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The 'indigenous native peasant' trinity: imagining a plurinational community in Evo Morales' Bolivia

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Abstract. Over the last two decades Latin America has been a laboratory for the implementation of new models of state and citizenship. In Bolivia the (neo)liberal multicultural paradigm dominant in the 1990s has recently been replaced by a plurinational paradigm, which implies a deepening of the decentralization process and the strengthening of rights for traditionally marginalized social sectors. This paper describes the process of construction of a plurinational 'imagined community' and, in particular, of one of its core narratives: the 'indigenous native peasant'. I argue that the negotiation of this collective identity and its inclusion as one of the core ideas in the new constitution is the result of a contingent strategy in response to a highly conflictive scenario, which has not been, however, able to trigger a change in the way people identify themselves. Yet in recent years, social movements' identities have been shaped by centrifugal forces. These forces should be understood as the result of a process of collective actors' adaptation to institutional and regulatory reforms and contribute to explaining the increase of new intrasocietal conflicts linked to the redefinition of citizenship and territorial boundaries.

Keywords: plurinational state, citizenship, collective identities, consultation social movements, Bolivia

1 Introduction

Plurinationalism is a growing field of research in political science and philosophy (Anderson, 2010; Keating, 2001; Requejo Coll and Caminal i Badia, 2011). Some recent experiences in Latin America provide a breeding ground for exploring how the well-known tensions between state and ethnocultural claims to self-determination are manifested in practice.⁽¹⁾ Yet, in Bolivia, the election of Evo Morales as President in 2005 gave political meaning to plurinationalism as an alternative model of state and citizenship. After harsh disagreements, conflictive episodes, and turbulent negotiations, the key features of this alternative model were eventually crystalized in a new constitution, and ratified by the Bolivian people in January 2009.

This process of reform was sustained mainly by rural social movements, which, after the so-called Social Wars in the early 2000s (Dangl, 2007; Perreault, 2006; Webber and Spronk, 2007), gained a key role in Bolivian politics. Far from being uniform, these movements have cyclically undergone phases of fragmentation and alliance, under the influence of changing political contexts, legal reforms and international dynamics (Fontana, 2012). Over the last thirty years the three main driving forces of rural Bolivia—the peasant unions,

⁽¹⁾In the 1990s different Latin American countries included in their constitutions a definition of the state as "pluricultural and multiethnic". But it was with the Leftist turn in the following decade that the more radical idea of a plurinational state took shape and was eventually included in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions. On the tensions between state reforms and indigenous agendas, see Van Cott (2002). On the process of constitutional reform, the formation of a plurinational state, and the role of the indigenous movement in Ecuador, see Becker (2011); on plurinationalism, indigeneity, and territorial rearticulation in Bolivia, see Perreault and Green (2013) and Gustafson (2009).

the lowlands indigenous groups, and the highlands native ‘nations’—have entered a phase of disarticulation and growing tensions. This has been due to a number of factors: the consolidation of a regulatory framework which triggered competition for land and resources; the growing interventions of international cooperation agencies and NGOs in indigenous peoples’ economic and ideological support; and the changes in the network of alliances between the government in power and social forces.

The electoral victory of Evo Morales radically modified the equilibrium of power between traditional political elites and social movements, but also between social actors themselves. As various analyses have highlighted (Do Alto, 2011; Zuazo, 2009), the movement towards socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS) was founded as a ‘political instrument’ of the peasantry, and especially of coca-growers’ unions. This is also the biographical origin and political training of Morales himself as leader of the Seven Federations of the Cochabamba Tropic. In fact the alliance with indigenous/native sectors was consolidated only after the MAS electoral victory.⁽²⁾ From a strategic point of view, this alliance was important in order to implement more substantial reforms, to benefit from a block of cohesive forces against external (political) threats, and to frame an appealing international imagery, recalling the indigenous-related symbolism. One of the most evident manifestations of the cohesive effort undertaken by MAS was the creation of a new discursive category capable of unifying all sectors of the rural world within a single indivisible concept. The ‘trinitarian category’ of ‘*indígena originario campesino*’ (indigenous native peasant), carefully negotiated during the constitution-making process, becomes one of the main pivots for the institutionalization of a new type of plurinational citizenship.

This paper explores the delicate equilibrium between the discursive constructions and contingent negotiations that characterized the moment of Bolivia’s transition from a unitary republic to a plurinational state. Without questioning the importance of the outcomes of the political transformations (clearly visible in the adoption of a new constitution and in the popular support that MAS still enjoys), the paper also focuses on the problematic aspects of this shift. On the one hand, the new discursive category served to cement a strategic alliance in a moment of great fragility for the new political project. On the other hand, so far, it has demonstrated its weaknesses in failing to generate a real impact on the reshaping of rural collective identities. Over the last three decades, rural self-identification processes have undergone a number of relevant changes. Yet the more recent outcome of these transformations has not been the more cohesive and inclusive identity that the merging category had hoped to create: on the contrary, the process of sociopolitical fragmentation has deepened.

