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From Recognition to Implementation of Ethno-racial Justice: Contradictory Urban Indigenous Politics in Bolivia

How to promote inclusive and racially just cities which respect specific group rights represents one of the key urban challenges in the 21st century. The need to embrace racial diversity and difference is particularly important in Latin America where colonial and subsequent post-colonial regimes constructed indigenous peoples as inferior 'others' in regards of their race, culture and political status. Since Latin America's indigenous peoples are generally identified by both cultural and phenotypical characteristics it is legitimate to define them as ethno-racial group and their everyday politics as struggles for ethno-racial justice (Wade 1997).

Ethno-racial divisions in Latin America also have important spatial characteristics. Since the colonial conquest, the Latin American city was associated with a specific group of inhabitants – 'white' Spaniards or people of 'mixed blood' who were granted citizenship rights (Hardoy 1989). In contrast, the countryside was conceived of as indigenous place, home to the 'non-white' native population which was granted relative political autonomy over internal community affairs but denied citizenship and from living in cities (Platt 1982). While such strict ethno-racial rural-urban divides could never be fully sustained, they have been further blurred since the second half of the 20th century as previously isolated rural indigenous territories have been affected by urbanisation, and indigenous peoples have increasingly migrated from the countryside to the city. By the turn of the millennium 35 percent of the region's indigenous population lived in cities and this number is likely to rise to a majority by 2030 (UN-Habitat 2010).

The move to the city did not automatically lead to an improvement in indigenous peoples' living conditions. In fact, in a context of increasing indigenous urbanisation, previously established rural-urban ethno-racial divisions increasingly manifest themselves *within* urban areas. Indigenous peoples mainly reside in informal settlements situated in the urban periphery (Arbona and Kohl 2005). They remain disproportionately poorer than other urban residents and continue to be confronted by historically established patterns of exclusion and discrimination (del Popolo et al 2007; Rivera Cusicanqui 2010). In urban settings, indigenous peoples also tend to be outlawed from specific indigenous rights-based agendas ratified by international organisations and Latin American governments since the 1980s (UN-Habitat 2010).

This does not mean, however, that urban indigenous peoples represent passive victims of exclusion, discrimination, and spatial segregation. Instead, throughout the region urban indigenous peoples increasingly mobilise around their ethnic identities and engage in struggles for inclusion and ethno-racial justice (Bengoa 2000). This trend is particularly noteworthy in Bolivia where specific ethno-racial justice claims raised by indigenous peoples have been included in political and constitutional reforms (Horn 2017). Such changes are an important move towards achieving ethno-racial justice in Latin America as they reflect a first step towards the inclusion of indigenous peoples in spaces that have been historically defined by whiteness.

Bolivia, hence, represents an ideal country to explore what happens when ethno-racial justice claims are recognised by governments through political and legislative reforms. How is such legislation translated into urban policy and planning practice and how is it appropriated by indigenous subjects in their everyday life practices? Drawing on empirical illustrations from my own research in the Bolivian cities of La Paz and Santa Cruz¹, I outline potential answers to this questions. In doing so, my aim is not only to show what is already done by government and civil society actors to address urban indigeneity, but also to draw attention on what still needs to be done to achieve ethno-racial justice for indigenous peoples in Latin American cities.



Figure 1: Two Aymara women from Ovejuyo (a neighbourhood situated in La Paz's Southern periphery) waiting for a minibus to begin their two-hour journey to the Max Paredes district (a neighbourhood situated northeast of the city centre) where they work as street market vendors. Like these women, most indigenous residents in La Paz reside and work in peripheral neighbourhoods but not in the more 'white' urban core (Photo by Philipp Horn)

¹ The findings presented here derive from doctoral research on urban indigeneity in Bolivia and Ecuador, funded by the University of Manchester and conducted between 2011 and 2015, and from recent postdoctoral research on peri-urban land conflicts on urban indigenous territories in La Paz and Santa Cruz, Bolivia which was funded through a Small Research Grant by the Royal Geography Society.

