

Fluvial Metaphors and the Politics of Place in Bolivia

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Abstract

This paper explores the changes encountered by the course of the Bolivian social imaginary. The case study of Bolivia allows me to construct the politics of place of this plurinational Latin American society: first, the rigid elitist dimension of the civic nation-state; second, a more fluid conversation about how ethnic diversity might be recognized without attributing it solely to the politics of the state. Since my paper moves from the civic nation into the analysis of national ethnicities, so do the metaphors that governed the imaginary of both realities. The confrontation between both types of nation also gave rise to the temporal conflict that takes center stage in my approach to a theory of locality. Consequently, the spatial organization of the nation-state will end up being challenged by the disorderly “non-contemporaneous” temporal nature of present-day ethnic movements.

Keywords: Nation–State, Ethnicities, “Spatialization of Time”, Locality, Mestizo Identities, Fluvial Metaphors

In his essay “Humanism in a Global World,” the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty introduces his vision of contemporary humanism with a phrase that helps explain the recent transformation in the social imaginary that was forged over the past century: “As we leave the shores of the 20th century to move into the uncharted waters of the twenty-first, we look behind to take our bearings for the future” (2009: 23). This observation weaves a suggestive spatial/temporal image, a provocative construction of fluvial metaphors that could be applied to the reality of Bolivia, one of the most interesting contemporary Latin American societies due to the political significance of its present-day ethnic movements. Indeed, by leaving behind the 20th century, and by moving into the “uncharted waters” of the twenty first, we are capable of distinguishing the metaphorical construction for the two explanatory processes of the course of the Bolivian social imaginary: first, the developmentalist and pedagogical dimension of the nation-state; second, a more fluid conversation about whether, and how, cultural diversity might be recognized without attributing it solely to the politics of the state. Let’s call this the

“dimension of deterritorialization.” By “deterritorialization,” I mean a cultural flow that contemplates the metaphorical displacement of the pedagogical dimension of the nation-state. This imaginary event does not only express the shifting of terrestrial spaces, but the “whole landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live” (Appadurai 1966: 33). I am talking here of a “society in movement” (Zibechi 2006), of an “ethnoscape” (Appadurai 33) that is changing the politics of the Bolivian nation to a hitherto unprecedented degree. While a lot could be said about the cultural politics of deterritorialized nations and the large question of displacement that it expresses, it is appropriate to reinforce here the idea that the term is not only a reflection on migratory forces, on the shifting of spaces, but a question of the temporal asynchronies that affect the relationship between indigenous and mestizo identities. As we will see later on, this relationship is in Bolivia an embattled one. It is possible to say that in this country the nation and the state have become one another’s projects. They are at each other’s throat and the hyphen that links them implies a disjunction rather than a conjunction. This disjunctive relationship may be detected through the battle of the imagination, beyond the nation-state and its pedagogical dimension. Fluvial metaphors, I believe, are at the core of this debate.

1. The Nation's Developmentalist and Pedagogical Dimension

The developmentalist and pedagogical dimension of the nation-state was dominant in Andean societies (Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia) for most of the twentieth century. The developmentalist concept was imbricated in the construction of the “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), the prime organizing principle of the nation since the early nineteenth century. This order of events remains controversial to this day. In Bolivia, it is no coincidence that a relatively unpublicized study by its Constituent Assembly Coordinating Unit (UCAC) recently traced the source of the country’s current political conflict to “differing concepts of the nation, among which there are two prevailing definitions that influence contemporary public discourse: the civic nation and the ethnic nation” (Mayorga and Molina Barrios 2005: 31).

Since these definitions derive from different traditions—the civic nation corresponds to the French model of voluntarism, while the ethnic nation arises from the German organicist model—political scientists themselves are unable to agree on which of the two types of nation should take precedence in their analyses. The civic nation highlights the construction of the “imagined community,” the changes introduced by mass media, and the geo-spatial shifts that are experienced over time that give rise to historicism, that is, to developmentalist thought. Without necessarily opposing the social imaginary of modernity,

the ethnic nation explores the traditions (sometimes calling them “preexisting situations”) that make it necessary to think the nation from a “organicist ethnic-genealogical spirit hailing back to the ancestral community, respectful of blood and language” (ibid: 32).

