BOLIVIAN STUDIES JOURNAL
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS BOLIVIANOS

Qullasuyu Rising: Indianista-Katarista Politics, Paradoxes of the Plurinational State, and the Fall of Evo Morales[1]

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Abstract

This work centers activist critiques of Evo Morales's government in order to understand how growing alienation of Indigenous social movements from the state-party apparatus contributed to his controversial fall in November 2019's right wing coup. To that end, I engage the work of Indigenous activists pertaining to the Indianista and Katarista movements as an evolving body of critical theory produced from the vantage point of racialized subjects engaged in a multivalent, anti-colonial struggle. Rather than considering the introduction of neoliberal reforms from 1985 as the inflection point for Indigenous political participation, a more organic understanding of the scope

[1] This article draws on the research conducted for my Bachelor's of Arts honors thesis in Anthropology at the University of Chicago, which received funding from the Foundation for the Advancement of Anthropology and History. Professors Ryan Jobson and Mareike Winchell in the Department of Anthropology and Professor Diana Schwartz Francisco from the Center of Latin American Studies provided invaluable guidance throughout the thesis process, and this article is certainly shaped by their mentorship, for which I would like to express my gratitude once again. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors for collaborating with me on this article. Throughout the article, English translations of texts originally published in Spanish are mine.

of these movements and their evolving conceptions of their own struggle requires a longer view, beginning with the fallout from the 1952 National Revolution. Such a perspective calls for closer attention to the various militant Indian organizations active throughout the twentieth century and positions them as key protagonists in Bolivia's numerous social, political, and economic conflicts. Borrowing from political ontology and activists' criticisms of the traditional Left, this essay argues that Indianismo and Katarismo are anti-colonial political ideologies whose practices mobilize an ontological politics that goes beyond the nation-state but not necessarily the nation, diverging from the state-led Process of Change. Indeed, the proliferation of the *wiphala* as a symbol of popular revolt across South America in the ongoing protest cycle since 2019 points to both the importance of Plurinational Bolivia in the contemporary progressive imaginary and the centrality of decolonization to autonomous political projects and horizons of possibility.

Keywords
Indianismo-Katarismo, Indigenous politics, Aymara mobilization, Wiphala, Alteños, social movements, ontological politics

Resumen

Este trabajo se centra en las críticas activistas al gobierno de Evo Morales con el fin de entender cómo la creciente alienación de los movimientos sociales indígenas del aparato estatal-partidista contribuyó a su controvertida caída en el golpe de derecha de noviembre 2019. Con ese fin, discuto el trabajo de activistas indígenas pertenecientes a los movimientos indianista y katarista como un cuerpo en evolución de teoría crítica producida desde la posición de sujetos racializados comprometidos en una lucha anticolonial multivalente. Más que considerar la introducción de reformas neoliberales a partir de 1985 como el punto de inflexión para la participación política indígena, una comprensión orgánica del alcance de estos movimientos y de la evolución de sus concepciones de lucha requiere una visión amplia, comenzando por las consecuencias de la Revolución de 1952. Esta perspectiva exige una mayor atención a las diversas organizaciones indígenas militantes activas a lo largo del siglo XX, situándolas como protagonistas clave en los conflictos sociales, políticos y económicos de Bolivia. En diálogo con la ontología política y las críticas de los activistas a la izquierda tradicional, este ensayo sostiene que el indianismo y el katarismo son ideologías políticas anticoloniales cuyas prácticas movilizan una política ontológica que va más allá del Estado-nación pero no necesariamente más allá de la nación, divergiendo del Proceso de Cambio liderado por el Estado. De hecho, la proliferación de la *wiphala* como

símbolo de revuelta popular en toda Sudamérica en el ciclo de protestas en curso desde 2019 señala tanto la importancia de la Bolivia Plurinacional en el imaginario progresista contemporáneo como la centralidad de la descolonización para los proyectos políticos autónomos y los horizontes de posibilidad.

Palabras clave
Indianismo-Katarismo, política indigena, mobilización aymara, Wiphala, Alteños, movimientos sociales, política ontológica

Introduction

Evo Morales's first election as president of Bolivia—making him its first Indigenous president—on December 18, 2005, was a landmark event in Bolivian history that represented a culmination of decades of militant Indigenous, peasant, and worker organizing and channeled the energy of the 2000–2005 revolutionary epoch to electorally seize state power. His resignation nearly fourteen years later, however, was the culmination of a right-wing coup that installed Jeanine Áñez as a transitional president. Scholars who describe this succession as a coup argue that it is the most fitting way to describe a government that came to power through a highly disputed succession, committing massacres and immediately overstepping its mandate to call new elections by trying to set Bolivia on a new, right-wing course. Conversely, many other scholars and commentators argue that it was not a coup but a constitutional succession, contending that Evo Morales's candidacy was illegal and that he had orchestrated massive electoral fraud (as alleged by the Organization of American States) to win the election in the first round.[2]

Concurring with the "coup" thesis in light of the Áñez government's anti-democratic nature, this essay centers Aymara and Quechua Indianista-Katarista activist critiques of Evo Morales's ostensibly decolonizing government in order to make an intervention in the debate over how and why Morales and his *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) party were vulnerable to this coup. Through a close reading of this literature, I demonstrate how the growing alienation of the Aymara population in El Alto and La Paz from the state-party apparatus contributed to Morales's controversial fall in November 2019. Although this phrasing seems general, I refer to Aymaras and *alteños* in general

[2] See Farthing and Becker for a thorough evaluation of both narratives that provides a strong argument for the coup thesis.

Vol. 30 • 2024 • doi: 10.5195/bsj.2024.331 • ISSN 1074-2247 (print) • ISSN 2156-5163 (online)

rather than naming specific organizations because many of the people involved in spontaneous mobilizations did not necessarily subscribe to specific groups, social movements, or political ideologies. Moreover, the contemporary Indianista-Kataristas cited throughout this piece most commonly use the same general framing of Aymaras and *alteños.*

The impact of Luis Fernando Camacho's entrance to the presidential palace with the Bible in one hand and the Bolivian tricolor flag in the other was compounded by the desecration and burning of the *wiphala,* Bolivia's official dual flag representing Indigenous peoples, at the hands of police officers. These acts, along with transitional president Áñez's proclamation that the Bible had "finally" been allowed to return to the palace, suggested the end of the plurinational project. With a focus on the resistance to the coup in El Alto and La Paz, I try to understand how the political mobilizations of *alteños* resisting the coup existed separately from Morales, despite the common identification of El Alto and the Altiplano region as MAS strongholds.[3] Although *alteños* do and have generally voted for the MAS, the MAS is not organic to El Alto. Rather, it formed in Bolivia's rural Chapare province and only later entered El Alto by integrating itself into preexisting social networks and organizations in the city. As the political scientist Santiago Anria concluded in his study of this process, "although the MAS achieved territorial penetration in [La Paz and El Alto], it did not consolidate a party structure that incorporated the interests and leaderships of these urban populations" (76). The relationship between the Aymara populations of these cities, the MAS, and Evo Morales is thus much more complex than generally assumed.

