

The «Proceso de Cambio» and the Seventh Year Crisis:

*Towards a Reconfiguration of the Relationship between
State and Social Movements in Bolivia¹*

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Abstract

On 18th December 2012, Evo Morales celebrated his seventh anniversary as president of the Plurinational State of Bolivia. In 2005, this Aymara coca growers' union leader was elected for the first time, with the support of social movements and, in particular, of the peasant and indigenous sectors, inaugurating a moment of political transition that raised many expectations for an in-depth transformation of the state-civil societal relationship. A complex reshaping that, as the popular belief suggests, was going to pass through a highly delicate moment: the seventh year. Relying upon an in-depth empirical research on social and land conflicts in Bolivia, this work aims to analyze the revitalization of new corporative struggles among collective rural actors (indigenous vs. peasant) in light of the recent institutional and normative reforms. The latter have favored a reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and social sectors, inaugurating a new phase of fragmentation and conflict.

¹ This paper is part of a broader research exploring new social conflict trends in Bolivia. It draws on evidences gathered during two years of fieldwork in the country (2010-2011).

Keywords

dynamics of social conflict, Evo Morales, identitarian construction, land, process of change, social movements, the MASista project

Resumen

El 18 diciembre de 2012, Evo Morales celebró su séptimo aniversario como presidente del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia. Este líder cocalero aymara fue elegido en 2005 con el apoyo de los principales movimientos sociales, inaugurando un momento de transición política que generó muchas expectativas por una profunda transformación de la relación entre Estado y sociedad civil. Una relación evidentemente compleja que, como lo sugiere la creencia popular, está por entrar en un momento muy delicado: el séptimo año. A partir de un estudio empírico de los conflictos sociales y por la tierra en Bolivia, este trabajo da cuenta de la revitalización de nuevas luchas corporativas entre actores colectivos rurales (indígenas vs. campesinos) a la luz de las recientes reformas institucionales y normativas. Estas últimas han favorecido un proceso de reconfiguración en la relación entre Estado y sectores sociales, abriendo paso a una fase de fragmentación y conflicto.

Palabras claves

construcción identitaria, dinámica del conflicto social, el proyecto MASista, Evo Morales, movimientos sociales, Proceso de Cambio, tierra

Introduction

In popular belief, Latin America is the “revolutionary continent.” It is where the fronts of social conflict have often matched up with the trenches of national politics. It is the symbolic homeland of social movements, which mould their history according to the dynamics of social action, as well as to the imaginaries of collective narrations. It is where “revolutionary romanticism” imbued with egalitarian rhetoric forges the social body, whose mythology and iconography—with *Che* Guevara in the front line—are universal referents, especially for those sectors of the radical left orphans of a promising ideology and mortally wounded by the collapse of 20th century socialism. Behind the stereotypical visions of the Subcontinent lies a peculiar “social ontology,” characterized by a tendency toward the development of

teleological visions of politics. This tendency belongs as much to conservatives as to progressives, two political categories that do not necessarily correspond to the traditional collocations within the right-left political spectrum.

Latin American regimes often tended to shift toward the extremes, toward ideological dogmatism and a consequential managerial authoritarianism, to the detriment of more pragmatic and moderated visions. The results would be a certain political trend toward the adopting of teleological schemes, rooted in ideologies and dogmatic political recipes, apparently solid in theory, where sophisticated linear arguments dominate, but often disastrous in their practical application.² *Change* is often the key word, but it is a change in the rationality, more than in the real world, a symbolic and verbal change, more that material, often unable to generate concrete consequences since it is based on overvalued theoretical and ideological expectations.

In neoliberal doctrine, the most significant example is the teleological development model of the 80s, whose main tenets were based in a more or less linear process of democratic transition and, in the economic realm, in the implementation of privatization and the weakening of the state, as bases for an assured and profitable growth. From the left, recent political projects that have gained some strength at the regional level have returned to the classical refrain –the revolution– as the way to dismantle the neoliberal teleology and replace it with a new one. While starting from a common base, this model assumed different characteristics depending on the national contexts: ethnic-indigenist in Bolivia and Ecuador, socialist in Venezuela and Nicaragua. Among all these experiences, Bolivia has often catalyzed attentions and expectations of this imaginary of change.