This fragmentation between rural sectors in Bolivia is not new. Indeed, since the National Revolution of 1952, peasant and indigenous organizations (and identities) have been going through phases of articulation and disarticulation. The most important are: (a) hierarchical articulation through the *campesinization* process during the 1950s; (b) the *Katarist* movement in the 1970s, which was based on a synthesis of syndicalist organization and Indianist ideology; (c) a strong process of divergence during the 1980s and 1990s, corresponding to the rise of new indigenous and native movements; and (d) a period of coordination and collaboration during the so-called ‘social wars’ in the early 2000s, the consolidation of a coalition around the MAS and the Constitutional Assembly (Fontana, 2012). Yet, in the years following the constitutional referendum (January 2009) and Morales’s reelection (December 2010),

⁽²⁾ Indeed, the most important Indianist movement (Katarism) had its own candidate in the 2005 Presidential elections, Felipe Quispe, who, however, suffered a crushing defeat and withdrew from the political scene.

tensions between social organizations have been rising again, reaching the highest peak with the conflict around the TIPNIS (*Territorio Indígena Parque Natural Isiboro Sécuré*).⁽³⁾

The reasons for these latest changes in social relationships are multiple. Although a causal link between increased fragmentation and the appearance of the category of 'indigenous native peasant' is hard to identify, the 'trinity' has been at the center of intense debates on the nature of the subject to be entitled to the new collective rights established by the constitution. A recent example that will be analyzed later is the discussion between social organizations and the government around the right to 'free, prior, and informed consent' on any legislative or administrative measures which may affect indigenous peoples directly.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first two sections outline elements of a theoretical framework for exploring the links between identity-building processes and new models of plural citizenship. The third section provides an overview of the legal and institutional changes that have shaped the Bolivian plurinational state. The fourth and fifth sections analyze the process of discursive construction of a plurinational community around the trinity of 'the indigenous native peasant'. The sixth section focuses on examples of how the trinity works 'in practice' beyond the constitutional discussion, namely the recent debates around the draft of the Framework Law on Consultation and around the decrease in the indigenous population revealed in the results of the 2012 Census. In the conclusion, potentialities and limits embedded in the effort of refounding the state on a new citizenship model will be highlighted. This paper is based on empirical grounded research carried out in Bolivia between 2009 and 2013.

2 Collective identities and 'imagined communities'

Over the last three decades the social sciences and philosophy have dedicated growing attention to the issue of 'identity' as a result of the return of the 'subject' to the core of scholarly debates (Calhoun, 1994; Castells, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Gutman, 1994). This paper focuses on the collective dimension of identities, in particular on their dynamic and interrelational traits. In contrast to essentialist and primordialist explanations that conceive identities as immutable, objective, and unique essences, sociologic constructivism and relational theories argue that every identity is socially constructed. In particular, Fredrik Barth (1998 [1969]) emphasizes the relational dimension of identity-building in terms of 'limits' and 'boundaries', where interrelations among groups mold the sense of belonging of their members.

Identification exists only in tension: "identity either opposes itself or perishes" (Martuccelli, 2008, page 49). This process of dynamic redefinition depends on the timing, on the context, and on how actors are able to claim and regenerate themselves according to their goals, concrete needs, and contingent situations. In some cases, identities become the main 'weapons' within a political fight and are clearly mobilized for strategic purposes. This strategic use of identities has been the focus of the so-called 'instrumentalist' current (Baud et al, 1996), which conceives identity, and especially ethnicity, as a resource to which individuals and groups turn to satisfy tactical needs. Identities gain strength in borderline social zones, where group interests experience a greater external threat, and where overall social cohesion is weaker. In this sense, limits become more than material lines, and they are often drawn through symbolic and narrative devices.

National identity is probably the most important political identity of modernity. Its main narrative is what Benedict Anderson (1991) defined as the 'imagined community': the discourse that culturally legitimates the existence of a group of individuals who recognize themselves as members of a political unity called a 'nation'. Nations are political artefacts

⁽³⁾In August 2011 the mobilization of lowland indigenous groups against the construction of a road through the protected area of the TIPNIS marked a new conflictive phase in the relationship between the MAS and indigenous sectors and also among rural social movements (Perrier-Buslé, 2012).

that generate, through the strengthening of symbolic and discursive boundaries, a sense of belonging to a historical entity able to provide a transcendent collective spirit (an identity). Although the idea of the imagined community has been rightly criticized (Castells, 1997, page 29; Miller, 2006; Sanjinés, 2009, page 54)—I agree in particular with the critical assessment of the unrealistic characterization of the community as horizontal and fraternal—I still think that the concept has a theoretical functionality for understanding the process of identitarian construction of political communities.

First, although the idea of the ‘imagined community’ was meant to describe the process of formation of nationality and modern nationalism, it could also be useful for defining other types of political identity-building through homogenizing narratives. These types of identities imply, in general, a process of subject-building. This, however, does not necessarily mean that their character is all-encompassing. In fact, they are always rooted in a dialectic relationship with ‘otherness’ that eventually ends up strengthening and legitimating the supraidentitarian category itself.

Second, it is true that Anderson’s theory is unable to provide a completely convincing explanation of certain aspects of the creation of Latin American nation-states. Here the ties between different social and ethnic sectors have always been hierarchically structured, and an endemic fracture between strong and weak citizenship still persists. However, the fact that the narrative of the nation carries the seed of exclusion does not imply that it has not been effective in generating new forms of identity, feelings of belonging, and shared cultural traits. In many Latin American countries, despite the persistence of strong socioeconomic and cultural gaps and inequalities (generally coinciding with ethnic fractures), it has been nonetheless possible to generate a shared sense of national belonging. In Bolivia, for instance, different social sectors (ethnic, class, and regional) share a sense of what it means to be a Bolivian; that is, a common sense of *Bolivianidad* (Montenegro, 1943). The rare political and intellectual movements that distanced themselves from this national identity were the Aymara nationalists (expressing the political project of reconstruction of the Qullasuyo)⁽⁴⁾, and the recent regional secessionist movement of the eastern province of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. The Aymara nationalists represent the only case of indigenous irredentism in Latin America and is minoritarian even among Bolivian Aymaras; the Santa Cruz de la Sierra regionalist movement was politically defeated in 2008, with the neutralization of an attempted coup d’état and the reconfirmation of a large majority for Evo Morales.