By grounding this essay in the work of Aymara and Quechua activists in La Paz and El Alto, I am necessarily taking only a partial perspective on the wide array of Indigenous politics in Bolivia. In analyzing the events after Morales's forced resignation, I adopt Yarimar Bonilla's analytic of nonsovereignty in order to consider the conditions of possibility encountered by protesters in the streets. That is, I pay attention to the "delicate shifts in everyday life in the ways and forms that challenge, even as they are unable to fully escape, the political and economic binds of modern life" (Bonilla 172-173). This methodological move seeks to decenter totalizing revolutionary narratives to instead comprehend and theorize peoples' response to ideologies and structures of

[3] It is important to note that, save for the mayoral and gubernatorial elections in 2021, discussed later on in this article, these regions do generally vote for the MAS by large margins. However, voting for the MAS does not necessarily make one a MASista.

Vol. 30 • 2024 • doi: 10.5195/bsj.2024.331 • ISSN 1074-2247 (print) • ISSN 2156-5163 (online)

domination based on "very locally grounded negotiations, incorporations, and rejections" (Thomas 14). At this level, the symbolism of items such as the *wiphala* and the Bolivian tricolor and their roles in protests becomes more profound, whereas the relationship between Evo Morales and those who voted for him in the Altiplano or in La Paz and El Alto appears more complex.

It is imperative that we recognize the vast international audience that Morales attracted, and how it is in no small part due to his popularity and personal symbolic significance that Bolivia has become such a popular talking point and solidarity item for the global left. Aside from it being another overthrow of a pink tide leader, Morales's fall then was also significant because he was one of the leaders in this group of leftist governments in attracting foreign sympathy (Stefanoni). For Nicole Fabricant, "[t]he international left must name what has happened in Bolivia for what it is: a popular mobilization against alleged electoral fraud that was sabotaged by a right-wing, neo-fascist coup." And as commentators such as Pablo Stefanoni argue, neither the narrative of a straightforward right-wing military coup nor that of there being electoral fraud and no coup offer satisfactory explanations to the sequence of events that transpired. Similarly, though the anarcho-feminist María Galindo condemned the burning of the *wiphala* and Camacho's entrance into the Palacio Quemado with a Bible as fascistic acts, she also argued that the coup narrative, while true, only explained part of the conflict. Although one can argue that the *pititas'* movement of electoral fraud denounced legitimate faults in the democratic process, it resulted in "not more democracy but instead a kind of reactionary and anti-popular revanchism" (Stefanoni).

While the radical Indianista leader and Morales critic Felipe Quispe Huanca (hereinafter referred to as Felipe Quispe) conceded the possibility of electoral fraud, he also recognized that "we have to come together to fight against the government that will come, because it will be a right-wing, anti-Indigenous government" (quoted in Tapia 2019). It was and remains problematic to reduce the process, as international commentators did, to "on one hand, a discourse which applauds the Indigenous president's existence and on the other, a discourse which makes him a victim" (Chambi Mayta). Even the CSUTCB and the *Ponchos Rojos* denied support to the government and called for new elections in the days before the coup (Csutcb, Futecra y la UPEA).[4] To

[4] The *Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia* (CSUTCB) [Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia] is the largest peasant worker federation in Bolivia, and the *Ponchos Rojos* are a prominent militant Aymara organization based in Achacachi, La Paz Department.

Vol. 30 • 2024 • doi: 10.5195/bsj.2024.331 • ISSN 1074-2247 (print) • ISSN 2156-5163 (online)

a degree, it was the same social sectors initially responsible for Morales's rise that began the most cutting questioning of Morales's leadership and that raised concerns during and after the disputed election (Mathias). Moreover, although the MAS was and is the only Bolivian party with a true national presence and mass base, the mobilizations against the coup in El Alto and La Paz focused on combatting the hateful rhetoric and actions of the resurgent right rather than necessarily demanding Evo Morales's return to power. When the *Ponchos Rojos* arrived in La Paz to demand that "racist, fascist instigators" such as Luis Fernando Camacho and Marco Pumari (right-wing leaders from Santa Cruz and Potosí) vacate the city, they did so with a resolution demanding that Áñez resign and that the *wiphala* be respected, with no mention of Morales (elaltodigital). Likewise, widely viewed interviews of protesters in El Alto by foreign media bear this out, as the grievances aired focus on the desecration of the *wiphala* and the denunciation of Áñez's assumption of the presidency without invoking the defense of Morales as a rallying cry (teleSUR tv 2019a, teleSUR tv 2019b, AFP News Agency).

The most notable characteristic of these mass rallies was the overwhelming presence of the *wiphala* and references to Tupac Katari and Bartolina Sisa. According to Ravindran and Lizondo Diaz, "The protesters in the streets of El Alto constantly claim that they are not representatives of any political party. Among the protesters there are some who want Evo Morales to return to Bolivia" (166). Following Helene Risør, I suggest that this was a moment of overflow, where the (re)becoming of urban Aymara people as relevant political subjects indicated the autonomous political power constructed in El Alto. For Risør, "overflow" refers to events taking a course that produces qualitatively new reality (117). Moreover, "overflow refers to the lived experience of the escalation of events in unpredicted ways, in this case when the number of people in the streets and events begin to take a course of its own without any clear leadership" (117). Such was the case in the streets in 2019. With party leaders largely in prison or in hiding, the Aymara population in El Alto and La Paz—also provoked by the burning of the *wiphala*—largely autonomously organized a resistance to the new government that defied easy identification with Morales's MAS.[5] This exceeded the terms in which

[5] The distinction between the MAS and Evo Morales himself is an important one. Although these mobilizations were not necessarily in support of Morales or even of the MAS, it would be incorrect to imply that the Aymara protesters in La Paz and El Alto are against the MAS. Indeed, El Alto and Aymara communities across the Altiplano overwhelmingly supported the MAS by voting for Luis Arce in the 2020 presidential election.