The Bolivian “Cultural Revolution”

From 2005, after the large electoral victory of the Aymara *cocalero* leader Evo Morales, Bolivia is experiencing a transition that would cut across

² This phenomenon could also be understood as a peculiar reinterpretation and adaptation to the Latin American context of the “rigid European narrative structure, which demands that every nation moulds the image of its future” (Sanjinés 2009, 113) through a teleological vision of time and history rooted in the Enlightenment’s idea of progress.

historic inheritance and bring the country towards a *proceso de cambio* (process of change). Within the framework of this work, we will consider the new political phase, after the failure of the corporatist and the neoliberal projects, as the latest answer, under a culturalist flag, to structural problems coming from the unsolved weaknesses of the modern nation-state and of its basic tenets (particularly, the citizenship principle), typical of post-colonial countries. In other words, we are confronted with another manifestation of a *longue durée* crisis, which is tackled through the adoption of a new political recipe to deal with endemically weak conditions of statehood and citizenship, implementing a project whose key word is neither politics nor economics, but culture, or, more precisely, pluri-culture.

The strategy to address the defeat of the historical nation-state within the Andean post-colonial context shows an innovation in the measure in which it does not try to re-conduct the process and find solutions within the very dominant model and among its traditional institutional instruments, but rather looks for alternative models, more comfortable for the autochthonous reality. This is probably why this experience has been labeled simultaneously as anti-modern and post-modern, and has been considered an innovation in its response to some of the main challenges of modernity. This is as well one of the reasons that explains why the Andean country has been raising so much attention and expectations overseas. In fact, this phenomenon forms part of a wider dynamic that could be observed in different regions around the world that, for a few decades, has been manifesting itself through the resurgence of identitarian claims, whether ethnically, religiously or culturally connoted (Kymlicka 2007). These struggles are fuelled by new narrative and discursive constructions that contribute to challenging the stability of the social and political order based on the nation-state.

Fernando Calderón (2008, 66) named the new Bolivian process as a “neodevelopmentalist indigenism.” Its main characteristics would be: the central role of social movements, especially indigenous ones; a search for inclusion and egalitarian order, based on a rather standardized development proposal that relies upon commodities incomes, paired with a complicated negotiation with transnational enterprises led by a state that proposes itself as strong and stable, but that still incubates chronic weaknesses; a national and anti-imperialistic rhetoric that dominates international relations and is used as a political instrument when it is time to consolidate internal consensus. This definition seems excellent in describing the first phase of the process, while recently it would likely be more appropriate to invert the order

of the linguistic composition. As Calderón himself noted, the latest development of the Bolivian political experience would rather concentrate on the strengthening of a less innovative development path that is mainly backed by state capitalism, commodities exploitation and basic measures of redistribution and poverty reduction. At the same time, the ethno-cultural issue has been placed in the background, abandoning its discursive centrality and entering into a new, more conflictive phase. This is why it would be more appropriate to modify the formula into “indigenist developmentism.”

This interpretation, although useful to describe the overall characteristics of the Bolivian experience, should be complemented by a more in-depth glance at the complexity of the social mobilization process that is currently taking place in the country. What could be observed over the latest decade is the end of an historical model of mobilization dominated by the pivotal role of the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (Bolivian Labor Confederation, or COB) and its miner-based leadership, towards new forms of mobilization led by the *cocalero* peasant indigenous movements, which renewed, at least partially, the repertoire of collective action. This process was accentuated when the new government led by Evo Morales came into power as the first popular coalition to have access to the national political arena as a majority.

The roots of the upswing of the revolution’s leading party, MAS, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement towards Socialism), have to 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 government; in particular, through the conflicts of the so-called Water War, Coca War and Gas War (Dangl 2007). Since 2005 and the electoral victory of Evo Morales, a new national strategy towards development and democratization has been forged —whose key words are decolonization, nationalization and pluralism— and formalized, in January 2009, through the overwhelming approval of a new Constitution.

Bolivia is living through an exceptional and complex moment of transition in recent Latin American history: the effort is to pass from a strictly representative model of democracy to another, based on the trinitarian formula of a “participative, representative and communitarian democracy.”³

³ “Democracy is implemented in the following ways that would be developed by law: 1) Direct and participative, through referendum, citizens’ legislative initiative, recall elections, assembly, *cabildo* and previous consultation, among others [...]. 2) Representative, through representatives’ elections through

Direct participation in public affairs is promoted, together with the possibility for integrating traditional practices of indigenous groups within formal institutional structures, as well as to strengthening a development path towards the reduction of inequalities and extreme poverty. In particular, the country has opened a new era in its political history, whose main innovations are in the leading role of the indigenous-popular sectors as a dominant coalition (García Linera 2010, 38), and the paradox of an unprecedented peasant political hegemony within a predominantly urban country (Do Alto 2011). The strength of social movements and the rise of new rural collective identities brought about a renewal among the protagonists of the public space, which represents a great political and symbolic change.