Third, the idea of the ‘imagined community’ highlights the role of discourse and narrative in the construction of the nation and, more generally, of each and every identity. It emphasizes how, in order to become effective, identity first has to be shaped within certain social groups that occupy a position of communicative leadership. The goal is the creation of collective identities, by using dominant narratives that encompass the majority of the population (or some strategic sectors) and offering them an effective definition of themselves and others through shared symbolic and cultural universes. This perspective provides insights into both the political component and the struggle for power embedded in the processes of identity-building.

3 Identity and citizenship

Some scholars have argued in favor of an interpretation of citizenship as identity—one of the many identities an individual could have (Heater, 1990, page 184) or, more precisely, “a form of group identity” (Isin and Wood, 1999, page 4). However, for citizenship to be effective, it must hold the potential to moderate identities’ “divisive passions” (Heater, 1990, page 184), as well as guarantee their respect and freedom within a balance of rights and duties. Citizenship is thus an articulating principle that affects the different subjective and group positions with

⁽⁴⁾The old Aymara territorial entity, recently redefined as a ‘nation’.

regard to society and politics, while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual and collective liberties. When certain social groups experience a feeling of injustice as a result of being excluded from the possibility of enjoying equal rights, tensions and conflicts can arise. In societies characterized by a high degree of cultural and ethnic diversity and by considerable economic constraints on citizens' well-being, these tensions can include an interdependent mix of redistributive and recognition claims (Fraser, 2003).

Multiculturalism is the multifaceted term that has been used to describe the condition of being of representation, equality, and culture in contexts where many ethnic, racial, and cultural identities coexist within the framework of a (nation)-state. Multiculturalism has a descriptive meaning that defines the simultaneous presence in a given territory of individuals belonging to different cultures. Yet it is more often used to refer to specific institutional and political arrangements (such as in the paradigmatic cases of Canada, Australia, and Sweden) or to a theoretical and normative model of coexistence among cultures (see, for example, the definition provided by the *Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology*; Inglis, 1996; Wieviorka, 1998). Almost all modern nation-states are—whether they admit it or not—multicultural societies, because of the variety of the populations and groups that form them (Cuche, 1996). Multiculturalism as a political issue is, however, a relatively recent phenomenon coinciding with the moment in which culture gains a legitimate space as political claim. From a policy-making point of view, it marks the shift from assimilationist public policies around universalistic representation (whether colonialist or republican) towards policies that are concerned with diversity and recognition (Martuccelli, 2008).

Multicultural theory can be traced back to the works of Charles Taylor (1994) and Will Kymlicka (1995; 2001), who advocate the recognition and promotion of cultural pluralism. Taylor (1994) argues in favor of the implementation of policies whose main goal is to guarantee the public recognition of heterogeneous forms of life with respect to the relatively hegemonic group. According to Kymlicka (2001, page 153), multiculturalism would be “a supplement to, not a substitute for, citizenship” and, in this sense, would consist in the effort to reconcile universal with particular values. This is indeed the most relevant challenge posed by multiculturalism: the difficulty of reconciling universalist conceptions of human rights with the rights of individuals to belong to particular cultural and identitarian collectivities (Cuche, 1996).

Multiculturalism, as an increasingly prominent part of the strategies of different governments to manage cultural diversity [often in tandem with neoliberal reforms and policies (Postero, 2006)], has been subjected to a wide range of criticism. The political right has questioned the multicultural ideal of the coexistence of distinct ethnic cultures within one nation-state, arguing in favor of the assimilation of different ethnic groups into a single national identity. The most radical fringes, led by the fear of difference and change, even envisage a national purity through the expulsion of cultural and ethnic minorities. Some liberal critiques focus on the inconsistency between recognition of minorities and the principle of equality. The argument is that the entitlement of certain cultural groups with special rights violates the neutrality of the state and the liberal principle of equality (Barry, 2001). Liberal multiculturalism has also been criticized for falling into the trap of communitarianism, since it grounds minority rights not in the liberal value of autonomy but in the supreme value of cultural membership (Rudanko, 2012, page 61). From Marxist and postcolonial studies, criticisms have been mounted against liberal multiculturalism as a homogenizing project that privileges an Occidental form of thought, obscuring others and building cultural hierarchies within a unique paradigm of progress and modernity (Tapia, 2007). According to Slavoj Žižek (1987), liberal multicultural discourse entails a certain amount of racism: it presents itself as egalitarian, inclusive, tolerant, and democratic, but in fact does not abandon pretension to universality and superiority.

In Latin America critics of the liberal multicultural policies of the 1980s and 1990s gave birth to new theoretical and normative proposals that are now experiencing their first empirical test. In Ecuador and Bolivia intercultural and plurinational paradigms became part of the agenda of the new Leftist governments. In this framework interculturality is intended as an ethical and political principle to orient the construction and maintenance of difference within heterogeneous societies.⁽⁵⁾ At the discursive level this is presented as an effort to overcome the multicultural paradigm; while the latter is focused on the improvement of the roles of social competition through tolerance, interculturality and plurinationalism would look for an articulation that emphasizes the interaction among diversities. In practice, plurinationalism takes the form of a political project able to mobilize traditionally marginalized social sectors, in particular peasants and the indigenous, triggering a process of renegotiation of meanings, identities, and political spaces. Although the material implications of this change are still unclear, plurinationalism is clearly marking a shift away from ‘multiethnic and pluricultural’ paradigms, “standing against any understanding of a homogeneous nation-state” (Perreault and Green, 2013, page 51). In the following sections I focus on the narrative construction of a plurinational state in Bolivia through both the constitutional reform and the renegotiation of new collective identities.