It is thus problematic, though not impossible, to think that both concepts—the traditional and the modern—can be complementary; that both can come together peacefully in the building of the nation-state; that both the organization of the modern community of citizens, founded on binding rules, and that of the cultural community, based on ancestral rituals and languages, can join forces to seek the common good. Reality, however, always resisted taking them both as equivalent. The confrontation between tradition and modernity gave rise to the temporal conflict that takes center stage in this essay.

Obviously, any view of locality must take place in both space and time; no space exists outside of time, nor time without space. In my perception of locality, however, I argue that the “spatialization of time,” that is, prioritizing the analysis of “space” over the concept of “time,” which is now being questioned by anthropologists and ethnologists, privileges the “territoriality” of civic institutions over the analysis of ethnic traditions that are localized in different senses of times. Following Harry Harootunian, I call them non-contemporary temporal registers.¹⁾ Later on, I will pay special attention to the

growing effort to make identities “flow” like calm, orderly rivers, without letting this effort at postmodern explanation of identity observe with equal care the fact that the new constructions of identity flow in tumultuous, disorderly streams, like those “currents” and “corners” of time that Ernst Bloch (1991: 106) and Reinhart Koselleck (2004) theorized about under the rubric of “the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous.”

I agree with studies that analyze movement between “porous” spatial boundaries, because they show how rural life has been turning into urban life; at the same time, however, it worries me that the subject of temporality might be set aside, for its relative abandonment and subordination to reflections on space continues to affect social and historical analyses. The spatial turn seen in some recent research on the “refounding” of the Bolivian nation is related to the importance taken on by migratory movements. This social event leads me to think that the “spatialization of time,” regulated by modernization and

1) The “spatialization of time” is one of the most important characteristics of modernity. It is a “ghostly and spectral” cultural form that conceals the past time built into its production. In tension with the synchronic production of space, time is asynchronous: it revives earlier images of the presence of the capitalist mode of production. These are “preexisting” images that create conflict because they contradict the spatial metaphor of expanding, developing society. When they are connected with space on a plane of equality, the condensation of time gives rise to the presence of “the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous.” To show that such “non-contemporaneous” concepts exist is to prove that the capitalist system desynchronizes things and produces inequalities. On this, see Harry Harootunian’s essay “Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem” (2005).

development, conceals the temporal asynchronies, the conflict-ridden times, which are so forcefully suggested by the social migrations taking place right now in the world in which we live.

As the relationship between space and time should be of key importance to those who wish to impart a balanced meaning to reality (Harootunian 2005), it seems to me that an analysis of reality can only bear fruit if it pays attention to what Bloch has described in these terms: “The *objectively* non-contemporaneous element is that which is distant from and alien to the present; it thus embraced *declining remnants* and above all an *unrefurbished past* which is not yet ‘resolved’ in capitalist terms” (1991:108, emphasis in original). I think it is also important to bear in mind Bloch’s assertion about history: “history is no entity advancing along a single line, in which capitalism for instance, as the final stage, has resolved all the previous ones; but is a polyrhythmic and multi-spatial entity, with enough unmastered and as yet by no means revealed and resolved corners” (1991: 62).

2. Towards a “Theory of Locality”

Keeping in mind Bloch’s observations on history, there are three “beyond” I wish to discuss as ways to envision an ethos that attends to the voices, the daily practices, the forms of memory, and the strategies of mobilization that societies in movement have devised to counteract domination. There is a

necessity to reflect on reality beyond, among others, three well-entrenched liberal concepts of modernity: an “imagined community”; a homogeneous citizenship based on individual rights, and the existence of the nation-state itself.

Let me start with the concept of the nation, nowadays too easily interpreted as an “imagined community.”