At the same time, the heterogeneity of the coalition in power raised many problems in terms of the management of diversity and potential tensions among social sectors. In this sense, the *Evismo*—the charismatic and populist movement that developed around the political leadership of Evo Morales— has represented the populist solution for the creation of a new hegemonic collective identity that works as a “void significant” able to catalyze and manage a structural and “not dialectically retrievable” heterogeneity (Laclau 2005). Within this context, a key role is played by discourse and narratives as effective tools to occupy symbolic spheres and social spaces, playing down diversity and promoting a hegemonic project, in the Gramscian sense (Fontana 2011a).

As Alain Touraine wrote at the beginning of Morales’ first mandate, Bolivia is the place where, not only the political life of the continent could be decided, but also its capacity to create a political and social model to intervene in an extremely tough situation. Accordingly, the political future of Latin America depends to a great extent on the possibilities for Bolivia to construct and achieve a social transformation model that combines the struggle against inequality and the struggle for democratic values (Touraine 2006, 53-54). In other words, what is at stake here is a theoretical and practical effort that is deeply tied to the specificities of the context and, at the same time, holds a universal value, in its dialectic approach to the crisis of the

universal, direct and secret vote, according to the law. 3) Communitarian, through election, designation and normative regulation of authorities and representatives through norms and procedures, typical of the native indigenous peasant peoples and nations, among others, according to the law.” (Art. 11 of the Political Constitution).

nation-state and of financial capitalism, and the tensions between global and local.

The moment of change in which Bolivia is living took form through a redefinition of the theoretical, philosophical, semiotic and political teleological approaches that lie at the base of the MASista project. Everything has been put under discussion. While in the neoliberal epoch as well as in Western societies the political game is played by moving the pawns within an already traced board, in Bolivia what is at stake is the definition of the board itself: where to trace the borders, how to define and negotiate the rules, while at the same time, however, there is the pragmatic and daily need to keep on moving the pawns, one way or another, given the impossibility to stop the game while the rules are put into question. The world is moving around and the political game has no time breaks. It is thus evident how difficult it is to keep on playing, and, in the meanwhile, to invest energies into the elaboration of a new game theory that at times ends up recycling old-fashioned ideologies and practical recipes. Moreover, while in Europe the Marxist and real socialism crisis left a void within the left, and caused some intellectual sectors to formulate theories on the opening of a new postmodern era, in Bolivia, perhaps because the crisis was not as strong as in the Old Continent, the trend is to look backward to the past more than to the new international, globalized vanguards, revitalizing Gramsci and Mariátegui as the main theoretical referents within Marxism capable of providing a culturalist solution to a multifaceted society that has started to call itself “plurinational.” If the potentialities and development of the new cultural and identity-based political bet is still uncertain, what comes out clearly from these changes is the decline of class as an explanatory and structuring social and political category, which seems unable to account for the current processes, neither theoretically nor normatively.

Contrary to the old popular mobilizations of the past, one of the key traits of the recent Bolivian political process is the important legislative and institutional transformation that has backed it. Not only the Constitution has been rewritten, and the very image and imaginary of the Bolivian nation have been changing, but also the institutional and legal apparatus has been widely reformed. Without an adequate comprehension of these changes, and their relative novelty within Bolivian society, it is not possible to reach an in-depth understanding of the MASista foundational project.

Redrawing the Chessboard

Looking at the institutional reshaping processes from a general point of view, Bolivia is reinterpreting the concept of citizenship through cultural lenses and is bringing up a theoretical–normative debate on the need to rethink the very foundations of modern representative democracy. The new Constitution, approved through a 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;⁴ it separates the state from religion; it permits only one presidential reelection and incorporates the revocatory referendum for the president's, governors' and mayors' mandates.

One of the most important innovations of the constitutional text is the substitution of the geopolitical paradigm of the unitarian state with that of a new *plurinational state* that institutes indigenous, municipal, departmental and regional autonomies. In this framework, elections of local authorities would be permitted on the base of customary norms, and a communitarian justice within the "native indigenous peasant" juridical framework would be introduced. Moreover, the new Constitution establishes that the judges of the Supreme Court and of the Constitutional Court will be elected through universal suffrage, among a candidates' short list previously approved by the Plurinational Legislative Assembly (the Congress).

Also in the economic ambit, the Constitution introduces a new paradigm that would substitute the neoliberal doctrine with a plural and diversified model, which would include various economic forms: state, communitarian, private and social–cooperative. According to Article 306:

The Bolivian economic model is plural and seeks to improve the quality of life and of the well-being of all Bolivians. [...] The plural economy articulates different forms of economic organization based on the principles of complementariness, reciprocity, solidarity, redistribution, equality, legal security, sustainability, equilibrium, justice and transparency.