4 Towards the institutionalization of a plurinational state: constitutional reform and political debate

In the framework of the institutional reform led by the Morales government, Bolivia is reinterpreting the concept of citizenship through new lenses and, in the process, is engaging in a theoretical–normative debate on the need to rethink the very foundations of modern representative democracies. The new constitution is the most important example of this renovation of the country’s legal and institutional apparatus, but it is also one of the major instruments for reinventing citizenship and creating “a field of homogenous identities that make the modern project of governmentability viable” (Castro–Gomez and Martin, 2002, page 271). The constitution introduces significant novelties in various aspects, including: formal recognition of thirty-six indigenous native peoples; respect for all religions and world views; limiting the Presidential term to two elections; and incorporating a revocatory referendum for the President, governor, and mayors.

From a broader perspective, one of the most important innovations of the constitution is the substitution of the geopolitical and administrative paradigm of the unitary republic with one of a plurinational state. The text does not include a definition of plurinationalism, but according to one of its ideologues, it mainly refers to “the acknowledgement of the colonial pre-existence of indigenous native peasant nations” (Prada, 2008, page 38). In a working document prepared during the Constitutional Assembly, the *Pacto de Unidad* (Unity Pact)—the umbrella organization that brought together indigenous peasant movements and constituted the main social grassroots of the government—provides this definition:

“The plurinational state is a model of political organization for the decolonization of our nations and peoples, reaffirming, recuperating and strengthening our territorial autonomy For the construction and consolidation of the plurinational state,

⁽⁵⁾The difference between plurinational and postnational models of citizenship has still to be explored. In general the most important difference is that the plurinational state is based on the formal recognition of different ethnocultural groups (defined in terms of ‘peoples’ and ‘nations’) within the framework of an (often nationalistic) nation-state. The idea of ‘nation’ in its classical meaning still persists: what is questioned is its biunivocal correspondence with the geopolitical dimension of the state. On the other hand, postnationalism in political theory tries to overcome the very idea of nation (in geopolitical and symbolic terms) and advocates a state in which “individuals are rights-bearing not only in virtue of their citizenship within the state, but in the first place in virtue of their humanity” (Benhabib, 2011, page 13).

the principles of juridical pluralism, unity, complementarity, reciprocity, equity, solidarity and the moral and ethic principles to stop all kinds of corruption are fundamental”.⁽⁶⁾

In this framework, an explicit duty of the Bolivian state is the strengthening of “plurinational identities” in order to build a just and harmonious society, free from discrimination and exploitation, based on decolonization and social justice (Article 9). What plurinational identities are in practice, however, is not explicitly clarified by the constitution.

Territorial organization is one of the main issues at stake in any process of redefinition of state-symbolic and administrative boundaries. Indeed this historical *querelle* was one of the key latent controversies that emerged in the constitution-making debate. In general the constitution ended up ratifying the main principles established in the framework of the agrarian law of 1996 (INRA), updated by Morales in 2006. Some of the changes were concerned with form rather than substance. For example, the native community lands (*Tierras Comunitarian de Origen*, TCOs)—large areas collectively owned by indigenous groups—were renamed indigenous native peasant territories (*Territorios Indígenas Originario Campesinos*, TIOCs). However, this slightly marginal modification is representative of one of the main strategic operations carried out by the MAS (mainly through rhetorical tools, as I will show later).

Closely tied to the TIOCs is the definition of the indigenous native peasant autonomies (*Autonomía Indígena Originaria Campesina*, or AIOCs). This concept is rooted in Article 2 of the constitution, which introduces the possibility of partial self-determination for a collective subject known as the ‘indigenous native peasant’. In distinction from other forms of autonomy recognized by the constitution (that is, municipal, departmental, and regional autonomy), the AIOC is the only one that can be formed without the need to have been part of other preexisting political-administrative divisions, but on the basis of ethnocultural features (Article 289). During the first year of the constitution, eighteen municipalities started the procedure for conversion into AIOCs; twelve of them were authorized to carry out a referendum (6 December 2009), and in eleven cases, the option of regional autonomy won the majority vote (Salgado, 2009, page 247).

Concerning the judiciary system, the constitution introduces the concept of plural justice, which includes both the ordinary system and the community system. An entire chapter of the constitution (chapter III) is dedicated to the definition of community justice. According to Article 199, this form of justice will be exercised by the “indigenous native peasant nations and peoples’ authorities according to their principles, cultural values, norms and proceedings”. Although community justice had already achieved constitutional recognition in Bolivia in 1992, it failed to become effective in practice. For this reason, from 2009 much effort was put into drafting a ‘Law of Delimitation’, eventually approved in December 2010, which aims to clarify the jurisdictional boundaries between ordinary and community justice. Another important achievement was the establishment of a plurinational Constitutional Court, in order to guarantee the practical application of the constitution.

Throughout the constitution, ‘indigenous native peasant’ is the term used to describe a new collective citizen who is now entitled to various forms of special rights in relation to land property, the juridical system, mechanisms of representation, and self-government. The concept, referred to more than a hundred times within the constitution, is used as if it refers to a clearly existing entity. However, empirically, it is hard to identify such a sociological aggregate. Indeed, native movements, indigenous groups, and peasant unions exist as separate organizations, often in conflict, and self-identification dynamics are highly volatile and easily influenced by contextual changes. In the light of this discrepancy between the

⁽⁶⁾“Proposal for a new political constitution” (“Por un estado Plurinacional y la autodeterminación de los pueblos y las naciones indígenas, originarias y campesinas”) [Sucre, 5 August 2006, quoted in Stefanoni (2012)].

legal/discursive framework and sociological reality, it is worth asking why there was a need to create this new political subject, and what changes the creation of this political subject might have triggered among rural social movements.