Rereading the classics in the social sciences, one begins to notice that even authors who analyze social reality from the perspective of class struggle tend to interpret societies as organic “wholes,” subject to rules of analysis that reinforce the criteria of unity and homogeneity through which human events are usually evaluated. The same is true when, as often occurs in the study of post-colonial societies, a historical analysis ignores the deep ethnic and social divisions that mark political life in nations like Bolivia. Similarly, concepts as important to the study of social organizations as “national culture” are based on a straightforward assumption of a supposed national cohesiveness that simply does not correspond to reality. This is a debatable Hegelian-style European model proclaiming the lineal, enlightened construction of modernity, which after overcoming all the obstacles that present-day reality has strewn in its path, will necessarily lead to the future social utopia, be it capitalist or socialist. This inalterable course of historical events, this linear path to seizing control of the state, is based on a profound conviction that the various historical and economic cycles will

follow, one after another, without ever casting doubt on the lineal and progressive character of History.

As I reflect upon the discourse surrounding the Andean nation - which, because it deals with the collective organization of the people, is the most important discourse in the enlightened construction of modernity—I notice that, when critics talk about imagining the nation, they rarely take the complex relationship between nation and ethnicity into account as they should. In other words, it is important to ask oneself whether an explanation of the nation also calls for an ethnic component, or whether the nation itself, unmoored from any situation predating its own organization, is the sole source of nationalism. To my way of understanding, the nation, approached from the local, can only be theorized in strict relationship with the theme of ethnicity, which is linked to profound cultural conflicts that influential thinkers on modernity have ignored. For Benedict Anderson (1983), the origin of the nation lies in a “print-capitalist” nationalism that emerged from the sphere of the educated elite. It overlooks or minimizes the local conflicts revealed by ethnic differences entrenched in oral traditions.

The “persistence of ‘then’ within ‘now,’ Ernst Bloch’s happy definition of the simultaneous and conflictive presence of the non-modern into the historical time of modernity (Bloch [1918] 1990: 129), can be seen in the stubborn present of “ethnic identities on the move” (Zibechi 2009). These identities,

uncomfortably grafted into the project of Latin American nation-building, are left unexplored in Anderson's construction of his "imagined communities."

Forged from the point of view of the lettered elites, this imaginary community comes under harsh criticism in a brief review by subalternist historian Ranajit Guha (1985). The validity of Anderson's thesis is based, as I have indicated, on a foundation of print-capitalism, which from Guha's point of view carries a problematic colonialist touch. If we were to overlook the fact that the spread of Western liberal ideas organized the political nationalism of the colonized peoples, Guha argues that we could fall into the error of ignoring the stubborn nationalism of the masses.

According to Guha, in societies where the peasantry is a major social force and with unmistakable politics (Bolivia fits perfectly in Guha's scheme), traditional values that clash with liberal culture prone ideas and with the political aspirations of the bourgeoisie are often set aside and given no importance. Omitting this experience of nationalism makes it impossible for Anderson to set out a more balanced explanation of the "origins" of the nation. Guha declares that reducing the language to an expression of print-capitalism is problematic for two reasons: first, because it ignores of everyday spoken language; second, because it uncritically accepts the discourse about modernity and the historical time that establishes it.

Guha's argument against basing the discourse of the nation exclusively on linear time is convincing. In Bolivia, if we take into account the multiple times the indigenous rebellions have haunted the construction of the nation, there are moments in national history when the community's self-image ceases to line up with the horizon of expectations in modernity. These are moments when the community returns to itself and follows a cyclical time, quite unlike the time of the flow of history. Historical time has its setbacks, its lapses, which participate in aspects of millenarianism, of utopianism, and which function as "resources of the present" that call the triumphal march of history into question.

A second "beyond" has to do with my long-standing concern with how Latin American social science promoted institutional "engineering" in the recent past. For social science concentrated in exploring modern "governability," social movements were anomalous destabilizing forces, alien to democratic institutionalization and incapable of adjusting to the new formal representative political arena. The "Water War" and the "War on Gas" revealed later on what Bolivian political technocrats were missing all along: a solid understanding of how ethnic identities on the move had been contributing to the relations between culture and politics within the struggle for democracy.