In part, these changes represent a deepening of the neoliberal reforms agenda implemented during the 90s, which promoted some important institutional innovations, among which the formal recognition of the multicultural and plurinational nature of the Bolivian State, the

⁴ Every native language is official in its influence area and public employers must compulsory learn one of them.

municipalization of the country through the institution of popular elections for mayors' and the financial autonomy for municipalities (Law of Popular Participation), and the creation of the *Tierras Comunitarias de Origen* (Native Communitarian Lands, or TCOs) that could be titled in favor of indigenous peoples to guarantee access to and control of their ancestral territory. Those opportunities were seized by indigenous and peasant leaders who started to occupy, firstly, local political charges and, afterwards, delegations within the National Congress (Stefanoni 2012, 7), and paved the way for the rise of a rural-based movement such as the MAS.

Identitarian Renegations

The recent institutional changes promoted by the Morales government have been both in the framework as well as in one of the main consequences of the identitarian changes under which the country has been living during the last decades. Indeed, the new engineering of the state, and mainly the process of constitutional negotiation, were confronted, both at the national and local levels, including the historical structural plurality of Bolivian collective identities (classist, ethnic, regional, gender-based ...).

Considering the complex ethnical and identitarian map that characterizes the Bolivian reality, the strengthening of social cohesion and a strategy for addressing ethnic heterogeneity are crucial challenges for the MASista government, especially in the rural area where its most important organizational and corporative bases –indigenous and peasant– have historically been the two poles of a complex relationship. These passed through phases of articulation and disarticulation, following the rhythm of contextual hetero-direct changes –both national and global– and of endogenous strategic and ideological issues. The two identitarian dimensions, which correspond to two sociological categories –class and race; to two organizational and political traditions –peasant union and indigenous traditional organization; and to two ideological streams –Marxism and Indianism/Indigenism; have real foundations, instrumental applications and strategic projections, although the alliance and conflict game is mainly disputed in the symbolic and narrative field.

The recent historical trajectory of the two identitarian ingredients of rural Bolivia could be split into four main moments in time on the basis of an articulation/disarticulation dialectic dynamic: (1) The nationalistic revolution of 1952 promotes a hierarchical articulation (class over race) through a

process of massive unionizing and the construction of a cohesive narrative by its members in terms of class and *mestizaje* ('campesinization').⁵ (2) Between the 1970s and the 1990s, a phase of ideological articulation occurs under the intellectual and political leadership of *Katarismo*, a young and educated Aymara indianist movement allied with the new unionized peasant vanguard of the highlands.⁶ (3) Beginning in the 1980s, with the return of democracy, the fracture between peasant and indigenous reopens with the rise of the neoindigenist intellectual and political current, which catalyzes the claims of indigenous peoples but, unlike *Katarismo*, distances itself from peasant syndicalism, inaugurating a phase of organizational disarticulation, strengthened during the 90s by neoliberal institutional reforms.⁷ (4) With the election of Evo Morales in 2005, the new project of the MAS is based in an effort to reconcile the two sectors through a new hierarchical articulation which privileges race over class. Its strategy relies upon the weaving of a complex system of political alliances with popular sectors and the design of an *ad hoc* narrative-building process. However, this is not sufficient to completely reverse the disarticulation movement begun two decades earlier at the level of the social organizations, which continue to generate tensions and conflicts in the rural area up to the present (Fontana 2012a).

Articulation and disarticulation between the two identities could be defined in terms of alliances and conflicts within the three plans: ideological, political and identitarian. Indeed, to gain the political struggle, it is paramount to affirm a symbolic supremacy and manage to position a narrative as dominant. The two ambits –political and symbolic– are in this sense interdependent. This game of unstable equilibrium depends, on the one hand, on the success in the occupation of symbolic spaces represented by the “indigenous” and “peasant” ideal types and, on the other, on the struggle around a certain criteria of “purity” and “authenticity.”

Moreover, peasant and indigenous groups hold a forceful historical and social agency and, far from being passive receptors of hetero-direct

⁵ For an historical, anthropological and sociological analysis of this period see Rivera Cusicanqui 1984; Gordillo 2000; Dandler 1969; Calderón and Dandler 1984; Sanjinés 2003; and García Linera 2010.

⁶ For an historical, anthropological and sociological analysis of this period see Rivera Cusicanqui 1993; Albó and Barrios 1993; García Linera et al. 2010; and Pacheco 1992.