Vol. 30 • 2024 • doi: 10.5195/bsj.2024.331 • ISSN 1074-2247 (print) • ISSN 2156-5163 (online)

Indigenous people had been incorporated as plurinational subjects and instead reignited El Alto's political militancy. The renaissance of El Alto as a "rebel city" (Lazar) exceeds its common representation as a MAS stronghold; overflow, then, indicates the unsuitability of common tropes and party affiliations to capture the situation that unfolded in 2019. The political subjectivity created in this moment of overflow corresponds to that of the *indio* as theorized by Fausto Reinaga in his *magnum opus, La revolucion india (1969).*[6] *Although both Indianistas and mestizos (radical* Indigenous activists and white or non-Indigenous Bolivians) may be referring to the same territory by "Bolivia," there is not necessarily a common referent between the two different representations each side entails. In either case, there is an equivocation with respect to the term used that depends on (or is controlled by) ideological considerations. Viveiros de Castro's concept of equivocation refers to a situation—in his formulation, ethnographic—where the two parties are referring to the same thing but are not aware they are not talking about the same thing.

This confrontation differs from Viveiros de Castro's method of controlled equivocation in one key respect: although each side is referring to the same thing despite not talking about the same thing, they are aware of the equivocation they are party to (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 2015a, 2015b). This makes controlling the equivocation a site of struggle. That is, the ability to define what the nation is requires power. By enforcing an ultimately unitary concept of the nation, common pitfalls of the politics of multiculturalism can be said to be replicated in Bolivia's plurinational context. Thus, plurinationalism remains committed to conferring the kinds of recognition that cannot confer power to the recognized but rather circumscribes them within some limit of acceptable difference (Povinelli, Postero 2017). So, recognition does not come from a place of equality because the act of recognition presupposes both a subject in need of recognition and another party with the power to meaningfully confer such a thing. Fausto Reinaga's *Indianismo* clearly responded to the antagonistic coexistence between the imposed category "being *campesino*" and the erased category "being Indian," demonstrating the particular significance of this semantic equivocation by polemically asserting that "the Indian is an Indian, calling him *campesino* is tantamount to calling him a *pongo*" (Reinaga 55). Reinaga's insistence on retaining the term *indio* is his

[6] The first edition published by Reinaga in 1969 under the auspices of the Partido Indio de Bolivia (PIB) [Bolivian Indian Party].

Vol. 30 • 2024 • doi: 10.5195/bsj.2024.331 • ISSN 1074-2247 (print) • ISSN 2156-5163 (online)

manner of seeking to control the equivocation vis-à-vis Bolivia's *mestizo* elite, much like how the defense of the *wiphala* and the reassertion of autonomous political subjectivity in resistance to the coup of November 2019 demonstrates that what is important is who can control the equivocation rather than how it is controlle. Although the equivocation, in this case, is contested between Aymara protesters and the MAS rather than between *indios* and *mestizos,* Reinaga's point about the significance of asserting the *indio* as a political subject remains relevant, given that the definition of Indigeneity and who gets to define it remains the subject of equivocation.

Indianista-Katarista Politics

In his prologue to Fausto Reinaga's *Tesis India,* the Peruvian Indianista Guillermo Carnero Hoke referred to Bolivia as "the revolutionary capital of Indoamerica" (8). Events since then, most prominently Bolivia's ongoing processes of political transformation in the twenty-first century, would appear to bear out his claim. But what was the trajectory of Indigenous struggle in Bolivia such that this affirmation was plausible to make in 1971? And consequently, how has Bolivia been taken up as an important symbolic referent in the progressive or revolutionary imaginary abroad? First, I suggest that, rather than considering the introduction of neoliberal reforms from 1985 as the inflection point for Indigenous political participation, a more complete understanding of the scope of these movements and their evolving conceptions of their own struggle requires a longer view, beginning with the fallout from the 1952 National Revolution and the subsequent 1953 agrarian reform. Similarly, the discursive shifts that took place during the neoliberal 1990s may have laid ideological groundwork for more contemporary transformations (Goodale 20), but these shifts themselves drew on and defanged the ideological work done by Indigenous radicalism. The strength of Bolivia's rural social movements and the conditions of possibility for Indigenous hegemony in national politics can be traced to this historical transformation (Soliz). Such a perspective calls for closer attention to the various militant Indian organizations active throughout the twentieth century and positions them as key protagonists in Bolivia's numerous social, political, and economic conflicts (Dangl 9). It also calls for a citational practice that prioritizes native—in this case, Bolivian—theory (Rosa and Bonilla).

The Indianista critique of colonialism recursively adopts the imposed identity of "Indian" in order valorize it as a means of creating group solidarity

BSJ Vol. 30 • 2024 • doi: 10.5195/bsj.2024.331 • ISSN 1074-2247 (print) • ISSN 2156-5163 (online)

and abolishing it as a category. The colonial invention of Indigeneity is similarly imposed in order to be grasped and negated. Indianista thought rejected the state-imposed politics of recognition and assimilation and instead took "Indianness" as a point of departure, rooting its politics in an assertion of the Indian as a legible, if not revolutionary, political subject beyond the auspices of the nationalist project (Reinaga; Apaza-Calle 2011). This is succinctly expressed in the constitutive documents of the *Partido Indio* [Indian Party], founded by Fausto Reinaga in 1970: "We are not Indians, but they oppressed us with the name 'Indians' and with that we will liberate ourselves as Indians" (Pacheco 33). This subjectivity is constituted in a rejection of representation and assimilation that seeks power instead of recognition. The relations that make representations possible, or controlled equivocations in the sense of de Viveiros de Castro's critique of ethnography, are antagonistic, unstable, and contested.

The recuperation of historical figures such as Tupac Katari in Indianista politics requires what can be called a "memory boom" (Bonilla). Part of the opposition to neoliberalism was movements increasingly turning to transcripts of the past to create tangible political narratives in the absence of coherent new models.[7] Following Bonilla's ethnography of Guadeloupean labor activists at the dawn of the new millennium, the Andes experienced a "memory boom, as narratives of slave resistance were revisited and reshaped to address the concerns of the present" (175). Whereas the Bolivian memory boom revisited narratives of Indigenous rather than slave resistance, the main thrust of the concept—the politicization of the past as a means of generating new forms of politics in the future—remains intact. And, as the contemporary Indianistas discussed in this paper argue, there is a material base to historical struggle and historical memory.[8] Though the original Indianista movement may have produced more political factions and parties than victories, it was transformative in that it began the development of the symbolic array through

[7] Rivera Cusicanqui's concept of "long memory" is also relevant as it refers to a tradition of Aymara political struggle that dates back to at least Tupac Katari's rebellion in 1781. In other words, it encompasses the social memory of a centuries-long resistance against colonialism. Bonilla's concept is similar in its historical scope but is drawn from specific ethnographic examples of political practice that provides a strong basis for comparison with Bolivia. Moreover, Indianista writers have criticized Cusicacanqui and "long memory" as tending to depoliticize Indigenous struggles and oppose tactical or technical innovation. A prominent example is Felipe Quispe Huanca's History thesis (33-34).