5 Imagining a plurinational community: the ‘*Indígenas Originario Campesino*’ as new political subject

The shaping of a cohesive identity among MAS’s rural constituencies—traditionally characterized by tensions and rivalries rather than by cooperation—was a key feature of Morales’s political discourse during the first phase of his government. In fact, it became clear from the very beginning that the shared rural origins of the most important social movements were not, in and of themselves, a guarantee of stable political alliance. On the contrary, the indigenous native, peasant, and *cocalero* sectors approached the political arena with their own respective agendas and with equally strong ambitions for actual (not just symbolic) power. These endogenous tensions within the MAS bases needed to be addressed through a strategy of consolidation of the political block as well as through continued bargaining. Therefore, the definition of a shared identity became paramount both at the symbolic and at the operational levels.

Rural Bolivia’s geopolitical map has been traditionally ruled by a system of alliances and conflicts between peasant unions, native movements, and indigenous organizations. These conflictive patterns constitute a problem for the implementation of the MAS’s political project, whose anchorage in the rural world is fundamental. In order to reduce centrifugal, dispersing forces, a process of imagination and negotiation of new political subjects was put in place. The most important outcome was the ‘indigenous native peasant’ ‘merging category’. As a new discursive tool, it was able to provide a shared narrative and symbolic space for the different actors in the coalition: the constellation of Eastern indigenous groups; the peasantry (including its colonizer and *cocalero* sectors); and the highlands population (mainly Aymara and Quechua). The final result of this definitional quest is summarized in the constitutional text:

“An *indígena originario campesino* nation or people is each and every human collectivity that shares cultural identity, language, historical tradition, territorial institutions and view of the world, and whose existence is previous to the Spanish colonial invasion” (Article 30).

The negotiation, at least in discursive terms, of a category that includes and represents all rural sectors and that is simultaneously unitary and tripartite gave a certain breadth to the political project and served as a propulsive force for more radical reforms. As discussed in the previous section, this category served also as a main operational corollary for the institutional and legal definition of plurinational citizenship. The ‘indigenous native peasant’ narrative was indeed an extremely effective discursive tool in responding to pragmatic needs during the constitutional bargaining. At the same time, however, the agreement around the definition of a new plurinational citizen did not change the way social organizations and people identified themselves.

The ontological perspective on identity that is adopted in this context puts the emphasis on the fluid character of identities and self-identification processes, and on the interdependent dynamics of construction that link identities with the social and political environment. Although I am far from arguing that a mechanical relationship exists between sociopolitical processes on the one hand (including regulatory reforms, dominant discursive constructions, and normative paradigms) and self-identification preferences on the other, I conceive the former as having great potential to influence self-identification.

There are examples in Bolivian history of how politics influenced processes of self-identification. Among the most famous and widely studied is the so-called '*campesinization*' of the rural Bolivian population, which was rooted in the postrevolutionary effort to provide access to citizenship through the membership of a peasant union. The changes introduced in the collective organization of the rural population also had an impact on the way people identified themselves over the following decades, with the peasant identity being adopted as category of self-identification. Of course, its strength and depth depended on a number of factors, including the balance between resistance and adaptability of preexisting institutions, which varied between areas such as the Norte Potosí or the Cochabamba Valleys (Dandler, 1984; Gordillo, 2000; Rivera Cusicanqui, 1984). Another example of a positive reaction to new political and regulatory frameworks is the rise of a new indigenous-native movement during the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with the debate about, and reforms inspired by, the so-called 'politics of recognition' and 'neoliberal multiculturalism' at the global and national level (Canessa, 2012; Lacroix, 2007; Postero, 2006). The magnitude of the change and the outcomes in terms of the generation of new dominant categories for collective self-identification, however, are not predictable and should be understood on a single-case basis. In this sense, it is worth questioning to what extent the category of 'indigenous native peasant' has been (or not been) able to generate a change in the way people self-identify.

Although the introduction of this new category in the political discourse and legal framework has not had a substantial impact on the way people identify, in this phase collective rural identities have not remained stable. Yet, they have been characterized by a high degree of fragmentation, rather than by cohesive efforts such as the one embedded in the 'indígena originario campesino' category.

This process depends on a plurality of factors including: the redefinition of the political equilibrium with the defeat of the Right after Bolivia's political crisis in 2008 (Fontana, 2013); an economic bonanza that provided incentives for social actors to increase their claims to and particular interest in access to (monetary and natural) resources; the attitude of the MAS government, which, instead of looking for negotiated solutions to moments of crisis, often adopted 'divide et impera strategies' (as in the case of the TIPNIS). Also, the high degree of fragmentation can be understood as the result of adaptive strategies by collective actors in response to recent institutional and regulatory reforms (and in particular in response to the progressive ethnicization of Bolivian political spaces). As a consequence, the identitarian boundaries between rural organizations became stronger, limiting the space for cooperation. This is clear, for example, in the crumbling of the Pacto de Unidad soon after the TIPNIS crisis.

Not only was the 'indigenous native peasant' narrative unable to reverse the tendency to fragmentation, but these rising tensions are mirrored in the new discourse around the trinitarian subject that became dominant in the latest political phase. Following the 2008 political crisis, the approval of the new constitution, and the reelection of Morales in 2010, the 'indigenous native peasant' narrative is experiencing a period of crisis. The idea worked in critical negotiations during the constitution-making process, when unifying narratives were effective in fighting the regional conservative opposition creating abstract categories for the attribution of new rights and a new legal status. However, in the midterm, this discourse has lost its cohesive power. The trinity is not strong enough and its three souls, although they intersect, are not sustainably melded. Old competitions and corporatist interests regain strength and are more and more evident within the discourses of the leaders of rural movements.

Below I provide some examples to illustrate the explicit challenges to the ‘indigenous native peasant’ as a merging category. In slightly different ways, all these discourses highlight the specificities of each identity and its contrast with the others.