⁷ For an historical, anthropological and sociological analysis of this period see Robert Andolina et al., 2005; Albó 2008; and Stefanoni 2010.

dynamics –characters from the past more than actors of the present, immutable and resistant to modernity– are rather protagonists of that very modernity and even become globalization agents. Likewise, the global dimension is not just forged at the transnational, macro level, but its shape is constantly molded by the changes in the peripheries, where what are often considered secondary actors are involved in a constant process of change that has an impact on macro phenomena. Peasant and indigenous groups, often considered the most traditional, anti-modern and static sector within a society, are now rather showing a great capacity to regenerate their identities and adapt to new changing contexts. They are an expression of modernity since they result from “the interplay between technology-induced globalization, the power of identity [...], and the institutions of the state” (Castells 1997, 2). These embody a high degree of fluidity (or, as Bauman would say, “liquidity”), which manifests in their capacity to move between tradition and globalized world, to articulate the local space with political conjunctures, and with mid and long-term dynamics.

In this highly interdependent framework, a strong instrumental use of identity-building processes seems to prevail, which tends to emphasize their ethno-cultural features, considering both the institutional and political conjuncture and those moves of the other actors in the game; in particular, the state, other social groups, the international cooperation, the academic community. In fact, the strongest link between modernity and ethnicity is largely political, and calls into question the politicization of cultural differences and the demands for new forms of reterritorialization. As Pablo Regalsky noted:

The process of ethnification calls into question the historical core of modernity, the ideology of bourgeois civilization, which implies the impositions of forms of appropriation of social resources, forms of private property and a certain construction of the individual and the simultaneous destruction of the commons through commodification and/or privatization. Modernity means a construction of a fragmented and homogeneous mass of individuals understood as the dissolution of collective subjects not as abstract identities or ‘imagined communities’ but as historical subjects and agents that control a certain material habit (Regalsky 42).

Bolivian social movements somehow challenge the core of modernity –i.e. the nation-state and capitalism– by claiming new forms of territorial control and land distribution. In this sense, the identity-based demands for land control and political autonomy in Bolivia, as well as in other parts of Latin America and the world, should be considered one of the most important

strategies, and sometimes the only available option, for marginal social groups to respond to a context of progressive fragmentation, weakening of traditional institutional frameworks, and new transnational economic dynamics. They are, in other words, both the result of and the response to the latest phase of the modern age: the global era.

From a broader perspective, the recent Bolivian political experience is built upon a complex and ambivalent spatial-temporal relationship with the long-term and the more recent past, and with the local, national and global dimensions. The historical phase in which the world is living is crucial in terms of the definition of a new spatial-temporal dimension of life in society. On the one hand, globalization deeply changed economic, political and cultural realities and, at the same time, has not won yet the struggle against the geopolitical articulator of modernity *par excellence*, i.e. the nation-state. On the other hand, the local dimension gains strength as a reaction faced with the contradiction of globalization and the inability of the states to manage this phase of transition. Moreover, the bases of capitalism as a recipe for progress and development –i.e. the nexus between the economic teleological project of modernity and its normative counterpart– have been deeply challenged by the financial crisis, and the changes in the economic balance of power worldwide.

The recent Bolivian experience could thus be understood as one particular manifestation of the contemporary multifaceted crisis of the nation-state and of capitalism, and of the weaknesses that have condemned them, in this and other cases, to be endemically incomplete. In particular, the political transition inaugurated by the electoral victory of Evo Morales in 2005 could be interpreted as a new effort to confront those structural situations of crisis. After the implementation of nationalist and neoliberal recipes (first, with the 52 revolution, and then through the 80s and 90s structural adjustment policies), and their incapacity to reach satisfactory results, the latest state-building model proposes a cultural-based answer to similar challenges. The new political project is built upon an effort of positioning itself between *demos* and *ethnos*, with a shift towards the latter. This proposal, although innovative and ambitious in some aspects, nevertheless should be confronted with serious limitations both the endogenous –i.e. dependent on the very model, and the exogenous –i.e. dependent on the international context, where it is inserted. One of the most important endogenous fragilities is represented by the levels of social conflictivity and the debilities of the MASista strategy in terms of political cohesion.

