

Three Takes on De-Colonizing the State Apparatus in Bolivia

Chuck Sturtevant

Davidson College

Abstract

This response summarizes and compares three scholars' approaches (Marcelo Bohrt, Robert Albro and Pamela Calla) to the Morales administration's efforts to decolonize the government of Bolivia. Seeking the common ground among them, I find that all three recognize the importance of symbolic and discursive changes, which have allowed some previously-excluded individuals to access positions of authority within the state apparatus. On the other hand, these changes have been uneven, exposing rifts between indigenous communities, exacerbating existing inequities, and establishing new or renewed hierarchies of subordination.

Keywords

Bolivia, decolonization, Evo Morales, indigenous people, state apparatus

Resumen

Este texto resume y compara tres enfoques académicos (Marcelo Bohrt, Robert Albro y Pamela Calla) sobre los esfuerzos de la gestión de Morales para descolonizar el gobierno de Bolivia. Al buscar un terreno común entre

ellos, encuentro que los tres reconocen la importancia de cambios simbólicos y discursivos que han permitido que algunos individuos previamente excluidos accedan a posiciones de autoridad dentro del aparato estatal. Por otro lado, estos cambios han sido desiguales; exponiendo, así, divisiones entre las comunidades indígenas, exacerbando desigualdades existentes y estableciendo jerarquías de subordinación nuevas o renovadas.

Palabras claves

Aparato estatal, Bolivia, descolonización, Evo Morales, pueblos indígenas

From the moment President Evo Morales took office in 2006, his administration set an ambitious agenda. It aimed to decolonize the state, promote indigenous frameworks for environmental sustainability, and combat all forms of racism and discrimination, all while maintaining strict control over natural resources and political processes. The scholarship gathered together here asks how the implementation of that agenda has played out in practice, and what legacies it might leave for the future. Each of these scholars examines the practices and institutions of the state –the state apparatus as Abrams puts it– from different perspectives and drawing on distinct materials. They triangulate on a conclusion that there have been important shifts in the discursive and symbolic expressions of the state apparatus, and that these have real affects in terms of which individuals can access positions within that apparatus. Nevertheless, that access has been uneven, exposing rifts between indigenous communities, exacerbating existing inequities, and establishing new or renewed hierarchies of subordination.

Marcelo Bohrt’s analysis of the position of indigenous bureaucrats describes an effort to reframe narratives about progress and development. Previous regimes described progress in terms of resolving “the Indian problem.” From this perspective, heterogeneity of ethnicities and the supposed backwardness of indigenous peoples prevented progress and development. Whiteness, on the other hand, was (implicitly and often explicitly) associated with modernity. Instead, the Morales administration has worked to reframe progress and development in terms of overcoming “the colonial problem.” Bohrt analyses this reframing –from a concern with “the Indian problem” to a concern with the colonial problem– in the administration’s official decolonization discourse, and the 2006-2010 National Development Plan, in particular. In the bureaucracy, this involved an effort to overturn the status quo of a “deeply ingrained, racialized system,” which

marked those spaces as hostile to indigenous people and reproduced a “boundary between indigeneity and the state.” Bohrt argues that these discursive and symbolic shifts redrew the symbolic boundaries between indigeneity and state and overthrew the hegemonic notion that state authority is embodied in white-mestizo bodies. Indigenous people now work within the bureaucracies and participate in the exercise of statecraft. Now, indigenous people –bureaucrats and petitioners alike– “come in as if they were in their own house,” as one of his interlocutors told him.

The fact that indigenous individuals have been able to gain access to positions within the state, clearly shifts the constitution of bureaucratic spaces in ways that make them more accessible to some indigenous people. Yet the state remains a principle venue for enacting the “actualities of social subordination” (Abrams 63), through which various interests, communities, ethnic groups, and social sectors compete to exert power, and state-craft still depends on bureaucracy, resource distribution, and political parties. There may have been –as Bohrt argues– a dramatic shift in the racial or ethnic make-up of the state. The participation of dark-skinned, indigenous-identifying bureaucrats in the “palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centered in government,” as Abrams (82) puts it, would have been unimaginable just ten years before Morales’ administration. But these transformations have not substantially altered the nexus of practice and institutional structure themselves.

Robert Albro argues that, in practice, the structural dynamics reproduced within the state continue to marginalize indigenous peoples as communities, interest groups, or ethnic classifications. Albro identifies a tension between indigenous priorities as the diversity of these interests come into conflict. For example, discourses reproduced in the constitution and other legal frameworks codify indigenous rights, offer stringent critiques of colonialism, and introduce an indigenous framework for environmental sustainability. These framings depend on a collective notion of indigenous subjects, with their own language, historical traditions, cosmivision, and territory. Yet indigeneity means something very different for urban indigenous people, who go largely unrecognized in the constitution and whose interests differ drastically from those of such rural, collectively conceived indigenous communities. Further, as these interests collide, it is these collective indigenous communities that remain marginalized from the exercise of power through state-craft, and who face disproportionately severe consequences from the extractive practices that benefit indigenous majorities in urban areas. The result is that MAS’s political

agenda (as produced in the constitution and, particularly, as projected into international sphere) continues to be informed by key indigenous cosmological concepts and a critique of liberal economic system even as these frameworks are disconnected from specific concerns of particular indigenous groups, and the everyday exercise of power through state-craft.

One of the consequences of these tensions has been that efforts at decolonization of the state have stagnated. Pamela Calla has explored the work¹ –or, more pointedly, the scarcity of work– conducted by the Vice-Ministry for Decolonization and the National Committee Against Racism and All Forms of Discrimination (Comité Nacional Contra el Racismo y Toda Forma de Discriminación). As Calla frames it, the MAS party hijacked the radical elements of the indigenous movement and coopted them to achieve its own goal: building a one-party government. The push from below by grassroots activists demanding a response to racist and discriminatory scaffolds that are embedded in the state has led to a string of resolutions, the formation of committees, and a string of meetings, but has not led to changes in public policies. Discrimination complaints go unprocessed, regional committees fail to meet, language training for public officials is ineffective, and the Vice-Ministry itself is poorly funded. That is, the state apparatus continues to operate along preexisting trajectories. The emotional bond between the party and the activists has been broken and the activists, particularly indigenous and women activists, who pushed for these changes, have found that they, once again, have to do the work of imagining an alternative. This involves looking beyond the Bolivian state as an emancipatory institution to build international networks.

The question that panelists put forward, one form or another, is, “How successful have the Morales administration and the MAS party been in decolonizing the state?” There have certainly been symbolic and discursive changes. Further, these changes in discursive or symbolic registers are important, as Bohrt argues. Individuals who identify as indigenous have access to bureaucratic spaces that were once closed off to them, both as officials and petitioners. If the outlook seems positive from the perspective of Bohrt’s indigenous informants, perhaps that says more about their position working within the state apparatus, as indigenous bureaucrats who have managed to attain a position within the state apparatus. For those outside, the picture is less encouraging. While bureaucracies and political parties may no longer be

¹ Pamela Calla’s paper is not collected in this special issue, but its contents and critique can be appreciated throughout this discussion.

constituted as white spaces from which indigenous people are inherently excluded, they still operate as bureaucracies and political parties that enact the interests of specific actors. The state apparatus still produces a palpable nexus of practices and institutional structure that continue to enact the realities of social subordination. These are not the practices and structures imagined by the grassroots activists, indigenous communities, and other actors who saw the election of an indigenous president as an opportunity to radically reimagine the idea of the state.

Works Cited

ABRAMS, Philip. 1988. "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977)." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1(1): 58-89.



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).