“We are not happy with the idea of *indigena originario campesino*, but still it is an improvement. ... It is a political agreement. It is an improvement but we do not agree at all. How can one say to the peasants, to the trade unions that they were pre-existent to the colony? We are sure that we are going to transform the concept during the process that will come—it is not written in stone—starting from the reconstruction of our institutions and the clarification of our identity.”⁽⁷⁾

I am just one person, the blood is the same. So, to avoid quarrels, I’m going to give you a name and a surname, you will be *indigena originario campesino*. ... To avoid struggles, we accept that definition. But in reality, the communities’ practices are distinct. By giving names and surnames, conflicts have not been solved in practice.”⁽⁸⁾

In time, we should abolish that article [Article 30 of the constitution]. We do not agree. A citizen is either a peasant or indigenous.”⁽⁹⁾

These criticisms of the merging category are directly related to the process of radicalization and essentialization of social movements’ identitarian narratives, and they have concrete implications in the framework of the contemporary process of legislative reform and policy implementation.

6 Beyond discourse: the effects of the spurious ‘trinity’ in law’ reform and its implementation

The narrative reshaping of collective identity should not be interpreted as a merely discursive issue. As discussed above, the ‘indigenous native peasant’ category was fundamental to the process of negotiation of a new constitution. Since its approval in 2009, Bolivia has been undergoing a phase of legislative adjustment with the aim of reformulating codes and laws according to the new constitutional principles and benchmarks. In the current discussions on the attribution of new collective rights (eg, autonomy, customary justice, and consultation), the ‘indigenous native peasant’ trinity has become the inescapable element that needs to be addressed in order to identify the subject holder (*sujeto titular*) of those rights.

This discussion on the configuration of the new collective subject reached a peak of tension during the debate on the draft of the Framework Law on Consultation. This law is meant to set the bases and mainly to formalize mechanisms through which the right to free, prior, and informed consent can be exercised. This right is one of the main provisions granted to indigenous peoples by international law in Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization and in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Bolivia ratified the former through Law 1257 of 1991, and integrated in its 2009 constitution; some of the most important rights recognized in the Declaration.

During the Constitutional Assembly, the *Pacto de Unidad* developed a proposal for the recognition of the rights of “indigenous native peasant peoples and nations”, which was approved with minor variations and included in the *Magna Carta* (Article 30). The Constitutional Tribunal issued a pronouncement on the constitutionality of this right in the framework of the Hydrocarbons Law 3058. However, no jurisprudence has been generated

⁽⁷⁾Interview with an advisor of the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of the Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ), La Paz, 5 August 2010.

⁽⁸⁾Interview with the Land and Conflict Secretary of the Unique Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB), La Paz, 20 August 2010.

⁽⁹⁾Interview with the executive secretary of the Confederation of Indigenous People of Bolivia, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, 25 August 2010.

so far on this issue, which is why the new ad hoc law to administer the consultation is very important for the establishment of standard procedures and for clarifying many points that remain vague in the international framework and in the constitution. One of these points is the definition of the subject entitled to this right. Article 17 of the Law's draft, elaborated by an ad hoc team within the Ministry of Government, stated that

“the subjects entitled to the right to free, prior and informed consent are: a) the communities of the indigenous native nations and peoples of the TCO; ... b) the *indigenous native peasant peoples*, intercultural communities and Afro-Bolivians” (Ministerio de Gobierno, 2012, page 15, emphasis added).

Although this formulation did not substantially differ from the constitution, this point generated an angry debate between the government and social organizations. During a two-day meeting in August 2013 aimed at reaching an agreement on the proposal, different representatives of the CONAMAQ unrelentingly stated their disagreement with the inclusion of 'peasant' in the definition of the subject entitled to be consulted. Among the points raised by the native leaders were the fact that only indigenous peoples are mentioned in international agreements, and the fact that the fight for recognition was led by indigenous groups—not the peasant sector. On the other side, the Ministry's officers clarified the impossibility of eliminating the word 'peasant', since this would be unconstitutional. In the end, the word 'peasant' was included in brackets in the draft proposal of the law that resulted from the meeting.⁽¹⁰⁾

Yet the inclusion of the 'peasants' as subjects has important practical implications. Indeed, it would imply a drastic widening of the population to whom, and of the territorial demarcations in which, the consultation should be applied. This would result in an increase of 'constraints' that the state would have to face in the processes of decision making—for example, on the use of strategic resources or on the construction of new infrastructures. From this, another issue follows regarding the definition of who, in practice, should be consulted: the community, the traditional authorities, or the social organizations' leaders (for example, the peasant union secretary vs the *jilakata*).

The debate around the Law on Consent was one of the new foci of tension derived from the reticence of social organizations to self-identify with the overarching melding category and their reluctance to share certain rights and privileges. Another example of how rural organizations have been prioritizing noncooperative paths is represented by the dispute on the agrarian issue. After the implementation of the INRA law in 1996, peasant unions started to complain about the marginalization they were suffering in the process of land titling (Assies, 2006; Bottazzi and Rist, 2012). At the beginning of 2010 they formulated a law proposal in which they advocated for the constitution of a new type of property called *Tierra Comunitaria Campesina* (Communitarian Peasant Land), mirroring the TCO. This title would have enabled the grant of individual property rights to families who are part of an indigenous community, legalizing their land parcels in the framework of a collectively owned territory. The proposal was never seriously considered and did not affect the system of land titling. But it constituted a clear manifestation of the interests and disagreements of the peasant sector.