New Patterns of Social Conflict

The radical change of government and political equilibria that brought about the first electoral victory of Evo Morales at the end of 2005 opened the possibility and expectations for deep transformations of state-civil societal relationship, i.e. the space of social conflict *par excellence*. Applying the conceptual framework of structuring and structured conflict of Wieviorka (2005), there was a shift in the conflict-violence continuum⁸ at the beginning of the 21st century and a rupture in the equilibria that have regulated social tensions in Bolivia for decades through structured conflicts (and in particular through a socially accepted and not-to-be-discussed pattern of roles and narratives: the oligarchy-rural relationship excluded the masses, the *mestizaje* discourse, the role of the COB as conflict catalyzer and articulator and, more recently, neoliberalism as the only conceivable way for development and its multicultural recipe). From the moment in which the conflictive tension between antagonistic sectors of society lost its structuring power, this generated the sudden increase of social and political tensions that eventually ended in a period of violence and open confrontation between 2000 and 2005. The breakthrough had to do mainly with the rise of new social powers and the re-discussion of a manicheist view of society (heritage of colonialism) through a *logique de rupture* (Fanon 1961). With the establishment of a new hegemonic order, new central principles of conflict organization were foreseen, which adapted to the moment of change that Bolivia was crossing.

Optimistic expectations were betting in favor of a redefinition of the conflict fields in light of a new institutional framework and a new role for civil society in politics, that could probably hold onto the potentialities for promoting a process of change in the nature of social conflicts towards a structuring and cohesive role, that could avoid violence as a viable and convenient means for the confronting actors. Although conflict would not disappear, the change of paradigm in favor of inclusion and democracy was

⁸ Wieviorka imagines the relationship between conflict and violence as a continuum with a lot of possible variations in the middle: “Entre les points extremes de l’axe qui conduit du conflit parfaitement structuré à la violence la plus débridée, il existe une infinie variété de situations moins tranchées, floues ou indécises, dans lesquelles la relation conflictuelle entre adversaires n’exclut pas la violence, et out celle-ci peut s’avérer génératrice de conflit pacifié” (Wieviorka 43-44).

expected to bring a shift and a fall of the traditionally high level of conflictivity within Bolivian society.

Seven years of Morales' government proves a good time to assess such expectations. Looking at the data and the conflict dynamics we can say that those expectations were partially accomplished, and partially not. The major evidence against predictions is that the number of conflicts has risen in the most recent years, reaching significantly high peaks in recent Bolivian history. Compared with 21 political conjunctures in Bolivia from 1970, the last one is the highest data after the governments of Siles Zuazo (1982-1985) and Mesa (2003-2005) (Laserna and Villarroel 2008; Laserna 2013) (fig. 1).

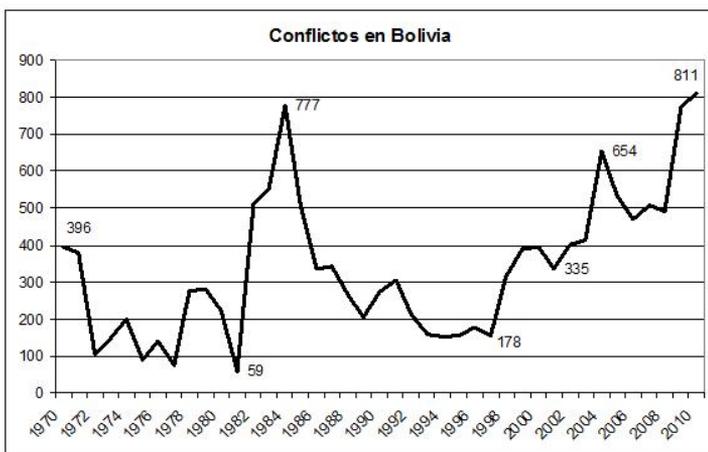


Figure 1. Number of conflicts per year in Bolivia between 1970 and 2010

Source: CERES, 2011

Between January and September 2010, a clear ascendant trend with respect to previous phases was registered (Fundación UNIR Bolivia 2010 and 2011). Since May 2010, there has been an escalation in the levels of violence, with direct clashes, especially among civil society groups, and actions that considerably affected third parties, which culminated, as we will see, in the grazed political crisis triggered by the *Gasolinazo* and the hard conflict with the COB in April 2011.

On the other side, looking at the conflict dynamics from a qualitative point of view, there seems to be a double track that conflates old causes and

patterns of social tensions with new ones, strictly dependant on the current political conjuncture. We observe the coexistence of structural conflicts, which depend of the long-term characteristics of Bolivian social and economic structure and, in particular, endemic inequalities and deep unresolved polarizations, and functional conflict, which arise from the endogenous contradictions of the transition process, and that are mainly politically rooted (Fontana 2011b).

Morales has led a process of strengthening the state, which could finally emancipate itself from the influence of traditional social sectors on the management of the *res publica*. The result is a new institutional apparatus with the capacity to be more autonomous in relation to the traditional powerful economic and political groups, and with an improved legitimacy in the eyes of the Bolivian people. At the same time, through an efficient narrative-building effort, a new inclusive country ideal was shaped, that has been successful, at least during the first mandate, in the management of tensions between localisms (ethnic, departmental, class-based identities) and national-populism (national identity), and in the generating of a new national self-valorization.