Let me now explore the third and last "beyond" I wish to

discuss throughout the last part of this essay. The redefinition of citizenship, which is no longer confined within the limits of the relationship with the state, but must be established within civil society itself, must move beyond the conceptualization of the nation-state. Pushed to the extreme, “beyond the nation-state” means “the total transformation of liberal society” (Pazi Paco, 2005), the end to the hegemony of liberal modernity, based on the notion of formal rights and representative democracy, and the activation of communal forms of organization based on indigenous practices. But only a society in movement, where autonomous social actors get to play, like in Bolivia, an important cultural and political role, might they be able to push the social formation towards the elusive goal of post-liberalism. In this respect, Arturo Escobar argues cogently that “beyond the nation-state” also means moving beyond the “Right-Left” political spectrum. It means entertaining the idea of a space where decolonial politics and post-liberalism emerge “as two aspects of the process by which some groups in Bolivia are imagining, and perhaps constructing “worlds and knowledges otherwise” (Escobar 2010: 24).

As Walter D. Mignolo has theorized in his studies on “local histories” (Mignolo 2000), and Pablo Mamani reflected in his studies on Bolivian indigenous autonomies (2008), “worlds and knowledges otherwise” implies a great political, cultural, ideological, and territorial organization between the indigenous

and the popular. For Mamani, the new scheme would mean that “the indigenous appears as the orienting matrix of the project, whereas the popular constitutes the ideological matrix of the new political articulation” (2008: 23). From the Aymara intellectual perspective, the indigenous-popular world in movement sets in motion a steady process of social reconstruction from the local and the communal to the regional and the national. While the dominant project aims at reconstructing the social order from the heights of the state, the indigenous-popular project goes “beyond the nation-state” to focus on the people mobilized as a turbulent multiplicity –the metaphor expressing this turbulence, this rush of people, is “avalanche”—and on the actions of a communal social machine which disperses the forms of power of the state machine (Escobar 2010: 29; Zibechi 2006: 161).

3. Deterritorialization and Metaphors of Flowing

Leaving the territorial boundaries of modernity behind, it is time to return to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s assertion that we have now sailed “into the uncharted waters of the twenty-first” century. Questions remain about the telos of modernity and preoccupations with development and with the old pedagogical policies that, in the case of Bolivia, derive from both the oligarchic-liberal state and from the reformist nationalism of the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the “uncharted

waters” themselves have headed off in a different direction in present-day Bolivia. They’ve moved beyond the sensory and territorialized dimension of *mestizaje* - the political ideology of modern national unity, and social progress— associated with the 1952 revolution, which introduced the social suture between the civic and the ethnic, but kept the privileged cultural, linguistic, and political status of ruling elites. What is this new kind of flow that modifies the mestizo representation of society?

After three decades of predominance in the Bolivian social imaginary, in the mid-1980s “revolutionary nationalism” and its homogenizing version of *mestizaje* fell into a deep political and moral decadence. As social scientist and journalist Pablo Stefanoni recently wrote: “It was, paradoxically, the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR) itself that proposed, in the midst of the economic collapse brought on by hyperinflation and the rise of neoliberalism in Latin America and around the world, abandoning state capitalism” (2010: 117). Indeed, this exchange of state capitalism for economic liberalism, which in Stefanoni’s words had already been “perfected” by the skills of mining entrepreneur Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, dominated the neoliberal political agenda.

Combining the recipes of the Washington Consensus with a heavy dose of multiculturalism, triumphant neoliberalism allowed for a series of initiatives to incorporate the “multiethnic, plurilingual, and multicultural” character of the Bolivian nation.

These were the Law of Popular Participation, which gave rise to autonomous municipal governments and indigenous municipal districts; the Education Reform of 1995; and the introduction of single-member districts elected by plurality vote (*diputaciones uninominales*). Stefanoni describes this process as an “attempted ‘passive revolution’ in the face of growing ethnic demands, within the framework of a process of technocratic democratization” (Stefanoni 2010: 118). These neoliberal reforms were expressed above all in popular participation, which “transferred great sums of money to the rural municipalities and opened up new political opportunities for rural workers’ unions to jump into institutional politics” (ibid.).