[8] Such as Carlos Macusaya, Iván Apaza-Calle, Quya Reyna, Franco Limber, Pablo Mamani Ramírez, and others.

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which Bolivian politics is now contested.[9] As Bonilla reminds us, "even movements that fail at eradicating the injustices they seek to overcome can still manage to have transformative consequences. Indeed, one could argue that they can effectively change the world by radically altering the possibilities imaginable for it" (177). Although the coup was not reversed, this paper argues that the strength of the mobilizations in El Alto and La Paz forced opposition figures such as Camacho to acknowledge the significance of the *wiphala* and the offense of burning it, demonstrating the popular power to check the new regime.

Camacho's proclamation that the Bible had returned to the presidential palace, and that the Pachamama would never return, was applauded by the "recuperators of democracy" because, as Aymara Indianista activist Quya Reyna puts it, it implied that "the Plurinational State was a hair short of its overthrow . . . [as the] small cabildo outside the palace that celebrated Morales's resignation received with applause the policemen who seized the flag of the highland's Indigenous peoples to set it on fire" (Suñagua Copa 136). The burning of the *wiphala* represented a violent rejection of the Plurinational State and its gains, as well as a renewed existential threat to Indigenous Bolivians, especially Aymaras and Quechuas. Ravindran and Lizondo Diaz note that "[i]t is the burning of the *wiphala* that provoked waves of protests from different Indigenous sectors and submerged Bolivia in serious political turbulence" (151). According to *alteño* sociologist Pablo Mamani Ramírez, the burning "revealed the ontological sense, or the being, of the powerful groups. That is why there was a process of stigmatization of the *alteño* under a connotated and at the same time direct language: of 'Indians', 'savages', 'hordes'" (2020a, 86). The concept of an ontological sense of being should also be extended to the groups referred to as "Indians." As the Indianista intellectual Carlos Macusaya Cruz argues, by placing its locus of enunciation within a radically different, racialized subjectivity, Indianismo Indianista thought rejected the state-imposed politics of recognition and assimilation and instead took "Indianness" as a point of departure. As such, its politics are rooted in an assertion of the Indian as a legible, revolutionary political subject beyond the auspices of the revolutionary nationalist project (Macusaya Cruz 2014).

[9] The original Indianista movement as inaugurated by Fausto Reinaga and other activists beginning in the 1960s.

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Indianismo and Katarismo are anti-colonial political ideologies whose practices mobilize an ontological politics that goes beyond the nation-state but not necessarily the nation, diverging from the state-led process of change, which shifted power away from Bolivia's traditional elite and toward the majority of mostly Indigenous workers and *campesinos.* Following Anders Burman (2016), I aim not to reinforce some binary of what is Andean and what is western but to "explore the underlying ontological premises that simultaneously inform and are reaffirmed in a process of re-articulation of Aymara identities and ways of being-in-the-world" (46-49). Indianismo-Katarismo is usefully defined here as a "politicized Aymara notion of the world and a highly politicized notion of 'being Aymara' [that was] prompted by Indigenous experiences of a colonial world, by a collective memory of anticolonial resistance, [and] by Aymara notions of alterity and identity and Aymara ontological postulates" (Burman 2016, 44). The intertwining of Aymara ontological postulates with what could be considered "Western" notions of class struggle and nationalism has no bearing on the legitimacy of Indianista-Katarista critiques, nor does the deployment of specific ontological postulates as a means of cultural continuity constitute fundamentalism or blood and soil ethnonationalism. In sum, it is an ontological politics because it speaks from a racialized subjectivity deemed to be radically different from the neocolonial ontology (Mamani Ramírez 2017, 163, 189), or ontology of power, articulated by the dominant classes that carried out the coup. Moreover, treating Indianismo-Katarismo as an evolving body of critical theory implies understanding Indianismo and its relatives as a distinct theoretical framework for understanding the political reality of past and present Latin America.

Indianismo and Katarismo are related but distinct revolutionary ideologies developed by Bolivian Indigenous activists (largely Aymara and Quechua) from their lived experiences of race and class oppression in Bolivia. These emerged as concrete political trends in the late 1960s and early 1970s among politically engaged Aymara students and workers who sensed that the leftist ideologies popular in Bolivian workers' movements (Portugal Mollinedo and Macusaya Cruz 26)—at this point, largely Trotskyism in the trade union movement, with a history of anarchist and syndicalist organizing as well (Ari Chachaki)—were not specifically attuned to dealing with the neocolonial situation in which Indigenous Bolivians found themselves. Indianismo maintains a more radically ethnocentric line than does Katarismo, advocating historically for Indian political self-organization independent from, and in opposition to, the white-mestizo bourgeoisie that controlled state power (Pati

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Paco et al. 20; Macusaya Cruz 2019, 39). In seeking to build Indian Power against the neocolonial state, Indianista organizing was characteristic for its specific focus on racial oppression instead of class oppression (Saavedra 81); to this end, the early Indianista parties uniformly refused to form alliances with the established Bolivian left (Dangl 35). Indianismo privileged the Indian—thought of as a racialized subject within a racialized social structure (Portugal Mollinedo and Macusaya Cruz 47–53)—as the vanguard of revolutionary change in Bolivia.

Taking inspiration from the concurrent Black Power movement and Third World revolutionary movements, Indianistas proposed analyzing Bolivian reality from a racialized subjectivity (Reinaga; Macusaya Cruz 2014, 2019). For Ayar Quispe (2011), *indio* is better defined as a "symbol-term" that has resonance beyond the local to the international and global Indigenous struggle. This is all tied up in a special case of controlled equivocation (Viveiros de Castro 2014) because though the state construes "racialized subjects," it does not have a monopoly on its the meaning of its construction. That is, the word "Indian" is used by both groups (Indian and non-Indian) to refer to the same thing despite the fact that each is using it to talk about completely different meanings. *Indio* becomes a term of empowerment when theorized as part of anti-oppressive ideology; thus, the common referents for *indio* and *indígena* are not quite so common.