Finally, the recent publication of the results of the last Census (2012) fuelled a debate that, in certain respects, was about the 'indigenous native peasant' as a new category of collective self-identification. One of the major surprises showed by the INE data was a decrease in the indigenous population of about 20% in a decade (from 62% in 2001 to 42% in 2012). In absolute terms, in Bolivia, 'only' 2 806 592 people out of 6 916 732 declared themselves as belonging to an indigenous group aged fifteen and over. As expected, Quechua and Aymara are leading the list, followed by Chiquitanos, Guaraníes, Mojeños, and, in decreasing order by population size, the other thirty-one 'peoples' and 'nations' recognized by the constitution.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Meeting between the Ministry of Government and CONAMAQ, La Paz, 12 July 2013.

These results generated a heated debate over explanations for this drastic change. Accusations were raised against the ‘disappearance’ of thousands of indigenous people. There was even talk of ‘statistical ethnocide’, referring to the political manipulation of semantic categories to influence processes of individual and collective self-identification (Columba Fernández, 2013). Another hypothesis is that a modification of the Census question on ethnic identification could partially explain the change in the data. In 2001 the question was whether the person identified himself or herself with an ‘indigenous or native people’: in 2012 the term ‘indigenous native peasant’ was used instead. The question was “As a Bolivian, do you belong to an indigenous native peasant nation or people?”, with a tick-box ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answer. In case of affirmative answer, the interviewee should name the people or nation to which he or she belongs (the interviewer was not allowed to read the list of the thirty-six *pueblos* that have been officially recognized). In light of the diverging identitarian narratives that dominate the discourse of contemporary rural organizations, it is plausible that, by introducing the ‘peasant’ category some people opted for answering ‘No’. In practice, they would have refused self-identification with an *indígena originario campesino* identity, but they might well have claimed identification with an indigenous *or* native group.

At the same time, the use of a spurious category as self-identification criterion leads to other types of problematic answers. For example, a member of the CSUTCB, originally from the northwest of Tarija, told me:

“When they made the population and household Census, I register myself as peasant, because I am neither indigenous nor native. I answered ‘yes’ to the question! And peasant ... although it was not in the options.”⁽¹¹⁾

As the debate that anticipated the Census foreshadowed, the ‘arithmetic solution’ to the complex interrelations between ethnic and social identities adopted within the constitution carries with it a number of other operational problems, such as the claim of the ‘interculturals’ (former colonizers) to be included in the list of potential categories for self-identification (Stefanoni, 2013).

The decrease in the indigenous population recorded in relation to the form of the question in the Census sheds light on the discursive gaps between the rapid urbanization of the Bolivian population and the progressive ruralization of the ‘indigenous’. A heated debate has been going on between those who believe that indigenous identities are relentlessly diluted as a result of increased internal migration, and those who consider urbanization an experience that reshapes indigenous identities, rather than destroying them. Beyond these interpretations, it is clear—and the Census has confirmed—that Bolivia is becoming a predominantly urban country at the same time as the ‘indigenous native peasant’ category is contributing to strengthening the conception of the ‘indigenous’ as rural by definition, through its association with the ‘peasant’ (Stefanoni, 2013).

The results of the Census and the debate that developed around the decrease in the indigenous population are other examples of how the trinitarian category acts in practice. The data obtained through the Census will have further repercussions, for instance, on the shaping of the political debate (in particular the querelle between liberals and communitarians on the mestizo issue) and on the formulation of the public policy agenda and the determination of the number of indigenous seats in the Plurinational Assembly. On the latter point, the Bolivian political analyst Carlos Cordero (2013) declared:

“[Indigenous organizations] do not have arguments to claim more seats in Parliament. The data from the Census have been devastating for this sector. However, [their seats] can’t be reduced either, they remain with seven seats because it is an established right.”

⁽¹¹⁾ Interview with a leader of the CSUTCB, La Paz, 8 May 2013.

7 Concluding remarks

The election of Evo Morales opened a new political phase in Bolivia. One of the key problems for the new government was the consolidation of an interracial alliance between native, indigenous, and peasant sectors. Through a relevant symbolic and discursive change, the indigenous element was included as part of a dialectic with the main social referent of MAS: the peasantry. Moreover, this new narrative balance played a key role in the management of endogenous tensions deriving from the ontological heterogeneity of the political coalition (Stefanoni, 2003). In this sense, the 'merging category' of the 'indigenous native peasant' has been a central discursive and operational tool in the effort to consolidate a plurinational 'imagined community' with binding legal effects. This paper has sought to highlight both the potentialities and the limits embedded in this process.

On the one hand, the creation of a shared identitarian category was an effective and pragmatic strategy to strengthen the alliance of social forces in a highly conflictive framework such as the Constitutional Assembly. Moreover, the numerous uses of this category in the constitutional text served as an operational tool to identify the 'plurinational subject' and, grant it a new legal status, a set of rights and spaces of autonomy vis-à-vis the state. Thus, this category worked as a key premise of the process of invention and consolidation of a plurinational citizenship. On the other hand, the 'indigenous native peasant' category shows some important limits: its impact outside the political framework has been rather weak and it has been completely unable to trigger a change in the way social organizations and people identify themselves. In fact, the dynamics of identity-shaping of these actors has followed an almost diametrically opposite trend. Identitarian boundaries have been strengthened, mainly through highly ethnicized narratives. A new competition for symbolic spaces has emerged between peasant and indigenous narratives, where an ethnic discourse becomes the key feature for the construction of successful political identities. In certain cases, the 'indigenous native peasant' trinity became a bone of contention, as, for example, in the debate around the Law Project on Consultation. In other cases this category was partially responsible for unexpected results in terms of self-identification, as shown by the 2012 Census. However, the fact that, in the rural world, centrifugal forces are prevailing over centripetal forces is due to a combination of factors, which go beyond the adoption of this category. I here propose several hypotheses to account for these political and identitarian fragmentations.

