Indigenous knowledge and constitutional changes in Bolivia[1]

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Summary

Latin America is one of the regions with the highest indigenous population, however, they still have little political representation and access to basic rights. In this sense, it is sought to analyse briefly the case of Bolivia, the first country to elect an indigenous president and to implement a Plurinational State, changing the structural basis of their society. The resistance of the indigenous population challenges the traditional definition of citizenship and so the neoliberal paradigm. The indigeneity is a fundamental element to understand the process of politicization of the indigenous identities and their interactions with the State. Furthermore, this paper aims to critically review, through a postcolonial reading, how this ethnic and cultural recognition have changed the political chart and how it could be seen as an example of intercultural dialogue, ressignifing the marginal position of those populations.

Key words: Indigenous knowledge, Bolivia, constitutionalism, postcolonial.

Conhecimento indígena e mudanças constitucionais na Bolívia

Resumo

A América Latina é uma das regiões com maior população indígena, no entanto, eles ainda têm pouca representação política e acesso aos direitos básicos. Nesse sentido, busca-se analisar brevemente o caso da Bolívia, o primeiro país a eleger um presidente indígena e a implantar um Estado Plurinacional, mudando as bases estruturais de sua sociedade. A resistência da população indígena desafia a definição tradicional de cidadania e, portanto, o paradigma neoliberal. O indigenismo é um elemento fundamental para compreender o processo de politização das identidades indígenas e suas interações com o Estado. Além disso, este artigo tem como objetivo revisar criticamente, por meio de uma leitura pós-colonial, como esse reconhecimento étnico e cultural mudou o quadro político e como pode ser visto como um exemplo de diálogo intercultural, ressignificando a posição marginal dessas populações.

Palavras chave: Conhecimento indígena, Bolívia, constitucionalismo, pós-colonial.

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Conocimiento indígena y cambios constitucionales en Bolivia

Resumen

América Latina es una de las regiones con mayor población indígena, sin embargo, ellos aún tienen poca representación política y acceso a derechos básicos. En este sentido, se busca analizar brevemente el caso de Bolivia, primer país en elegir un presidente indígena y en implementar un Estado Plurinacional, cambiando la base estructural de su sociedad. La resistencia de la población indígena desafía la definición tradicional de ciudadanía y por ende el paradigma neoliberal. La indigeneidad es un elemento fundamental para comprender el proceso de politización de las identidades indígenas y sus interacciones con el Estado. Además, este trabajo tiene como objetivo revisar críticamente, a través de una lectura poscolonial, cómo este reconocimiento étnico y cultural ha cambiado el cuadro político y cómo podría verse como un ejemplo de diálogo intercultural, resignificando la posición marginal de esas poblaciones.

Palabras clave: Conocimiento indígena, Bolivia, Constitucionalismo, Poscolonial.

1. Introduction

Latin America has at least 10% of its society formed by indigenous people, divided in more than 800 different groups, with a high linguistic, social, cultural and political diversity (Cepal, 2015). But still with low representation in the political scenario and in decision making positions. In Bolivia this number is even more expressive, over 50% of the population identify itself with one of the many ethnic indigenous groups, and maybe this could explain the changes that had been implemented there in the last century. Since the colonization period, these groups have been fighting against the *status quo* and for their survival. Even though some political and constitutional changes had taken place, there is still a "gap" between the formal recognition and the implementation of these laws in practice.

One of the reasons that could explain this, is that the concept of civilization that the latin american states were built on were based in the european values, seen as universal. The indigenous issues have been closely linked to the construction of the Nation State in this region, due to the problems caused by the structural heterogeneity and the persistence of high levels of inequality. Despite the significant progress on the economic and social development in the last decades, which reflected in poverty reduction and improvements in several social indicators, the issue of this prominent population segment remains alarming - these are still the most marginalized ones. There is still a cyclical behavior, in which the political class has repeated a pattern over the years, that is to say, the continent is still immersed in a reality of chronic system failures. There is an urgent need to include intercultural debates in the politi-

cal scenario, which go beyond the idea of the Latin American Republican State based on the artificial idea of unity and homogeneity.

There is an idea that those who are at the margins will stay there, overall, because there are no policies being implemented that really change the structure that makes those margins exist. As Cynthia Enloe (2017) points:

> Few states are so powerful that policies issued at the centre can be assured faithful implementation on the margins, especially if the state itself depends on the continuing support of these very people, people with privilege derived from accumulating the resources on the margins, it is calling upon to sacrifice a good portion of their income and their sense of class honour (ENLOE, 2017, p. 192).

In this sense, the political changes that took place in 2009 in Bolivia were, in a way, an attempt to change the political structures that do not communicate with those that are at the margins. The Plurinational State, that will be analysed in this paper, tried, from a constitutional point of view, to give the basic cultural recognition and civil rights to the indigenous population that had been ignored by the State since its foundation.