State-led urban indigenous politics

In Bolivia, where 42 percent of the indigenous population lives in cities², urban indigenous peoples have been involved in a long struggle for political recognition and ethno-racial justice which escalated during the 2003 gas war in the ‘rebel city’ of El Alto. Here, indigenous peoples, in alliance with other dispossessed groups, not only resisted neoliberal reform policies but also advocated for recognition of their specific interests and needs (Lazar 2008; Harvey 2013). These events led to the ousting of a pro-neoliberal government. After a transition period, a new left-leaning government led by President Evo Morales, himself of indigenous descent, was elected. One of the first actions of Morales’s government was to confront patterns of ethno-racial discrimination and exclusion through constitutional reform. In 2009, Bolivia ratified a new constitution which recognises cities as urban intercultural communities composed of indigenous and other ethno-racial groups whose rights, interests and needs should be addressed in all policy sectors. The constitution also introduces a new intercultural, plurinational and decolonial development model which follows indigenous worldviews of *Vivir Bien*³ (in English: living well).

The idea that constitutional reform alters practice, however, ‘is a hypothesis, not an action’ (Flyvbjerg 2003: 325). This statement holds true for Bolivia where a gap remains between constitutional rhetoric on ethno-racially just cities and actual government practices which often ignore the collective rights of indigenous peoples⁴. Such gaps can, for example, be explained by the fact that government authorities continue to hold preconceived notions of cities as spaces in which indigenous rights do not apply. Here, it is worthwhile citing Bolivia’s deputy minister of indigenous justice (Interview, January 2013):

You can be Aymara or Quechua in the city but you are living in a modern legal environment. By contrast, in the countryside this is different. There you have a communitarian authority and you can rely on indigenous justice. There you have ancestral indigenous territories and you can have territorial autonomy and collective land rights. In the city, this is impossible because here we are governed by different rights.

This testimony replicates spatialised understandings established already by the Spanish colonisers more than three centuries ago whereby being indigenous is associated with rurality, community and tradition, but not with urban politics. Most national and city government officials interviewed in Bolivia shared such sentiments. It is, therefore, not surprising that collective rights for indigenous peoples outlined in Bolivia’s constitution remain unrecognized within cities. Instead, national and local government authorities simply treat indigenous peoples as ordinary urban residents (*vecinos*) and, following a liberal model of urban politics, consider them to be recipients of individual and universal rights to tenure, housing and basic services.

Yet some local government authorities (many of whom are indigenous urbanites themselves), have participated in struggles for more ethno-racially just urban politics. In 2009, for example, a group of elected councillors and administrative

² This information derives from the 2012 Bolivian census which can be accessed here: <http://censosbolivia.ine.gob.bo>.

³ Bolivia’s constitution can be accessed here: <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Bolivia/bolivia09.html>.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion on gaps between constitutional rhetoric and urban policy and planning practice see Horn (2017).

staff in La Paz formed the “intercultural unit”, a local government initiative focusing on the translation of Bolivia’s ambitious ethno-racial justice agenda outlined in the constitution. To achieve this, members of the “intercultural unit” co-produced an alternative city plan with indigenous civil society groups from across the city. This alternative city plan offers guidelines on how to implement specific indigenous rights in an urban context, including the right for collective ownership of rural territories affected by urbanisation, for prior consultation about interventions on indigenous territories, and for culturally appropriate healthcare. The “intercultural unit” already started implementing this plan. A new centre for traditional indigenous medicine which provides free healthcare for every urban resident was established in 2010. Dialogues were also commenced between the intercultural unit and municipal authorities to ensure that elements of the plan are mainstreamed into the work of relevant policy sector units. The director of the intercultural unit described these dialogues as beginning of a long-term struggle of confronting and changing established ‘planning truths’ which prioritise universal over indigenous rights (Interview, December 2016).

While the “intercultural unit” still struggles to achieve its full set of objectives for ethno-racial justice in La Paz, it represents a first initiative of a local government in Bolivia which challenges discriminatory and exclusive urban political structures.



