

**Stefanoni, Pablo. 2010. *“Qué hacer con los indios...”*
y otros traumas irresueltos de la colonialidad.
175 páginas. La Paz: Plural Editores.**

In “Qué hacer con los indios...” y otros traumas irresueltos de la colonialidad, Pablo Stefanoni traces the history of ideas and policies on how to tackle the “Indian problem” from the early days of the independent republic to the present days of institutional re-foundation under Aymara president Evo Morales and his Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) party.

The importance of the book is clear since the ongoing Bolivian political process is frequently characterized by many analysts as the taking of power by the previously subordinated Indigenous masses and the attempt at overcoming Western modernity through the adoption of ancestral cosmovisions and the decolonization of the State. Whether this overcoming is real and on-going or a wishful thinking and projection of desires, it doesn’t matter as the issue remains central and its understanding fundamental for the comprehension of what is at stake in Bolivia today. And as Stefanoni himself acknowledges, tracing the history of indianist ideas in Bolivia is a very difficult endeavor due to their various and very fragmented origins and paths of evolution.

Stefanoni shows us how racist ideas about the inferiority of Indians were turned upside down into equally race-based idealized visions of Indian purity that contrasted, nevertheless, with the really existing excluded Indians. Although some limited attempts at some integration of the Indians into the Republic through rural education –aimed at preparing them for a passive life

of rural work – and incorporation into the army – aimed at avoiding the risk of their own autonomous military organization as under the leadership of Zárate Willka in the Federal Revolution– were carried on the turn of the 20th century, it was only in the 1930s and especially after the Chaco War fiasco that the idea of their full integration into national life really started to gain momentum.

Even if it took the form of praising the process of mestizaje and incorporating the Indians qua class of productive peasants and voting individual citizens as it came to be with the 1952 Revolution and its agrarian reform, it is undeniable that it marked an important condition of possibility for the current developments of the issue. As Stefanoni puts it, movements like the Katarists that sought to revalue Aymara cultural identities built their discourse on the unfulfilled promises of equality brought by the Revolution, but these inequalities could only be felt because of the partial successes it delivered. As it increased social mobility among peasants (Indians) to some extent, it made it possible for them to accede to urban life, enter university and conceptualize upon the persisting discrimination and inequalities they suffered in this new environment.

Although the Revolution came to be almost despised by some of the more hardcore indianist thinkers later because of its conversion of Indian identities into peasants, Stefanoni seeks to recover its positive role from under the pile of shortcomings as it allows him to better comprehend the nature of the current process. He regards the current political experiment and many of the major Indian-based political organizations as having a very strong “*entronque histórico*” with the 52 Revolution, some sort of Indian actualization of the popular-national project carried on by the MNR. A closer look at the main projects attempted at that period and now do, indeed, lend support to the hypothesis, even if the official rhetoric wouldn’t admit it and prefer to talk about alternative civilization paradigms of ancestral good-living.

He rejects almost entirely these “*pachamamic*” (as he calls them) currents for lack of substance and a minimally viable political project that could dispute with the popular-national project in concrete terms beyond the mere rhetoric. Also, he seems to consider them as too idealistic and incapable of recognizing the multiple ways the Indian peoples came to evolve through time and to become what they are now: a complex set of population with multiple identities, influenced by long term memories of Indian exploitation, but also demographic and sociological shifts, exposed to the influences of modern trade unionism, Pentecostal churches, urban life and capital penetration. Although widely known, these changes have been extremely

under-theorized in terms of their implications for the constitution of Indian identities and their political mobilization in Bolivia.

Stefanoni also rescues as an important constitutive moment of the current Indian politics in Bolivia the almost entirely neglected experience of the *Conciencia de Patria* (CONDEPA) party of “compadre” Carlos Palenque, a mestizo radio presenter that became a political phenomenon in the altiplanic regions of La Paz and El Alto from the late 1980s until his death in 1997 for giving voice to urban indigenous masses and eliciting strong ties of identification. Although many of CONDEPA’s militants later came to become the core of the MAS’ urban bases in La Paz as the author points out, the party’s legacy is normally unrecognized by the ruling party and its experience of Indian empowerment is normally considered by the indianist intellectuality as one of Indian manipulation by demagogues. Symptomatically, it is a very similar accusation to the ones prompted against MAS itself and its cocacero social base time and time again.

Stefanoni rejects such criticism for failing to acknowledge the experience in its complex and more contradictory reality. As the critics dismiss them as mere cooptation (whose existence he does not deny), they fail to see that it did give channels of real empowerment that changed the actors perceptions of themselves and how they came to act in the world, just as with the 1952 Revolution and its agrarian reform. Failures are never complete and in being partial failures, they are also partial successes. Even short-lived experiences like Villarroel’s Indian Congress of 1945 that could not enforce the concrete policies it had proposed, such as the end to *pongueaje*, left durable marks and consequences in indigenous empowerment just for the sole fact of recognizing the Indian delegates as valid interlocutors with the national-state for the first time and sending them back to the communities as State agents for socialization of the discussions.

The book presents a good panorama of the evolution of the Indian issue in the country and is a very good starting point for those willing to understand it, but we come away from it with a certain feeling that although it gave us a good grasp, it could have deepened the discussion of certain important issues. The Katarist project of Indian identities recovery in the 1970s, for example, is discussed a bit too much *en passant*. The influence of international NGOs and the “multicultural mood” of the 1990s in the conformation of the Indian identities could have been developed in more detail, as well.

Also, hardly anything is said about the plurinational project for the State enshrined into the new Constitution of 2009, presumably because Stefanoni regards it as part of the pachamamic rhetoric without much concrete significance, but we cannot know for sure since it is not really discussed. But even if it were for that reason, it is still an important gap in the text since, one way or another; it is still the new fundamental law of the country and will bear significance in the political struggle and structures even if it is for its possible inconsistencies.

Readers would have profited greatly from a description of how the Magna Carta defines the indigenous actors and their collective rights and a discussion about how the complex identities of the really existing Indians will affect its implementation. How will the rights to communal land autonomy granted by the constitution affect the popular-national project of economic development and transport integration, for example? Those are complex questions we would have expected Stefanoni to deal with in his book and which are already starting to affect the Bolivian polity, as witnessed, for example but not only, in the recent conflict about the construction of a highway through the Isiboro Sécore National Park and Indigenous Land.

For those acquainted with Stefanoni's vast and rich bibliography about contemporary Bolivian politics, the end of the book might come as a bit repetitive, as it was declaredly based upon a previously published study of his, a minor problem that could have been mitigated if he had dealt with some of these unanswered questions in the section, as they obviously relate with the same main theme of Evo Morales and the MAS's version of indianism. But the merits of the book surpass vastly these minor flaws and convert it into a must-read for those willing to understand this complex and important moment of the country's history, which has attracted a lot of international attention and is certainly to be seen in the future as a deep constitutive moment in much the same magnitude as the 52 Revolution or the Chaco War.

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