2. A brief overview of the concepts of coloniality and interculturalism

During a Congress at the United States, in 1998, a group of latin american scholars - such as Lander, Mignolo, Quijano, Dussel, Escobar y Coronil - were formed soughting, above all, to break with the Western epistemological canon. Thus seeking to decolonize the area of knowledge, including and giving strength to the production of subordinate knowledge of the groups exploited and oppressed from the perspective of the same and discuss the colonial heritage in Latin America (Castro Gómez; Grosfoguel, 2007). The main idea was to transcend the dichotomies applied by the capitalist system, the colonial power matrix and the Eurocentric view of the work, culture, ethnic-racial and gender relations particular to each location (Grosfoguel, 2008).

Modernity, as a result of the process that had begun with the "Discovery of the New World" and the capitalist colonial system, had defined new patterns of Eurocentric world power that encodes social elements in detriment of the control of work, its resources and its products. Thus, race was the foundational and constitutive element of those relations of domination, since it grants and legitimizes the colonial discourse that assumes that there is a race naturally superior to another. The formation of this new social relations were founded on the idea of those new identities: the indigenous, the black and the mestizos people; and these cat-

egories formed a new social hierarchy in society, with race being the main character (Quijano, 2005). This classification created a "new temporal perspective of history and have relocated the colonized peoples, as well as their respective histories and cultures" (Mignolo, 2000). In this way, it could be said that the history has been told from a specific location, in which the colonized are not active agents.

Thus, the position of the latin american countries in the World System (Wallerstein, 1974) could be related to the subaltern position of the indigenous people. The idea pointed by Wallerstein emphasizes that there is not an individual development in the capitalist economy, because it has a "polarizing nature". In other words, in a capitalist system it will always have the center and the subaltern, the rich and the poor, and the distance between those will not be diminished by the system itself. So, in this way, it is possible to point that the consequences for those marginalized people is an economic overexploitation within countries considered to be underdeveloped or dependent on this system.

These authors have pointed that the postcolonial perspective does not explain the latin american society and its issues, because even though there is not an administrative control since the independence movements, a relation of power remains, in which the ex-colonies are in a subaltern position. The coloniality differs from colonialism and expresses itself in three dimensions: power, knowledge and subject. It is also important to address this issue to the power relations built inside those countries that had created what Casanova (2009) have called "internal colonialism". In this way, to talk about decoloniality is to talk about decolonizing those three areas mentioned before and create a movement that questions the world order and the internal power structures of countries, questioning the *status quo* and the hegemonic powers.

In these terms, it is important to critically view the relations that exist between a cultural diverse group. Interculturality is a complex term, often misconception, that refers to the relations that exist in a cultural constellation defined and express by its different forms of expression - language, ethnicity, religion, nationality, etc - and its interactions, that are "both conflictual and dialogical" (Dietz, 2018). An intercultural dialogue is not an effort to find a new - not an eurocentric - hegemonic power, it is a form to recognize the diversity and the plurinational composition of a society. That is to say, the intercultural perspective considers the power relations that exist in the cultural dialogues - that are often conflictive - and aims to, other than creating a monoculture space, enrich the differences that exist between them, focusing on the spaces between (Guilherme, 2019). This should not be romanticized, because it is not a peaceful or a linear process, but it is an effort necessary to decolonize the structures

that the society is built on. As mentioned by Gunther Dietz (2018) "[...] a citizenship regime that is based on intercultural specific and interculturally negotiated capacities to exercise human rights in situations of persistent, historically rooted inequalities and asymmetries".

Bearing this in mind, Latin American authors, among them Quijano, have proposed localized theoretical alternatives, in which normative or universal ideals are not brought, focusing on specific alternatives to local problems. In this sense, the author points out that the adoption and reproduction of European institutions in Latin America was a great mistake, which developed an oppressive social and economic structure. Several cases that have been occurring in the last decades may point to this path, as is the case in Bolivia. The constitutional change to a plurinational state, based on the indigenous philosophy of "*Suma Qamaña*", opposed to the Eurocentric idea, has become a vector of these processes of epistemic decolonization and of the social structures of the continent, as will be discussed in the next chapter of the paper. Assuming the idea of indigeneity, that according to Fontana (2012), is placed as the basis of a counter-hegemonic imagined community, with a historical anchorage and a symbolic resistance against the interests of western powers over the nacional ones. That is to say, this politicization of the indigenous identity is related to the claims of the indigenous movements in the previous decades.

3. A critical analysis of the Plurinational State in Bolivia

Bolivia has become an important actor on the international stage due to the development of policies for ethnic minorities, managing to wake them up with broader issues related to economics and politics. During the 20th and the 21st century, several social movements emerged in Latin American countries, dissatisfied with the institutional structure and the dominant sectors. Movements that seek to transcend the market and economic debate and question the colonial structure in which the notion of the Nation State emerge, in an attempt to reformulate it according to the reality and the demands to which the Latin peoples are inserted. In Bolivia, this process took place in 2006, when they elected the country's first indigenous president and in 2009 promulgated a Plurinational Constitution (Camargo, 2006).