Figure 2: Graffiti art in La Paz’s city centre depicting an Aymara woman with her child. It is through such art installations that indigenous peoples increasingly take over and transform a historically ‘white’ city (Photo by Philipp Horn)

Everyday indigenous urbanism

Not only government authorities, but ordinary urban indigenous peoples are also working to build to more inclusive and ethno-racially just urban spaces. As active planners of their own lives, they draw on a diverse array of formal and informal practices to address their specific interests and demands within the political environment that governs them.

In La Paz and Santa Cruz, urban indigenous residents mainly articulate their specific interests and demands through claims for land and public space. Such claims reflect distinct, and at times conflicting demands for resources, including financial (money generated from reselling land), physical (tenure as pre-condition for access to housing, water, electricity or roads), social (public space as site for community meetings), economic (land as source for agricultural activities), political (land rights, territorial autonomy rights) or cultural (festivals or art displays within public spaces) resources. Intra-group differences frequently complicate claims for land and public space. For example, some first-generation indigenous migrants have sought to revitalise rural traditions and ancestral dances during parades on the streets of their neighbourhoods, while, indigenous youth, born in the city and often lacking attachments to rural communities of origin, have been more likely to fuse indigenous traditions and languages with popular urban culture. This is visible during Aymara Rap shows that take place frequently on public squares throughout La Paz. These different emerging indigenous cultural practices, however, share that they seek to transform ethno-racially divided spaces. This is neatly summarised in a testimony by Maria⁵, an Aymara youth activist in La Paz (Interview, October 2016): 'Through our performances we take over a city which was always dominated by whites and *mestizos* [people of mixed race]. This is a conscious decolonial act by which we turn this city into an indigenous and intercultural place'.

The interests and needs of urban indigenous people are not only distinct but sometimes come in to conflict. This is evident in indigenous residents' underlying motivations for asserting the right to collectively manage and own rural territories affected by urban expansion – a claim which, as discussed previously, has been recognised in the intercultural unit's alternative city plan for La Paz. On the one side, indigenous residents have mentioned desires to preserve their territorial management rights to use the remainders of their land for agricultural purposes. Meanwhile, others highlight that they want to hold onto their collectively owned territories in the present context. Yet, in the long-term, with land value prices increasing as consequence of urbanisation, they aim to subdivide and sell this land for personal enrichment. This example illustrates that state-led planning is by no means the only problem for indigenous exclusion. Instead, the causes for such problems can equally be found within divided indigenous communities themselves⁶.

It is important to flag that the relationships between indigenous leaders, predominantly men, and ordinary urban indigenous residents are also not straightforward, but characterised by uneven power dynamics and conflicts of interest. Leaders play a crucial role in negotiating access to rights and services with national and local government. Yet, taking advantage of their role as brokers between state and community, they often prioritise addressing their own interests and those of close friends while ignoring other members of their community,

⁵ For purposes of anonymity, I have replaced the original names of research participants with pseudonyms.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion on land disputes within urban indigenous communities in Bolivia see also Postero (2006).

especially those of indigenous women and youth. Veronica, an indigenous youth activist from Santa Cruz, offers a succinct summary of this problem (Interview, November 2016):

For our leaders, indigenous community development means constructing a football pitch or getting permissions for old-fashioned dance events where the men can get drunk. As a young woman, I couldn't care less about yet another football pitch and another piss-up. But what can I do to change this if they don't give me a voice. Well, I must speak out elsewhere.

In Santa Cruz, young indigenous activists like Veronica are indeed raising their voice, especially within the different activities of their own indigenous youth collective *Los Jóvenes Indígenas Participamos* (Indigenous Youth Participates). This organisation hosts a weekly radio show in which young indigenous activists share their own personal stories of what it means to be indigenous in the city. The organisation also runs monthly public seminars in which indigenous women are invited to share their experiences of being young, female and aspiring urban indigenous leaders. In addition, with help from local NGOs, the organisation offers leadership and social media training events for indigenous youth, especially for girls and young women. Through all these activities organisations like *Los Jóvenes Indígenas Participamos* lay the groundwork for a new urban indigenous politics which not only confronts unjust government practices but equally condemns uneven and gendered power dynamics within urban indigenous communities themselves.