Building on the prior discussion of Indianismo-Katarismo, the following two sections offer an analysis of the 2019 crisis using the works of Indianista-Katarista thinkers such as Carlos Macusaya, Iván Apaza-Calle, Pedro Portugal, and Pablo Mamani Ramírez to present an important vantage point on the crisis. Although they conclude that there was indeed a coup in 2019, their arguments depart from more common left-wing framings and defenses of Evo Morales and the MAS by focusing on Aymara autonomous politics and autonomous mobilizations in a moment when social organizations, as well as their leaders, were subject to extreme political repression. Rather than use that scenario to contend that Aymara people were against the MAS or against Morales, or to criticize formal social movements, my recourse to the aforementioned authors and the categories they use in their writing is in order to understand how street politics took on their own direction absent formal leadership. Thus, these authors provide a perspective that is important in Bolivia but that is not well known in English-language scholarship.

Vol. 30 • 2024 • doi: 10.5195/bsj.2024.331 • ISSN 1074-2247 (print) • ISSN 2156-5163 (online)

Indianista-Katarista Critique of the MAS-IPSP

The proliferation of the *wiphala* as a symbol of popular revolt across South America in the ongoing protest cycle since 2019 points to both the importance of plurinational Bolivia in the contemporary progressive imaginary and the centrality of decolonization to autonomous political projects and horizons of possibility. Yet, perhaps the key contradiction in Bolivia under Morales's governance was the transformation of the significance of Indigeneity from a site of emancipation to one of liberal nation-state making (Postero 2017). Although Postero acknowledges that the MAS's process of change challenged the fundamental tenets of liberalism by drawing on Indigenous values and practices, she concludes that it failed to overturn or substantially modify liberalism (2017, 3-4). Though other critiques have referred to the perceived "Aymara-centricity" (Albro, Postero 2013) of Morales's government and the constitution it promulgated, there has been less attention paid to the critiques made of this phenomenon by Aymara activists themselves. These critiques suggest that Morales and the MAS adopted—but also adapted—political symbols and ideas that arose independently among the Aymara masses engaged in anti-colonial struggle, and that this has significant implications for understanding the so-called Process of Change." As Burman (2020) argues, the Morales government co-opted epistemological and ontological radical difference as rhetorical devices in an Indigenized language of resistance used to legitimize Bolivian state power. As Olivia Arigho-Stiles notes in her dissertation on the Katarista movement's conception of nature, few studies have explored the genealogy of the Indigenous movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries beyond the 1990s (9). Part of the lack of scholarly attention to this genealogy likely also has to do with past studies, which tended to be dismissive of the revolutionary potential of these ideologies, seeing them as regressive and drawing on a mythologized past (Lavaud). Yet, Aymara anti-colonial resistance and uprisings against the state have been a constant of Bolivia's pre- and post-independence histories (Teijeiro).

The MAS tried to position itself as a claimant to this history, and that is perhaps one reason why the Plurinational State has been criticized for being Andino- or Aymara-centric. But this criticism has also come from Indigenous commentators of all backgrounds, including Aymara and Quechua Indianista-Kataristas who resent the appropriation of their history and symbols for different political purposes: "The election of Morales as president of Bolivia . . . has been presented as the coronation of an historic struggle by the Indigenous

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movements. This historical trait has attempted to be understood and expressed through an endless number of ritual acts, in which colors, fabrics, *wiphalas*, 'wise men' . . . were the main components" (Portugal Mollinedo and Macusaya Cruz 23). According to such a perspective, perhaps the most problematic aspect of Morales's government was that it presented an ahistorical image of Indigenous struggle detached from the actual historical processes that established "the Indian" as a subject that sought to govern the country. This Indian subject seized vanguard status from the workers' movement, and as a specifically racialized subject came to articulate other sectors in its struggle and became a hegemonic subject determined to undermine colonialism in Bolivia.

It is important to highlight how Evo Morales and Álvaro García Linera actively sought to identify the MAS with the historic Indianista-Katarista movement by claiming that Fausto Reinaga's ideas had been a major influence on their politics. From this came the state's reprinting of *La Revolución India*, which redoubled scholarly interest in Reinaga's work (Coronel). *La Revolución India* was deployed inconsistently and symbolically (Goodale) and, as the *Comunidad Pukara* [Pukara Comunity] proclaimed in their manifesto for a "New Bolivia," although the militancy and successes of Indianismo and Katarismo helped to spark global interest in Indigenous struggles, it is not necessarily something to celebrate. At issue is the widespread conflation of Indigeneity and Indigenous politics with the *Movimiento al Socialismo - Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos* (MAS-IPSP) [Movement Toward Socialism - Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples], from a perspective where Morales comes to assume the leadership of the Indigenous vanguard party. They note that the MAS was not and is not an Indianista-Katarista party, but that the changing conception of Indigeneity in global politics and the mobilized Aymara communities' revolutionary presence led parties such as the MAS to position themselves as champions of Indigenous rights and to appropriate Katarista symbolism (Comunidad Pukara 2). Thus, according to the Indianista interpretation, the Morales government's rhetorical version of Indigenist neopopulism and *pachmamismo* has come to be seen as the most advanced line on Indigenous liberation in Bolivia even as it co-opted and instrumentalized its constituent social movements.

Put succinctly, the Katarista critique of the Process of Change and the new constitution places it within the same paradigm of neoliberalism that the insurrections of 2000 and 2003 sought to consign to the dustbin of history.

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Rather than being a "post-neoliberal" state, the new constitution remained committed to liberal capitalism despite its stated goal of decolonization (Calle). Moreover, despite the rhetoric of communitarian socialism, the beginning of the Process of Change saw very little in the way of the "communitarian" in the government; "the community became folklore or discourse. Many believe that this government is rooted in the [Indigenous/campesino] communities because President Evo Morales is Indigenous, but this is naïve. Evo is also complicit, the president is not on the sidelines" (Reynaga Vásquez 59). As Simón Yampara explains, the expected relationship of reciprocity (*ayni*) between leaders and the community at large was not upheld (6). Pedro Portugal argues instead that the Aymaras (as in the Aymara population in general) interpreted their relationship to the Plurinational State through a lens of negative reciprocity, taking advantage of what benefits and gifts the government did offer without committing to the defense of a system that was not necessarily organic to their history of struggle (Portugal Mollinedo). This perspective views Morales as a transitional figure rather than transformative: he is completing a part of the long historical process toward the Indians taking power that was initiated by the original Indianista-Katarista movement (MITKA) in the 1970s, itself really a renewal of the much longer historical process of Indian revolution since 1492 (Reynaga Vásquez 74).