However, from 2009, with the promulgation of the new Constitution and the defeat of the right-wing opposition led by the eastern Civic Committees, this management strategy of social centrifugal forces from the government entered into a crisis, creating space for the rise of new tensions, especially among social movements.

Moreover, there is a structural problem within the MAS, which has always been an articulation of multiple subjects, organizations and social movements where no one is holder of ontological privileges in the construction of new identities, so that these very identities are the result of contingent hegemonic fights. Within the social universe close to the MAS, a new wave of identitarian and organizational construction, deconstruction and hybridization, in particular from the peasant and indigenous sectors, has been generating conflicts for the control of corporative power and political spaces.

We are faced with a crisis of the discursive strategies of cohesion that Morales adopted to integrate popular rural masses within the “revolutionary project.” More than homogeneity, the effort was to create discursive alliances among rural sectors, through the negotiation, mainly during the Constitutional Assembly, of the merging category of the “native indigenous peasant.” This strategy gave a certain breath to the MASista project and served as a propulsive force for more radical reforms. In fact, it

was within this merging category that the broader doctrinal and juridical changes are rooted, in particular, the definition of the state as plurinational, which appears to be an innovative constitutional-based experiment of re-foundation of the very doctrine of the state.

As a consequence of the discursive and strategic crisis that the government is facing as a cohesive agent, fragmentation among social sectors has risen and a new system of alliances (and conflicts) has been shaped, with an increased degree of social tensions, especially at a local level. In this sense, the problem of land tenure and management constitutes a key conflictive issue among MAS's rural allies, which reflects differing visions on development, territorial organizations and systems of control and power management (Fontana 2012b).

From 2009, the new pattern of social conflict is characterized by a wide range of small events that look for the immediate resolution of demands, generally belonging to the economic and labor sphere. This dynamic is part of a wider framework, in which the presence of important natural resources has been the national apple of discord. From the side of the executive power, the trend is to favor the classic dynamic of the socio-economic conflict, characterized by a rentist and clientelistic logic, within a context dominated by a weakness in the policy-making strategic vision and by the lack of negotiation and bargaining space.

In 2011, the new conflict pattern that has been taking shape during the second mandate is significantly manifested through a series of social mobilization episodes in which collective actors seek the immediate satisfaction of punctual claims. In particular, it is possible to identify three main sources of tensions: 1) the increase in the cost of living and the scarcity of basic products; 2) the insufficiency of salary increases; 3) the control of natural re-sources and, in particular, of the land (Fundación UNIR 2011).

The year 2011 began with a widespread conflict between the state and wide sectors of Bolivian society called the *Gasolinazo*: the government decided to increase prices for liquid fuels through a Supreme Decree [gasoline 73%; diesel 84%; aviation fuel 99%], simultaneously reducing diesel subsidies.

The rise in fuel prices as well as the overall inflationary peak were at the origin of a wave of protests by the main social sectors close to the MAS. Transport workers, union members, indigenous people, miners, *cocaleros*, and neighborhood committees organized protests all around the country, eventually obligating the president to withdraw the decree only six days after its promulgation. Beyond strictly economic evaluations on the need for and the pertinence of the measure, it is evident that it was a relevant political

error which generated a high cost in terms of loss of support for the government and had an impact on the overall social consensus, which had sustained Morales since 2005. In fact, surveys showed that the popularity of the President dramatically fell from the 84% to 36%, over the month of January 2011 alone. Moreover, the withdrawal of the measure was not sufficient to automatically contain the increase of inflation, which was at the origin of a new wave of demonstration during the following months, amplified as well by the protests against the shortage of basic goods such as sugar.

In April, Bolivian streets continued to be occupied by demonstrators, but with a new prevailing platform of claims structured around the need for a salary increase above the 10% proposed by the government. In analytical terms, this new wave of protests had two main characteristics: The first referred to the disproportion between the concrete measures –which provoked the blockade of key central areas of La Paz for almost two weeks and the violence of demonstrators as well as the police, in the end resulting in twelve injured and/or arrested– and the outcome of the negotiations being an increase of 11%, i.e. only one point more than the initial proposal by the government. The second element is the return to the foreground of the COB and of its miner-based leadership, after two decades in which it played a rather marginal role in Bolivian political and social life. At the same time, popular sectors, such as the peasants and transport workers, organized counter-demonstrations to support the government and to protest against the negative consequences of the workers' mobilizations in their daily lives. These counter-demonstrations illustrate the recent fragmentation between popular social forces faced with a political context that is well losing its cohesive potential. Rising instability thus seems to be an inevitable consequence of this social configuration.