Towards ethno-racially just urban practices

The examples presented in this essay illustrate what is currently being done by government authorities and ordinary urban indigenous peoples to achieve ethno-racial justice in the city. They highlight that legislative reforms only represents the first step in a long process. Even in Bolivian progressive settings it is possible to identify a set of conflicting realities. The examples reveal how, in everyday life, urban residents who self-identify as indigenous express multiple and sometimes contradictory interests and claims for ethno-racial justice. This, perhaps, makes it difficult for government authorities to come up with a coherent political agenda on urban indigenous peoples. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, government authorities fail to implement constitutional reforms because they often remain guided by colonial and racialised understandings of indigeneity as rural category and anti-thesis to 'white' life in the city. Such (post)colonial continuities are not unique to Bolivia and Latin America. Similar trends have been observed in other urban settings such as South Africa where socio-spatial relations based around race and ethnicity introduced by the Apartheid regime are reproduced, in somewhat different ways, in the current post-Apartheid context (Lemanski, 2004; Miraftab, 2012). In order, then, to better understand and subsequently confront contemporary government practices of ethno-racial exclusion, activist scholars would do well by further engaging with the historical processes that have shaped and continue to shape these practices.

In Bolivia's complex and often contradictory political environment, certain organisations nevertheless continue laying the groundwork for a more inclusive, ethno-racially just, and decolonial urban politics. Cases like the intercultural unit show that ethno-racial justice struggles not only take place outside but within local governments. Meanwhile, the *Los Jóvenes Indígenas Participamos* experience

highlights that for ethno-racial justice struggles to be truly successful and transformative it is necessary to not only confront state-led practices of ethno-racial exclusion and internal colonialism. In addition, it is equally important to problematise patriarchy and intergenerational conflict within urban indigenous communities, factors which contribute to the trend that indigenous women and youngsters remain at the bottom of the ethno-racial hierarchy. Yet, to date, insufficient attention has been paid to such intra-community problems, mainly because indigenous women and youth are hardly recognised as leaders of ethno-racial justice movements and their voices are often not sufficiently taken into consideration in decision making processes at the city, national, and international level. This problem was, for example, raised in a regional forum of indigenous youth leaders from across the Latin American region, including Bolivia, which took place at the ‘Resistance to Habitat III’⁷ conference in Quito. Here, members of urban indigenous youth movements not only shared common problems but also exchanged different political strategies to confront locally varying patterns of ethno-racial exclusion.

Despite engaging in emerging regional platforms for ethno-racial justice, urban indigenous movements have so far not linked up with other urban indigenous groups that operate outside Latin America but are possibly involved in similar political struggles (Porter and Barry 2016; Walker and Barcham 2010). Moreover, hardly any transnational exchanges occur between urban indigenous movements in Latin America and other activist movements – such as black women’s groups struggling for land and housing in Brazil (Perry 2013), members of anti-eviction campaigns in the US and South Africa (Roy 2017), or organisations affiliated with Black Lives Matter (Derickson 2017) – that equally seek to reshape urban development and intra-group relations in ways that are racially just and inclusive. To conclude, then, I argue that the establishment of transnational alliances with other groups involved in struggles around racial justice in the city could benefit urban indigenous peoples in Latin America at least in two ways: Firstly, it would allow them to further learn from the successes and failures of other racial justice movements operating in different urban geo-political contexts. Secondly, by positioning their own political agenda as part of a common struggle for racial justice in the city, indigenous groups could possibly receive more international attention and support for their specific local struggles for ethno-racial justice, inclusion and decolonisation.

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⁷ The ‘Resistance to Habitat III’ conference occurred in parallel to the Habitat III summit in Quito and produced an alternative urban agenda. For more information see: <https://resistenciapopularhabitat3.org/>

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