First of all, with the political defeat of the radical Right in 2008 and the progressive weakening of other oppositional forces, the coalition in power found itself without 'reliable enemies' (Oviedo Obarrio, 2010). The lack of enemies was not completely positive for Morales: avoiding the explosion of latent intergroup tensions requires channelling them toward shared external threats, according to Lewis Coser (1956). When these threats are missing, the cohesion of the coalition is at risk. Despite a clear effort to generate a coherent discourse on external enemies with the aim of redirecting endogenous tensions (Fontana, 2013), this strategy was not sustainable, lacked the strength to regenerate the energies of the coalition in the long run, and left the door open for new social conflicts.

A second element that fueled internal tensions was a growing inconsistency between the MAS discourse and its political program and plan of action. For instance, issues such as environmental sustainability and care (through the rights of Mother Earth); claims for a new development model (based on a community economy); and respect for indigenous rights (in particular for the rights to consultation with local communities on the exploitation of natural resources) were abundantly emphasized in discourse, but widely ignored in practice. The economic development plans of the Morales government have been largely focused on economic 'reprimarisation' (neoextractivism, Gudynas, 2012), on attracting the flows of foreign direct investments (especially of big transnational corporations operating in the

commodities sector), and on strengthening the infrastructure network. A significant change introduced by MAS is the fact that the profits from commodities exploitation were largely reinvested in social redistributive policies (mainly through the so-called *Bonos*), which benefited the most vulnerable sectors of Bolivian society and contributed to poverty reduction in the country. However, the magnitude of the symbolic changes generated by the victory of the popular coalition fuelled much greater expectations for economic redistribution and also for greater access to the exercise of power. The insufficient response to those expectations as well as the gap between discourse and practice were at the root of new tensions among social sectors, which for different reasons perceived themselves to be excluded or not sufficiently included in the changing process.

Thirdly, the rural sectors have traditionally been engaged in a rather turbulent relationship. Especially since the 1980s, with the rise of indigenous organizations and the implementation of a new set of policies inspired by neoliberal multiculturalism and good governance paradigms, the tensions between peasant and indigenous organizations have become more evident, and they have engaged in direct competition for strategic resources (in particular, the land) and control of power. This competition greatly influenced the way in which these organizations identify themselves. In particular, the process of ethnicization of rural collective identities, as well as of national politics, was strengthened. I argue that this process was mainly due to the combination of legal reforms that institutionalized the link between cultural belonging and resource allocation mechanisms, and the reshaping of social equilibria in light of the new institutional context (Fontana, 2012). Beyond the reasons that underpin these conflicts, what is interesting is that, in the midterm period, these preexisting trends towards disarticulation are prevailing over the contingent need for articulation to face a critical phase during the first Morales government.

Ultimately, the increasing social tensions as outcomes of the recent political phase highlight the difficulties embedded in the process of implementation of a new model of plurinational state and citizenship. The great question at stake within plurinationalism is whether it can reconcile particular rights based on identity with strong state sovereignty and a discourse of equality, while avoiding new exclusions and potential violence “associated with territorializing models of ethnocultural difference and with hypernationalist states” (Gustafson, 2009, pages 991–992). In this sense, the vagueness of the new legal and political narratives, while effective for the purposes of persuasion, rhetoric, and political discourse, could in practice hinder the management of institutional reforms. Likewise, the key role played by ethnic-based categories in defining rights and resource allocation could become a source of perceived injustice.

In a broader sense the political and cultural problems that the new plurinational model tries to confront are related to an endemic lack of citizenship and state weakness typical of many postcolonial countries. The question at stake is an old one. In the words of Chantal Mouffe (1992, page 5) it is:

“how to make our belonging to different communities of values, language, culture and others compatible with our common belonging to a political community whose role we have to accept?”

This involves an attack on the resilient but contentious model of the nation-state, a binomial that has been at the core of great historical transformations as well as dreadful conflicts and social disasters. As Perreault and Green note (2013, page 51), “the new Constitution interprets indigenous differences (and nationalism) not as a threat to the Bolivian nation but, rather, as a founding principle.” However, while criticizing the idea of ‘nation’ as intrinsically colonialist and incompatible with the Latin American context, the new constitutional and citizenship model does not manage to emancipate from this very idea, but rather multiplies

its attributes by adding the prefix 'pluri'. In other words, plurinationalism challenges the state–nation biunivocal correspondence, but not the nation as an identitarian, ideological, and institutional superstructure that organizes and complements the state. The difference between 'plurinational' and 'pluricultural' seems to go beyond pure terminology. The idea of plurinationalism implies an ethnic–cultural conception of nation(s) that prevails over the idea of nation as a political community founded on the principle of citizenship, questioning thus the classical Rousseauian and Herderian dichotomy.

The Bolivian plurinational model formulates a critique of, and attempts to overcome, the identitarian homogenization imposed by earlier political experiences. However, it appears to be moving in the direction of creating a new homogeneity with other purposes. Moreover, it cannot avoid the very paradigm of the nation as the coincidence between an ethnic identity and a territorial demarcation. A process of discursive legitimation of national plurality has been undertaken: no longer one 'imagined community' (as postulated by nationalisms), but many 'imagined communities'; not one, but many nations. Further questions are thus emerging on the potentialities for the new plurinational state to foster a process of decolonization, since it still seems to be firmly linked to old and very resilient models of territorial organization.

As a result, in a country where about 60% of the population self-identify with an ethnic identity; where the level of poverty and exclusion is one of the highest in the Latin American region; and where, for a greater part of the Bolivian people, the state has historically been unreliable and ineffective, the equilibrium between redistribution and recognition, between equality and identity still remains particularly fragile and poses a major challenge for the near future.

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