The field of education was not ignored. To the contrary, it once more became an important space for the national imagination. Indeed, the new Education Reform act proposed “to reinforce the national identity by exalting the historical and cultural values of the Bolivian nation in all its multicultural and multiregional richness.” In order to achieve this multiculturalism, the reform needed “to overcome distances and isolation and build the nation based on an intercultural vision of reality.” Before neoliberalism appeared on the scene, the dominant pedagogy was that of the territorial nation-state, which put development before diversity; in its neoliberal version, diversity balanced cultural matters against economic development. Thus, the displacement of pedagogical policies since the 1980s have been

the new ways of navigating waters that, as we will see, have been filled with conflict since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the Bolivian case, I think that it was linked to the new trajectory taken by the iconic model of *mestizaje*, separated now from its modernity-based developmentalist discourse. I turn now to this displacement, which I will link to major migratory forces not considered heretofore; then I will connect it with one of the most interesting “deterritorialized” readings of the present, which was set forth by the economist Carlos Toranzo Roca, a sharp-eyed researcher of the pluricultural and multilingual face of Bolivia today.

The pluricultural and multilingual facet that was promoted during the neoliberal phase of the 1990s gave rise to a singular experience related to ethnicity that changed the course of Bolivian society. This sudden turn in favor of “pluri-multi” diversity was very handy for neoliberalism, because it helped weaken the nationalist state that had preceded it. Its “participative” face, which promoted popular culture, made the new system much easier to digest and allowed progressive sectors to swell the ranks of neoliberalism. By offering a more equitable division of wealth among the various ethnic groups, the neoliberal reforms also helped the indigenous communities and peasant unions to make use of and subsume “into their corporative and communal logics the Popular Participation Act, which was set up to expand liberal democratic institutionality

into the rural area” (Stefanoni 2010: 120).

During these years of neoliberalism’s triumph it became very clear that there was a newly constituted cholo-mestizo elite. (Cholos are persons of Indian origin who live among mestizos and have been partially integrated into the white Spanish-speaking culture). This new elite was composed of people who owed their rise in society to their successful entrance into the market.²⁾ In this way, the “discovery of the cholo” was closely related to the growing power acquired by a sui generis bourgeoisie, that is, by an ascendant social sector that had resulted from one of the great paradoxes produced by the 1952 revolution: the growth of state capitalism, which did not manage to create a solid industrial bourgeois but instead brought about, beginning in the 1970s, an urban sector formed of migrants from the countryside who worked in smuggling and informal commerce. The strongest portion of this booming sector was organized into this “cholo bourgeoisie,” which, significantly, did not abandon its indigenous cultural roots.

The suggestive intellectual work of Carlos Toranzo Roca, in my opinion the most important promoter of “pluri-multi” discourse,

2) Ximena Soruco Sologuren’s recent work (2011) shows the repercussions that the weakness of the elites in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had on the mestizo sectors. The rise of that sector, which according to Soruco has not yet received the attention it deserves from official historians, reveals an intense process of accumulation. Indeed, the emergence of modernity, understood as a process of constituting criollo identity with its Darwinist discourse and purity campaigns, made it impossible to see the rise of the cholos, with their aesthetic codes and cultural affiliations.

covers the deterritorializing viewpoint of this neoliberal moment that has made the cholo so particularly visible. Toranzo states about one of his own books:

Lo pluri-multi o el reino de la diversidad (1993) is not a sociological, political, culturalist, or ethnological analysis; it contains not a drop of academic research or conceptual debate. It was, above all, a descriptive essay that showed how Bolivian society, including its elites and its peasants (in 1993 it wasn't time yet to insist on their being indigenous or first peoples), was the product of a historical process of five centuries of mestizoization, of building many mestizajes, dozens of them (2009: 51-52).

