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Article (Accepted Version)

Laing, Anna Frances (2012) Beyond the Zeitgeist of 'post-neoliberal' theory in Latin America: the politics of anti-colonial struggles in Bolivia. *Antipode*, 44 (4). pp. 1051-1054. ISSN 0066-4812

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Beyond the Zeitgeist of “Post-neoliberal” Theory in Latin America: The Politics of Anti-colonial Struggles in Bolivia

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The March in Defence of TIPNIS

¡Evo prometía que todo cambiaría, mentira, mentira, la misma porquería! [Evo promised that everything would change, lie, lie, the same crap!]

On 19 October 2011 I joined approximately 3000 marchers on the descent into La Paz, the final destination of the historic 66-day march in defence of the Isiboro Sécuré National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS). Tens of thousands of Bolivian citizens lined the streets along the route chanting in solidarity with the marchers and demanding the cancellation of the government’s planned highway set to cut through the ancestral lands of the lowland indigenous people of the Yuracarés, Mojeños and Tsimanes. Such an outpouring against the once popular President, Morales, reflected the anger of the Bolivian people that he had contradicted his international discourse surrounding climate justice, anti-neoliberalism and indigenous rights. Two days later the President announced the cancellation of the road. Being reported as a victory for the environment by the international press, it has also been a significant milestone in the presidency of Morales, rupturing the bond between the first “indigenous leader” of Bolivia and sectors of the indigenous stronghold that bought him to power.

Whilst such developments could be read in terms of the legitimacy of the “post-neoliberal” project in Bolivia, I argue that this limited framework could become abstracted from the grounded and placed realities of contentious politics. Instead, I reflect

upon recent events to argue that a colonial epistemology remains embedded within the State that is being actively challenged by “anti-colonial” indigenous movements.

The Smokescreen of the “Plurination”

For many, Morales represents a figurehead of the indigenous rights movement, notably renaming the country the “Plurinational State of Bolivia” in 2009 in recognition of the ethnic diversity of a nation where almost two-thirds of the population identify themselves as indigenous (INE/UMPA 2003:157). The new constitution of 2009 not only recognises 36 ethnic communities but grants them greater rights to autonomy over their lands and territory, including self-regulation and the right to be consulted by the State before the exploitation of non-renewable resources.¹ However, these rights were not granted by the State during the procedures in the proposal for the highway and recent events would seem to suggest that the idea of the “Plurination” stands for very little when in contradiction to State development plans, regardless of whether they are defined as “post-neoliberal”.

Historically, the indigenous peoples of the *tierras bajas* (lowlands) have been more marginalised and repressed than the Andean highland groups (Canessa 2006). This is an ongoing trend that can be witnessed through encroachment by external forces, such as coca growers (who originate from the highlands of Bolivia), in the lowland area of the TIPNIS. Tellingly, Morales demonstrated his true allegiances when he declared that “I never considered myself to be the first indigenous president, but the first trade-unionist president”² (*Página Siete* 2011). Rather, then, the concept of the “Plurination” has acted as a smokescreen for the continued repression of lowland indigenous groups in Bolivia with Morales utilising the notion of a “united indigenous peoples” alongside an anti-neoliberal agenda to knit together a broad coalition of supporters that brought together the class politics of the unionists alongside indigenous groups.

(Re)colonisation by the State?

“Colonialism” has become associated with a Western form of imperialism linked to the

economic rationalisation of capitalism (Clayton 2009). However, the term does not preclude colonialism by dominant powers within or by the State, whether capitalist or socialist. Such “internal colonialism” (Hechter 1975) can be witnessed through recent events as issues remain unresolved with the government rallying the coca growers and peasant unions to demand the construction of the road in spite of their promise to annul the plans. During this process the government has continually used a discourse of “progress” and “development” through a project “*en defensa del proceso de cambio*” (“in defence of the process of change”). Such discourse operates to construct binaries of “civilisation”/“savagery” and “modernity”/“tradition” that are being employed to distinguish between the forward-thinking “*campesinos*” (peasant farmers of highland indigenous origin) and the backward-thinking “*indios*” (lowland indigenous). This produces an “imaginative geography” of “us” and “them” (Said 2003), which acts to repress the lowland indigenous people of TIPNIS. The State has also operated physical subjugation when the police blocked and detained the marchers without food or water outside the town of Yucumo on 25 September (*Los Tiempos* 2011).

Beyond the Zeitgeist of “Post-neoliberalism”

Somos ni la izquierda o la derecha . . . Somos indígenas [We are neither the Left or the Right . . . We are indigenous] (Representative of the march in defence of the TIPNIS, 18 October 2011)

The “post-neoliberal” frame of analysis is undoubtedly important, especially in a country that suffered hugely under radical neoliberal restructuring. However, it is imperative that the academy does not turn a blind eye to other modes of analysis for the Bolivian people by focusing solely on the Zeitgeist of “post-neoliberal” enquiry.³ For many of the indigenous ethnic groups of Bolivia, the notion of “colonialism” represents a more substantive and enduring lens in which to analyse current political trajectories. For the indigenous marchers of the *tierras bajas* the Bolivian government represents a renewed colonialist regime following a 500-year history of exploitation since Spanish rule.

Academic enquiry needs to reflect the embodied realities of ongoing political struggles in order to recognise the geographical and historical specificities of colonial experiences. In this vein Escobar argues that a process, such as globalisation, is “about a complex, historically and spatially grounded experience that is negotiated and enacted at every site and region of the world” (Escobar 2008:1). As such, the importance of *placed* analysis is vital to the comprehension and construction of alternative forms of modernity and knowledge production.

Therefore, it is important that a Left-leaning journal, such as *Antipode*, does not confine itself to limited frames of analysis by stating, as it does, that it accepts articles with a “perspective [that] can be Marxist, post-Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, queer, anarchist or green” (*Antipode* 2011). Such a statement would seem to define what is deemed acceptable within the discipline regardless of the grounded realities of contentious politics. By doing so, the academy may act to reinforce a Western colonialist epistemology of knowledge production that represses the potential for much needed critical academic interventions.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David Featherstone and Paul Routledge for their helpful advice and suggestions.

Endnotes

¹ See Articles 2 and 30 for specific details (Asamblea Constituyente 2008).

² The original in Spanish reads “Yo nunca me consideraré como primer presidente indígena, pero sí como primer presidente sindicalista” (*Pagina Siete* 2011).

³ It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss whether Bolivia has entered a “post-neoliberal” moment (for more, see Webber 2011).

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