The MAS government from 2005 to 2019 was characterized by its paternalistic relationship with the unions and social movements that replicated colonial relations of dependency (Portugal Mollinedo). As John Brown shows, intensive and extensive linkages were formed between the social organizations in El Alto, such as the *Federación de Juntas Vecinales de El Alto* (FEJUVE) [Federation of Neighborhood Councils], the *Central Obrera Regional El Alto* (COR) [Central Regional Workers of El Alto], and the MAS during mobilizations against right-wing forces. That is, there was a shift in these organizations from contestatory mobilizing to mobilization in defense of the party and the state. This had the effect of bolstering the MAS's hegemony but also over time contributing to a weakening of organizational militancy, which fostered internal splits and a loss of organizational autonomy. Specifically, the loss of autonomy experienced by organizations such as the *Central Obrera Regional El Alto* (COR) [El Alto Regional Workers' Center] the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (COB) [Bolivian Workers' Center], and the CSUTCB harmed their internal politics and stunted the development of new, experienced leaders (Tapia and Chavez 186).

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Although autonomy was lost, the fact that these organizations became folded into the state is not necessarily a problem in itself. Rather, what is problematic is how the politics these organizations were able to espouse change within their changing relationship to state power. Instead of a social movement state, or a state for or of the social movements, key allied social movements assumed a role as protectors of the state. Though the MAS has been very successful relative to past Bolivian governments in terms of economic growth and, arguably, political stability, we cannot understand the MAS according to the categories used in its original discourses of decolonialism and Indigeneity. Rather, it must be understood as having popular support from, but also being separate from, the Aymara and Quechua people of the Altiplano, who make up a vitally important section of its base. It is indisputable that the MAS has had and still has strong political influence in the Altiplano, but it is also true that communities make their own demands, which instead have much in common with political currents that are not of the MAS (Morales Rondo).

The exclusions necessary to the government's conception of pluralism and plurinationalism stems from its appropriation of those concepts from the social bases that independently developed them. The distance between the MAS and its bases as well as the relative autonomy these social organizations sought to maintain made the party a check on popular energies rather than a channel. As Goodale notes: "Morales's base of support in the Indigenous movement viewed him more as a strategic ally than as one of their own" (25). The plurinational state's constitutional form of plurinationalism did not articulate with the approaches to political pluralism that had developed among social movements and outside elite circles. Although the government was loathe to acknowledge it, the "decolonizing" state remained staunchly committed to a unitary and centralized conception of the state, which was incompatible with the vision for plurinationalism that it espoused.

The *Wiphala* Rebellion

The MAS could not gain or hold on to state power without the support of Indigenous, peasant, and popular movements, but these key blocs did not readily mobilize in the Altiplano though the *pititas'* protests of electoral fraud were for several weeks the dominant street presence. This was despite the MAS's attempts to organize them to do so, and the party's long-standing tactic of calling on social movements and community organizations to mobilize for the party in cases of conflict. In the final instance, the Process of Change was

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vulnerable at precisely this impasse: the equivocation with respect to the meaning of Indigeneity acted as a check on a mass energy, which would need to be overcome in order to advance decolonialization. That is, Evo Morales's MAS and the mobilized Aymara protesters in El Alto and La Paz did not mean the same thing by "Indigeneity," even though both parties invoked the defense of Indigenous identity as central to their politics. It is because of this equivocation that contemporary Indianista intellectuals, although they may or may not be sympathetic to the MAS, often claim that Morales appropriated symbolism and discourses from the Indianista movement without actually addressing its substantive demands. More specifically, the related state co-optation of Indigenous social movements, and the increasing alienation of the grassroots from the state's agenda, demonstrated the ultimate incompatibility of these projects. Perhaps this could be thought of in some ways according to the logic of leadership rotation among inhabitants of an *ayllu*, an Andean Indigenous local government model, and certainly in relation to how communities in El Alto and elsewhere organize themselves: Morales had served the purpose for which he was chosen to lead, and now it was time for someone else—for a new generation with a new vision. The differing conceptions of what it meant to be Indigenous or what it meant to be Aymara each called on different political histories and tactics. Thus, Indianista activists were quick to emphatically argue that it was not the *masistas* in the streets of El Alto but the Aymara:

> The burning of our blazing symbol, and the mistaken accusation that [the] *wiphala* belongs to the MAS, has raised the fighting spirit of El Alto and as always we find ourselves alone, as in 2003, with a police that has "sold out" and now defends a social sector and that fires bullets and tear gas at us, at young people, at innocent girls, yes, at girls who only observe or accompany their mother. What country do these gendarmes defend? Listen. It is not the *masista* who blockades, it is not the *masista* who is enraged by the burning of their symbol, by the racist offense, by the indifference, by hypocrisy, by paternalism, no, no and a thousand times no. Understand it is not the *masista* who is in the streets, it is a whole society, it is a whole city of migrants *within their Aymara territory* that is mobilized. They are the veterans of 2003, they are the orphans who have lost their parents due to the shooting caused by the government of those who now advocate democracy. It is not the *masista,* gentlemen, it is the *alteño* who is fighting. It is the Aymara. (Apaza-Calle 2019, italics added by author)

In Pablo Mamani Ramírez's interpretation, the spontaneous mobilizations after Áñez assumed the presidency also pointed toward a parallel

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reconstitution of Aymara-Quechua senses of their own nationhood, "presenting themselves as the new 'national being' in open dispute with those who claim to have recovered democracy" (Mamani Ramírez 2020b, 104). He goes on to characterize the new nation being articulated: "The rulers of yesterday and today held them back and criminalized them, now they seem to be the force of the new national being. Apparently, the new nation was born in every corner of the nation. It is the *wiphala* nation. The underground nation converted into thousands and thousands of *wiphalas* as the substantial basis of the new national consciousness. The much-claimed national consciousness that curdled from the old/new elites contracts itself. It is reduced to its minimum expression" (104).

According to the radical Indianista perspective, the Indigenous mass mobilization that did occur after Morales's resignation was in defense of the *wiphala* and their own identity rather than for him (Portugal Mollinedo). This is perhaps not dissimilar to Raquel Gutierrez Aguilar's point regarding the Altiplano mobilizations in 2000, which she characterizes as the Aymaras asserting their nationhood, whereas the *q'aras* (whites and mestizos) defended their republic. This was a moment of overflow in which "the symbolic struggle as a consequence of the burning of the *wiphala* permitted its resurgence as a symbol of the Aymara nation" (Limber 2020b, 155). That is, this was a moment of overflow because the symbolism of the *wiphala* in this moment, as evidenced in the practice and discourse of protesters, exceeded its identification with the MAS and reasserted its particularly Aymara roots. Stemming from the overflow in the protests' significance, it was the reassertion of a particularly Aymara—and importantly, *alteño*—politics that typified events and catalyzed a potent resistance to the new regime in the absence of conventional leadership.