The books that Toranzo wrote in past decades were essays describing reality that he targeted at local elites, in the hopes that they, who loved to define themselves as “criollos”(Spanish Americans of pure European stock), might understand that they were actually the products of the long process of mestizaje brought about by Bolivian history. Moreover, Lo pluri-multi o el reino de la diversidad was

an indictment of homogeneities. Though it described the process of mestizoization, it did not speak of a single type of mestizo; that is, it departed from the homogenizing culturalist model of the 1952 Revolution, which understood that revolutionary history was going to construct only one model, a single, monocultural model of mestizaje. Just as it differed from the revolutionary MNR [Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario, the leading political party after 1952], it also stood apart from the Soviet revolutionaries who intended to construct a different sort of homogeneity, the proletariat, while killing or obscuring every shade of diversity, or covering up the

heterogeneities that were being cultivated every day and that continue to do so everywhere in the world. (2009: 52)

It is suggestive that Bolivian reality still makes it necessary to keep “thinking” *mestizaje*. Note, however, that doing so now calls for a very different viewpoint. Indeed, Toranzo reinforced his conclusions from Lo pluri-multi o el reino de la diversidad in his article “Repensando el *mestizaje* en Bolivia” (Rethinking *Mestizaje* in Bolivia) (2009: 45-61), one of the most interesting essays in ¿Nación o naciones en Bolivia? (Nation or Nation(s) in Bolivia), an anthology commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the graduate program in Development Sciences (CIDES) at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés and edited by the social scientist Gonzalo Rojas Ortuste.

“Rethinking” *mestizaje* means bearing in mind that racial differences, which were supposedly superseded by modernization and the rationalization of the state, are not a bygone matter but, to the contrary, continue to hold the interest of intellectuals today. At bottom, we can say that “*mestizaje*,” the homogenizing view of reality that seemingly cured Bolivia of the racial “illness” that had ailed it, has now reappeared with unexpected force under the name of “the mestizo nation.” The need to rethink *mestizaje* shows that the mestizo nation, just as it had been thought by last century’s pedagogical policies, had to be reinterpreted by various sorts of new demands related to ethnicity, gender, the generations, regions, labor sectors, and so

on. Therefore, at the end of the last century there were calls for studying the formation of “multiple mestizajes” (Toranzo 2009: 45). Indeed, Toranzo argued, by the 1990s “closing your eyes to the hundreds of mestizajes in this country simply means closing your eyes to the majority of Bolivians” (ibid.).

But studying these “multiple mestizajes” or describing their long process in Bolivia, as Toranzo does in his recent essay, means being very aware that historical construction “is not linear but iterative, sometimes with moments full of violence” (2009: 46) that fill the process with “tonalities” that cannot be taken as homogeneous regularities, but as heterogeneities that require periodic reinterpretation. The reader should note, however, that reinterpreting does not mean starting all over from scratch. As Toranzo says, “the idea of starting from scratch is fallacious, just as it is wrong to think that political phenomena begin from zero, as if they had never had any historical antecedents” (ibid.). At bottom, Toranzo is suggesting the ordered flow in which mestizajes displace and mimic each other, as identities that “are constructed from the amalgam of past, present, and dreams of the future” (ibid.). Therefore, this flow of identities contains the traces, good or bad, of the history that marks such processes. To deny them—as Toranzo says occurs in the cultural politics of today’s plurinational state, which promotes an indianismo that neglects and subalternizes the existing mestizajes—only makes it more difficult to see reality

clearly. Given that “the” Bolivian identity cannot exist as a singular fact, Toranzo insists on mestizo *identities*, plural, to reestablish the need to construct a “common we” that can change the direction of the Republic of Bolivia, wrongly described by the current government as a “plurinational state.”

Now, the displacement of these mestizajes, their flowing in time, removes them from the terrain of pedagogy, from the “hard boundary” imposed by the “revolutionary nationalism” of the early 1950s. For Toranzo, this nationalist model had not lost its relevance, but it had changed in the flow of time. He concludes that we Bolivians, whether rural or urban, are “facts of community and a presence of diversities” (2009: 49). We Bolivians, however, have changed iconic models (the phenomenon of identities being, basically, movement), a fact that I would like to emphasize in particular, because it constitutes one of the most important observations in this essay, one that would surely have been ignored by a different reading, purely sociological in bent, that paid no attention to representation. I will concentrate, then, on this change, this “metaphor of flowing,” which now represents identities from a very different viewpoint.