The election of Evo Morales, far beyond a political or ideological position, represents the rise to the highest level of state power, a representative of a segment of the population that until less than a century ago did not even have the right to vote. It is also worth mentioning that the president was elected with 56% of the votes, something that has not happened

since 1967. In addition to the symbolic significance, the rise of Morales showed a tendency to fight the internal colonialism, inequality in access to Bolivia's resources and a greater empowerment of marginalized classes. Political-legal control has historically been in the hands of the most powerful, of the great oligarchies. In this sense, the last decade of the twentieth century was marked by a popular design of political change that, in conjunctural terms, was opposed to the neoliberal model (Dan, 2015).

In 2009, articulated by Morales, the Bolivia Plurinational Constitution was promulgated, recognising more than 36 ethnicities and also making their languages official and officially assuming ideals of different cultures. Therefore, a series of structural reforms were implemented within the state spectrum, with plurinationality and ethnicity as the central element, issues raised in a sectorial manner by indigenous and workers. Among these changes is *Suma Qamaña*, as an ethical principle of a plural society, as stated in article 98 of the Bolivian Constitution: "the State affirms that cultural diversity is the essence of the Plurinational State; with this, we must consider that the State begins to appropriate this conception of original culture in order to decolonize " (Bolivian Constitution, art. 98, 2009).

That is to say, this new Constitution is an effort to leave behind the legacy of the colonization about the traditional model of a Nation State, and its patterns of exclusion, subordination of the majority, homogeneity and the rational construction of modern institutions, as well as the idea of a single official language. Which can be also linked to the notion of the abyssal thinking (Santos, 2017), which is a concept that refers to the imaginary line that divides the "Me" and the "Other". The Me having its visibility based on the invisibility of the Other. This process would have as its starting point the colonial period, the zero degree, where modern conceptions of knowledge and law are built; both originating from abyssal thinking. In other words, the two great colonial domains would be science and law, where what is interpreted as wrong, is part of the illegal zone, thus being a possible territory to be dominated. So to talk about an intercultural perspective in the law, is also to give visibility to those that were on the other side of the line.

However, constitutional changes do not break with the imaginary standards imposed by the colonial system. Although recognition by the law is important and has a symbolic importance, it does not necessarily have changes in practical life that will remain over time. It may not be possible to count these kinds of changes, like how less racist the population is. But even though, over the last decades an expansion of the understanding of the idea of identity and indigeneity occurred - when the social movements have started to assume in their narratives the anticolonial and critical dimension, claiming for substantial changes in the

Nation State, from its basis - the changes promoted by the State have continued to address these subjects from a policy of difference perspective, in which their insertion in decision-making processes was hindered.

It has been possible to have indigenous participation in the process of "refounding the State", something unimaginable a few decades ago, but there is also a permanence of a part of the structures that subordinated the indigenous population in the past. In this new political scenario, the indigeneity can be found in the political discourses often, while in other hand, there are a lot of policies that contribute to the isolation and the exclusion of this group, ignoring the pluralistic perspective of the constitution. For example, the law still reinforces the individualistic perspective to evaluate the participation of indigenous people in detriment of their formation as a collective. The law still recognizes the individual rights of autonomy and citizenship, while they are self-determined as a group, a collective and aim for their right as a whole, reinforcing, in a way, what Enloe has pointed about the studies of the margins.

Lastly, 2020 marks a period of ten years since the promulgation of the Plurinational State and it is the first year without Morales since then. In november of the previous year, after a *coup d'état* was taken by the right-wing and the military forces, the president was forced to resign and from this moment the country emerged in a scenario of several racist actions against indigenous symbols, such as the Whipala, showing that maybe there is still a more deeper issue. The Plurinational State is a huge step toward a more plural and intercultural concept of the State and a great legacy to the bolivian society, but it should be combine with other actions that aims to achieve the decoloniality of the knowledge and the subject also, and do not remain only in the paper.

3. Final Considerations

Constitutional changes, in addition to representing an advance in inclusive policies, destabilize the hegemonic logic present within the structures of the State. In addition to political issues, social movements - and in this case mainly indigenous peoples - articulate themselves as an epistemic insurgency that faces the dominant structures of the State that support capitalism, the interests of oligarchies derived from the colonial period and the financial market.

The idea of intercultural debate is precisely to identify the internal fractures within each culture and the relationships of domination and subordination to which they are subject. In this sense, it goes beyond the multicultural view in which Western customs and principles

are presumed to be the most correct, thus being a process of revising and reframing this "standard" model, understanding and questioning the asymmetries of social and political structures, which are mostly Eurocentric.

Although, the adoption of plurinationalism culminated in a series of public policies with a more intercultural character that strengthened communities and gave them more autonomy. The fact that the existence of Laws and Articles in the Constitution does not in itself change the reality of indigenous peoples, but its formal recognition has created more mechanisms for the defense of these rights. Furthermore, it was also possible to see that the policies developed have created important mechanisms to increase the access of this segment of the population to basic needs.

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