In the view of many activist writers, it is precisely this articulation of Aymara nationhood—or instead, the articulation of another kind of plurinationhood—that was arguably the most lasting political effect of November 2019 (e.g., Calle Laime, Mamani Ramírez 2020a, Apaza Huanca). This can be considered a revolutionary moment not because it provoked a transformation of the state but because, relative to the prior state of the social bases' relationship to the MAS, it marked an "interruption of the conventional ways people act politically" (Bjork-James 49). As in 2003, Aymara protesters demonstrated their capacity to not only paralyze the country by impeding the flow of food and gas to La Paz but also the organizational fortitude necessary to—at least temporarily—convert El Alto and the Altiplano around La Paz

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into an ungovernable territory whose affairs were conducted by neighborhood and community assemblies themselves. Perhaps the most spectacular manifestation of these protests was the parade of militant Aymara nationalists down El Alto's La Ceja main boulevard, defiantly flying the *wiphala* and chanting, "¡*ahora sí, guerra civil, ahora sí, guerra civil!*" [civil war, now!]. Yaneth Katia Apaza Huanca writes that these protesters demonstrated the vitality of the clandestine Aymara nation, or the ongoing territorialized existence of Qullasuyu within but separate from Bolivia, as "in the current moment the *Wiphala* is more to the Aymaras than a multi-colored flag, it represents the essence of their 'being and living in community'—*ayllu, marka, suyu, Qullasuyu, Tawantinsuyu*—that is, recognition of the geographical, economic, political, and social (each being interrelated)" (Apaza Huanca 3).

Iván Apaza-Calle (2020) expanded on the *wiphala's* significance at this juncture: "November 2019. That city [El Alto] has resurfaced again, its causes are varied but the essence of their mobilization lies against the offense and the spit that each of its inhabitants received with the burning of their symbol: the *wiphala*. The offense was done. Each one, with the burning, felt that they were being burned . . . the burning of the *wiphala* was not recent, it was not a fact of yesterday or today, but of that visceral hatred, rejection, and denial of the whole Aymara society coming compacted from centuries ago" (63).

These were not "official" social organizations with vertical authority structures that had mostly been co-opted by the state over Morales's presidency. Thus, the social movements acted as *autonomous political subjects* with the capacity to (re-)articulate and dynamically control territory and expand their reach, in order to defend what they had gained in the insurrections more than a decade prior (Calle Laime). Calle Laime argues that if anything good came out of the catastrophic November 2019, it was "the recovery of political life in the social [life] of El Alto. The crisis allowed for the re-politicization of society." The direct action in defense of the *wiphala* did prevent the complete consolidation of power over society by the new regime, thus managing to protect the gains made in October 2003 and in some of the institutions of plurinationalism; we could say that this demonstration of popular power and capacity for disruptive mass action helped to balance the political forces of society and the government. Thus, their mobilizations contained "not only collective actions of different dimensions, but also the express constitution of a new social subjectivity now territorialized as an expression of a nation around the burning of the *wiphala*" (Mamani Ramírez 2020a, 75).

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The Aftermath

This is not to deny that Morales represented Bolivia's Indigenous peoples, nor am I suggesting that his fall was anything but a setback to the Indigenous movements in a moment when the racist elements of Bolivian society that denigrated everything "Indian" were reappearing (Quispe Kapquique 27). But neither am I suggesting that Morales lacks accountability for events taking the course that they did. Jeffrey Webber argues that although Morales's election "represented a democratic gain in race relations in Bolivia" (70), the revolutionary epoch of 2000–2005 nonetheless did not develop into a true social revolution (67). Rather, the artificial separation of the struggle for anti-colonial Indigenous liberation from that for socialist transformation handicapped each of them, whereas the party itself began to demonize demands from its social movement bases, which transcended the limitations of government policy (73, 99, 124). If the social movements transcended the limitations of how the government represented them, however, then this transcendence had two principal outcomes in the year following the coup that led to Luis Arce's election. On one hand, it can be argued that the roadblocks carried out by *autoconvocados* (self-organized protestors) in August 2020 to demand that the postponed election be held on its original date forced the Áñez regime into a democratic resolution to a political standoff that confirmed the MAS's national hegemony. On the other hand, the central role played by Indianista radical Felipe Quispe in these blockades, and the autonomy that blockaders vociferously claimed, were channeled into subnational campaigns that defeated the MAS in several departments.

Declaring that the Aymara communities in the highland would continue their roadblocks despite the Áñez regime and the MAS coming to a final agreement on the date elections were to be held, Felipe Quispe argued that "Qullasuyu must liquidate Bolivia" (Mendoza). More popularly known as "*el Mallku*" ["condor" or "leader" in the Aymara language], Felipe Quispe was chosen as the "commander of the blockades"—effectively reprising his role in the 2003 Gas War—in Achacachi on August 11, 2020. In a 2020 interview with Sergio Mendoza, he forcefully argued that the *autoconvocados,* whose demands included the restoration of the original election date and the immediate resignation of President Áñez, had nothing to do with support for the MAS, Evo Morales, or Luis Arce and were instead part of a larger movement for "Indigenous revindication" (quoted in Mendoza).

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Bjork-James defines the logic of the roadblock as pushing “the community toward the deepening construction of political autonomy” (111), with roadblocks an example of how “space-claiming protests [became] a tool for both claiming and reimagining the political community of Bolivia” (127). These tactics of space-claiming protest through collective self-organization create partial spatial interruptions of state rule that pose “an alternative sovereignty and put the existing order into crisis [which, while despite not] being able to replace the state (or the political-economic order) as a whole, [articulate] a challenge that [cannot] be ignored” (Bjork-James 213). Like the rest of the mobilized Aymara blockaders, Felipe Quispe was adamant that the protesters be recognized as *autoconvocados,* as self-organized and not affiliated with the MAS. This wave of protests was thus an example of autonomous, mass direct action. In addition to protesting the prorogation of the presidential elections and demanding the resignation of President Áñez, the protesters were more generally concerned with the crimes and abuses committed by the regime. As the *Movimiento Indianista Katarista* activist and writer Franco Limber explains: “The Aymaras seek the president’s resignation which, therefore, is one of the *Mallku’s* slogans. It may appear an incomprehensible idea, but the base of the demand is loaded with a host of unforgivable mistakes made in a short period of government: corruption, robbery of the state, misappropriation of resources, poor management in the face of the pandemic, racism, violations of democracy, violent repression, attacks on the freedom of the press, all of them created a stored aversion which became tangible in the mobilizations” (Limber 2020a).