Reading a book by the Argentine historian Ignacio Lewkowicz, who has dedicated himself to the study of contemporary subjectivity (2004), I am reminded of the fact that we often talk about the “stream of consciousness,” but we don’t realize that we are using a metaphor that displaces itself in a very peculiar

way: flowing like a stream, like a river that changes and is never the same. Thought of from its banks, Lewkowicz tells us, “the river is the image of fluidity conceived as ‘change’ into which we cannot ‘step twice’” (2004: 235). But if everything in the river changes, the transformation follows an ordered, permanent meaning: a source, a course, and an outlet. Thus, “the river is the meaning of the water between its source and its outlet” (ibid.).

This image of the river’s ordered fluidity gives us a way to “rethink” *mestizaje*, because Toranzo uses this very image to explain, as I have noted, how “everything flows in time” because “no one is identical to what he was in the past” (2004: 50). Toranzo uses this Heraclitan metaphor to express the opening of the *mestizo* nation to historical processes that are much more complex, that leave no one unscathed, petrified in his original state: “No, there are no exactly identical copies in history; this is valid for all of society, even its elites, who have also changed over time” (2004: 58). The result of all historical processes is that no one is identical to what he was in the past. There cannot be, then, “an” unchanging *mestizo* nation, but rather a historical process, a flowing of races in permanent change. Note, however, that this flow of *mestizajes* has an end, an exact outlet: the nation and the republic.

The interesting but problematic aspect of this fluid multicultural construction of identities is precisely the

postulation of the possible “common we” that can mediate our acts. This mediation can make it possible to administer real conflicts in such a way as to remove and resolve (miraculously, it must be said) the difficulty of constructing the human community. These same conflicts only deepen when they are determined and preceded by many demands of an ethnic nature.

At this point in the analysis, I should note that the ordered flow of identities is quite separate from the fact that the contemporary condition is configured, as Lewkowicz puts it, “between two different sorts of movements: on one hand, the collapse of the state; on the other, the construction of a subjectivity that inhabits that collapse” (2004: 220). And these distinct forms of subjectivity that grow up in the collapse of the state become a very different “we” than the one Toranzo assumes as a synthesis of the trajectory followed by identity construction. Lewkowicz describes it as a “contingent we” (2004: 277). The contingent we is “the pronoun of quick joy, the proper name of the unruly fiesta and of the state on the verge of dissolution” (2004: 231).

Where did this imprecise, strange, and precarious “we” originate? Given the “collapse” of the institutionality of the state, it seems to have come about quite unexpectedly, forming on street corners and in plazas, in assemblies that apparently left people with a new way of thinking. This “we” is the result of a different way of conceptualizing fluidity, because, given the

collapse of the state, it corresponds to the dispersion of the contents for lack of a container. It is the water that flows like an uncontrollable, “uncharted” torrent, with no outlet and no dam that could contain it. I speak of troubled waters that can change, can transform the ordered course of identities, such as Toranzo has thought them. Indeed, the “metaphor of the river,” affirmed as it is in the flow of the historical process, ignores those “corners” that come from the past to create turbulence in the tranquil waters of *mestizajes*. It seems to me that this metaphor does not represent the avalanches of water and earth that come smashing down the current when rivers rise and flood. In other words, the “metaphor of the river” ignores the “ruins,” the “whirlpools of the past” that disturb our present because they correspond to a beyond and to a before that is suddenly rediscovered; a past that cannot be rationalized and that is useless for predicting the future. This “beyond” and this “before” that the “metaphor of the river” conceals is the “here” that, when it is present, feeds on our sleepless but fragmented memory. It is the “now” that runs just as it burrows vertically into a dense time that accumulates without synthesizing the experiences that I call “the embers of the past” (Sanjinés 2009), product of a circular, mythical time that had been left behind, but that continues to disturb the present with anger and with violence. I speak, then, of postponed longing, sunk in memory, which, as they bob to the surface, take on new and sudden

social and political importance, giving rise to a “contingent consciousness” that, unlike proletarian consciousness, is the point of departure for the historical earthquake that we are now experiencing. Avalanches, earthquakes, turbulence: all are incorporations of the remote past that the “metaphor of the river,” in its ordered and tranquil flow, manages not to notice. Through these incorporations appear the social movements that today play a specific role in the dynamics of the social whole. The avalanche and turbulence express the return of the multitude, of the plebeians. In this connection it seems useful to follow the path left by the “multitude form of the politics of vital necessities,” the topic and title of an essay by Raquel Gutiérrez, Álvaro García Linera, and Luis Tapia, who describe in detail the “wave of humanity” (2000: 162) that the multitude generates.

