York: Routledge.

Brighenti B., Gago V. 2013. *From neoliberal multiculturalism to differences as forms of contention. The mestizaje hypothesis in Latin America* in *Science and Politics*, 25 (49): 91-106.

A. Brysk, A. 200. *From Tribal Village to Global Village: Indian Rights and International Relations in Latin America*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

---

[45] Rivera Cusicanqui (2010: 73). See also: Rivera Cusicanqui (1996).
[46] Rivera Cusicanqui (2010b).
[47] Zavaleta Mercado (2021: 275-8, 337-46).

Ceccherini, E. 2008. *Multiculturalism* in *Digesto delle Discipline pubblicistiche* in A. Angeletti *et al.* (eds.) Milan: UTET/Wolters Kluwer.

Conklin B., Graham L. 1995. *The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-politics* in *American Anthropologist*, 97 (4): 695-710.

Constitución política de Bolivia, 1994.

Constitución Política de Colombia, 1991.

Constitución Política de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 1999.

Constitución Política de la República de Ecuador, 1998.

Declaración de Barbados II, Barbados, 28/07/1977.

Gamarra, E. 1996. *Bolivia: Managing Democracy in the 1990s* in J. I. Domínguez and A. F. Lowenthal (eds.), *Constructing Democratic Governance: South America in the 1990s*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Geertz, C. 1998 [1973]. *Interpretation of cultures*. Il Mulino: Bologna.

Hale, C. 2005. *Neoliberal Multiculturalism: The Remaking of Cultural Rights and Racial Dominance in Central America* in *PoLAR*, 28 (1): 10-28.

Hale C., Millaman R. 2005. *Cultural Agency and Political Struggle in the Era of Indio Permitido* in D. Sommer (eds.), *Cultural Agency in the Americas*, NC: Duke University Press: 281-314.

Harvey, D. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ILO. 1989. *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention* No. 169.

Klein, H. 2015. *Historia Mínima de Bolivia*. Mexico City: El colegio de México.

Kohl B., Farthing L. 2006. *Impasse in Bolivia: Neoliberal Hegemony and Popular Resistance*, London: Zed.

Lehm Ardaya, Z. 1999. *Milenarismo y movimientos sociales en la Amazonia boliviana. La búsqueda de la Loma Santa y la Marcha Indígena por el Territorio y la Dignidad*. Santa Cruz: APCOB/CIDDEBENI/OXFAM AMERICA.

Ley No. 1715, *Ley del Servicio Nacional de Reforma Agraria*, Bolivia, 18/10/1996.

López P., Makaran G. 2018. *Recolonización en Bolivia. Neonacionalismo extractivista y resistencia comunitaria* Ciudad de México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Macusaya, C. 2016. *Pachamamadas; apariencia y dominación* in *Pukara* 10 (116): 10-11.

Mallon, F. 1996. *Constructing Mestizaje in Latin America: Authenticity, Marginality, and Gender in the Claiming of Ethnic Identities* in *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, 2 (1): 170-81.

McKay, B. 2018. *Extractivismo agrario. Dinámicas de poder, acumulación y exclusión en Bolivia*. La Paz: Fundación Tierra.

Miller, M. G. 2004. *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race. The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Montecino, S. 1991. *Madres y huachos: alegorías del mestizaje chileno*. Santiago: Cuarto Propio.

Petras J., Veltmeyer H. 2005. *Social Movements and State Power in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador*. London: Pluto Press.

Postero Gray, N. 2007. *Now We Are Citizens. Indigenous Politics in Postmulticultural Bolivia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Postero Gray, N. 2017. *The Indigenous State. Race, Politics, and Performance in Plurinational Bolivia*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Redford, K. H. 1990. *The Ecologically Noble Savage* in *Orion Nature Quarterly*, 9 (3): 24-29.

Remotti, F. 2014. *Culture. Dalla Complessità all'impoverimento*. Rome: Editori Laterza.

Rivera Cusicanqui, S. 1996. *Ser mujer indígena, chola o birlocha en la Bolivia poscolonial de los años 90*. La Paz: Plural.

Rivera Cusicanqui, S. 2010. *Violencias (re)encubiertas en Bolivia*. La Paz: La mirada salvaje.

Rivera Cusicanqui, S. 2010b. *Ch`ixinakax Utxiwa. Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón.

Schultz, J. 2005. *Deadly Consequences: The International Monetary Fund and Bolivia's 'Black February'.* Cochabamba: The Democracy Center.

Segato, R. L. 2010. *Los cauces profundos de la raza latinoamericana. Una relectura del mestizaje* in *Crítica y Emancipación,* 3: 11-44.

Van Cott, D. L. 2005. *From Movements to Parties in Latin America: The Evolution of Ethnic Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van Cott, D. L. 2006. *Multiculturalism versus neoliberalism in Latin America*, in K. Banting and W. Kymlicka (eds.), *Multiculturalism and The Welfare State: Recognition and Redistribution in Contemporary Democracies*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Svampa, M. 2016. *Debates latinoamericanos. Indianismo, desarrollo, dependencia y populismo.* Buenos Aires: Edhasa.

Ulloa, A. 2003. *The Ecological Native: Indigenous Peoples' Movements and Eco-governmentality in Colombia*, presented at *Latin American Studies Association*, Dallas-Texas.

Van Niekerk, N. 1994. *Desarrollo rural en los Andes: Un estudio sobre los programas de desarrollo de Organizaciones no Gubernamentales.* Leiden: Leiden Development Studies.

Varese, S. 1991. *Think Locally, Act Globally* in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 15 (3): 13-17.

Vasconcelos, J. 1948 [1925]. *La raza cósmica.* México: Espasa Calpe.

Wade, P. 2000. *Raza y etnicidad en Latinoamérica.* Quito: Ediciones Abya Yala.

Webber, J. 2011. *Red October: Left-Indigenous Struggles in Modern Bolivia.* Leiden-Boston: Brill.

Zapata, C. 2013. *Intelectuales indígenas en Ecuador, Bolivia y Chile. Diferencia, colonialismo y anticolonialismo.* Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala.

Zapata, C. 2019. *Crisis del multiculturalismo en América Latina. Conflictividad social y respuestas críticas desde el pensamiento político indígena.* Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press.

Zapata C., Oliva E. 2019. *La Segunda Reunión de Barbados y el Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas: horizontes compartidos entre indígenas y afrodescendientes en América Latina* in *Revista de Humanidades*, 39: 319-347.

Zavaleta Mercado, R. 2021. *Horizontes de Visibilidad. Aportes Latinoamericanos Marxistas. Obras escogidas de René Zavaleta Mercado.* Barcelona: Editorial Sylone/Traficantes de sueños.

Email: camilla.deambroggi2@unibo.it