Consequently, this wave of blockades heralded the splintering of the Indigenous and popular social movements that had made up the MAS bases and catapulted Eva Copa and Felipe Quispe (before his untimely death and replacement by his son Santos) to the top of opinion polls for the mayoralty of El Alto and the governorship of La Paz, respectively.[10] This process, from the blockades to the election campaigning, can also be understood as one of overflow produced in the act of resisting and directly challenging the transitional government. Felipe Quispe’s desire to see Qullasuyu liquidate Bolivia was articulated in blockades that, as Carwil Bjork-James notes, put the existing order into crisis by paralyzing and thus challenging the political-economic order in a way that could not be ignored. The blockades posed an

[10] They ran on the JALLALLA-La Paz ticket, in Copa’s case, after being expelled from the MAS.

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alternative and distinctively Aymara sovereignty, reminiscent of blockades in 2000 and 2003. Although it did not bring down the government (as similar mobilizations have in the past), this movement did force it to concede to the demand for a concrete election date. Distinct from Risør's example, and from that of 2019, is that this overflow did have clear leadership in the form of Felipe Quispe and eventually developed into a concrete political force that competed in and won gubernatorial and mayoral elections: Santos Quispe and Eva Copa would defeat MAS candidates to become governor of La Paz and mayor of El Alto, respectively.

Copa announced an independent run for the mayoralty after the MAS leadership selected a different candidate, leading to her expulsion from the party. Quispe, a longtime critic of the MAS, had previously run for office but never achieved the level of support he did in the initial polls for the gubernatorial election, which came after his leadership in the August 2020 blockades that demanded elections be held. Quechua *campesino* leader and former executive secretary of the CSUTCB Damian Condori, a former MASista turned dissident, also surprisingly topped the polls while running for governor of Chuquisaca. Both Condori and Santos Quispe advanced to the second-round run-off elections, where each won convincing victories against MAS opponents (Molina). All told, six of Bolivia's nine governorships are presently held by opposition parties, and the MAS lost all four run-off elections.

It is perhaps not surprising then that, leaving aside Arce's landslide victory in the October 2020 presidential elections, the subnational elections in March 2021 saw MAS candidates continue to lose ground in their core support regions, particularly the rural Altiplano. It remains the only party in Bolivia capable of running candidates in every region, but the MAS is nonetheless increasingly vulnerable to challenges for regional offices by smaller local parties across the country whose ideologies range from the "independent" Indigenous left to the far right. There is perhaps no better example of this phenomenon than in El Alto, the Aymara migrant city long thought an unquestionable MAS-IPSP stronghold but where Eva Copa won a landslide victory. Copa is in many ways very representative of El Alto as a young person who identifies as Aymara and descends from relatively recent rural migrants, and whose mother wears a *pollera.* As a senator for the MAS, she eventually ascended to the senate's presidency during the Áñez government, becoming widely known as the party's highest-elected official and playing an important role in combatting the

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transitional government.[11] However, why Copa won is up for interpretation, as El Alto also voted overwhelmingly for Luis Arce in the 2020 presidential elections. Copa's margin of victory suggests that she had a wide base of support in the city, such that she likely would have also won had she been the MAS candidate. Thus, one possible interpretation is that *alteños* voted *for* her rather than necessarily *against* the MAS. Another possible interpretation is that votes for Copa were *votos castigo* [punishment votes] against the MAS for rejecting Copa despite her popularity among voters.

Conclusion

The functional autonomy that the Aymara and Quechua social and community organizations vociferously claim and defend demonstrates the long-term tensions between Indigenous and leftist movements in Bolivia, where articulations and solidarity between these sectors has been difficult but necessary to any semblance of a hegemonic political project. The grounding in Indianista-Katarista political theory and ideological writings throughout this work helps to explain the roots of this autonomous positioning, and hence why Aymara communities from the Altiplano in particular mobilized in the aftermath of the November 2019 coup, less to defend Morales or the MAS than to defend the *wiphala* (Humérez Oscori 139). This also applies to resistance to the coup government; that is, the *autoconvocados* who blockaded highways to prevent the further delay of the election. It is important to separate the political practices and aspirations these sectors have, on the one hand, from the party they vote for, on the other. The resistance to the coup can be understood as an overflow, wherein the autonomous politics of the masses in El Alto and La Paz reasserted themselves beyond the auspices of party politics, as events took a course of their own, defending Aymara symbolism and the gains of the plurinational project. The resistance to the coup, particularly the response to the burning of the *wiphala*, also demonstrates the importance of controlling the equivocation. Those who burned the *wiphala* and those who defended it are very conscious of the fact that they are not talking about the same thing when they say "Bolivia," and the symbolic struggle over the importance of the *wiphala* rests on this equivocation.

[11] Her remaining in this role (and staying in Bolivia) and trying to work with the transitional government to the extent possible has been criticized by others as evidence of her disloyalty to the MAS and justification for her expulsion.

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The histories of Indianismo and Katarismo and their contemporary interpretations of Bolivian politics allow for an understanding of Aymara and Quechua social movements that recognizes their autonomous positioning by going beyond an easy identification of Indigenous politics with Evo Morales and the MAS. These histories draw on material political practice, a memory boom that directly politicizes long memory for the necessities of contemporary struggle. This historicized conception is necessary for understanding the coup against Morales because it uncovers the potential contradictions among his principal base of support, contradictions I have argued helped create the conditions wherein a coup was possible. That Morales was overthrown in a coup cannot absolve him or his party from their errors that contributed to the development of the 2019 crisis. The government's instrumentalization and co-optation of the social movements that brought it to power sapped their bases' enthusiasm to mobilize for a government that had not addressed their concerns and no longer seemed interested in a substantive decolonizing agenda. The instrumentalization of social movements was facilitated by the instrumentalization of symbols and rhetoric that had been developed by Indianista-Katarista activists in their own struggle. Thus, the resistance to the coup seen in El Alto and La Paz and the political effects this resistance had speaks to the possibility of an autonomous rearticulation of these movements' struggles rather than necessarily to an affinity for Evo Morales and the MAS.

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