In Bolivia, the scenarios of social conflict are mainly urban and half of conflictive episodes are set in La Paz (Calderón et. al. 2011). Nevertheless, the most important mobilization that received abundant media attention both at national and international levels and that has been catalyzing the Bolivian political debate for almost a year was triggered by the eighth march of the eastern indigenous peoples, to fight against the construction of a trans-continental highway through the *Territorio Indígena Parque Isiboro Sécuré* (Indigenous Territory of the Isiboro Sécuré National Park, or TIPNIS). Indigenous organizations accused the government of violating constitutional obligations, which establish a preliminary consultation with indigenous peoples on

the initiatives that would affect their territories. Moreover, in agreement with national and international environmentalist groups, they considered that the highway would have favored access for smuggling and for the influx of colonization by *cocalero* groups, with which the relationship was already fuelled by tensions and conflicts. From its side, the government argued that the new infrastructure, mostly financed by Brazil, would have contributed to connecting Bolivia with important transamerican highways, favoring thus a new wave of development and economic growth. At the same time, they accused indigenous groups of being manipulated by USAID, the American cooperation agency, USAID, which could have been supporting the march both politically and economically (Perrier Bruslé 2012).

After a one month march, indigenous peoples reached La Paz where a massive demonstration took place to welcome them and then, on the 25th October, Morales promulgated a law that forbade the construction of the highway throughout the indigenous territory. Meanwhile, counter-demonstrations by sectors closer to the MAS (mainly peasant and *cocalero*) took place to support the construction of the infrastructure. The issue has not come to a definitive end yet, with indigenous groups preparing a new march and Morales visiting the indigenous territories in search of consent and support.

As the Argentinean journalist Pablo Stefanoni (2012) wrote, to confront these conflicts, “the government responded with a classic discursive that conceives the state as the agent of the universality in the face of the particular interests of those who oppose its ‘development project’.” Social movements would thus be the representatives of those particular interests. In this turbulent framework, it would thus be a pertinent question to wonder whether the Bolivian honeymoon between the state and social movements would have definitely come to an end.

Conclusion

Social conflictivity is a mirror of a country’s socio-political dynamics. It provides information on axes of tensions, power relationships, institutional efficiency, discursive and theoretical innovations, as well as chronic and conjunctural problems and strengths. This work began with the consideration that social conflict is a structural feature of every society. However, we have argued that only some of the multiple potential conflictive forms become structuring axes of conflictivity, namely through a process of narrative-building that provides tensions and social struggles with a

contingent, efficient and modern historicity. This theoretical framework and in particular the analysis of the dialectic relationship between structural tensions and narrative declinations allowed us to describe and provide an interpretation of the recent shift –both in Bolivia and with slightly different characteristics in Latin America– from the *class/people/nation* dominant narrative (which corresponded to the national popular developmentist model) as articulator of social conflict, towards a new narrative configuration based on *ethnicity/identity/plurination*, which looks for an original declination of the structural issues of equality, economic development and cultural complexity, eventually leading to a new cultural and political composition of social conflict.

From the analysis of contemporary conflictivity in Bolivia, and in particular of its articulation in narrative terms around cultural and identitarian axes, more general reflections could arise on the historical moment the country is living through, and especially on the complexity and heterogeneity of the *proceso de cambio*. In particular, it seems that we are facing the end of a long honeymoon, with a change in direction in the relationship between the state and social movements, which opens the way to a rather uncertain future.

As in every marriage, the daily challenge of the conjugal life could either fortify the ties or bring it towards an irreversible crisis. From the state, there is a lack of political capacity to regenerate the alliance according to new changing contexts and to find structural and structuring elements able to build a unity among diversity in the long-term. In moments of crisis, particular sectorial interests tend to prevail and put into question governmental equilibria. From the society, social movements have shown a great potential in terms of agency and adaptability to a mutable institutional context. They have demonstrated that they are neither a passive electoral basin nor completely institutionalized forces, although they have not been able to alter rather extreme patterns of collective action and mobilization, and to emancipate themselves from a strong corporatist and state-dependent logic, which tends towards tactical fragmentation. Faced with this pattern of conflict and tensions that characterizes recent Bolivian history, it is quite difficult to make predictions on the future development of the relationship between the state and social movements. However, if the popular belief is right, it is at the edge of the seventh year that these problems would worsen. We could thus expect a rather turbulent future.

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