“Forma multitud de la política de las necesidades vitales” (Multitude-Form of the Politics of Vital Necessities) is the last essay in a book on the “return of the plebeian” that these three authors wrote. It amply reveals the changes that took place in Bolivia at the end of the twentieth century and the opening of the twenty-first. Actually, the events of April, 2000, marked the beginning of the “collapse” of the nation-state, the crisis of the neoliberal system, and the emergence of the “contingent we” described by Lewkowicz.

The first months of 2000 saw the city of Cochabamba, located in the Bolivian hinterlands, become the epicenter of one of the

most important social rebellions in Latin America in our time, the “Water War.” Between January and April of that year, the Coordinadora del Agua y de la Vida (Water and Life Coalition) was formed, a new organization without institutional precedents, and successfully opposed the privatization of the city’s water system under a neoliberal law passed in late 1999, which would have transformed water from a public good into a commodity.

This coalition brought together the associations of irrigation farmers of the high Andean valleys, the Federation of Cochabamba Manufacturers, the middle-class professional schools, the coca unions, and the members of the highland *ayllus* (indigenous communities), forming, according to the authors of this essay, “an organizational structure with new voices” who expressed the discontent of a “plebeian multitude” who represented themselves in a vast and spontaneous street assembly (Gutiérrez, García Linera, and Tapia 2000: 150). It was their “plebeian density” (ibid.: 154) that “swirled through the streets, plazas, and avenues” like a “human torrent” (ibid.: 163), giving rise to an unprecedented “deliberative council” (ibid.: 154). This multitude, which “overflowed the streets until it reached the city center” (ibid.: 157) was not a traditional union structure but a multitude composed for the most part of “agrarian blockaders, humble men and women from the outskirts of the city” (ibid.: 139). The multitude that gathered in Cochabamba in April, 2000, rising up to demand respect for their “customs and

traditions" (ibid.: 136), was a "centripetal pressure" (ibid.: 143) spontaneously invented by the mechanism—strange and precarious for any traditional political organization—of an assembly gathered on the streets and plazas of the city. As Lewkowicz put it with reference to the "contingent we," "the assembly first needed to gather on street corners or in plazas to think in this fashion. And even if it were later dissolved or weakened as an effective assembly, this modality of thinking remained. The assembly is the effective mechanism for the we" (2004: 221).

This renovated modality of thinking also called for a new metaphor that could express it more appropriately. I refer to the "avalanche," the "eddies" and "corners," that is, to the flowing metaphor of the uncharted here and now that is the present. The "avalanche" is the violent accumulation of asynchronicities, of conflicting, non-contemporaneous times that break from the ordered vision of history. Distanced from the beaches, the safe coastlines of modernity, and from the river that represents and contains them; thought from a different point of enunciation in conflict with the nation, the "metaphor of the avalanche," of turbulence, overflows, as did the "water warriors" in the social confrontations of the year 2000. The essay we have been citing about the "multitude form" goes on to reconstruct the days that followed the event that kicked off Bolivia's contemporary era: the "Water War."

For these essayists, the “water warriors” who “descended on the city under the leadership of their indigenous authorities” did not temporize, but instead “swept away the mestizo elite in power” (Gutiérrez, García Linera, and Tapia 2000: 168). A “human wave that overwhelmed the state” (ibid.: 162), made up of cholos and campesinos like the revolutionary wave of 1952 that René Zavaleta Mercado described so vividly in Bolivia: el desarrollo de la conciencia nacional (Bolivia: The Development of National Consciousness) (1990 [1967]), the “water warriors” constituted “the intense aroma of the crowd who transformed the use of urban space in response to their sense of collective force and pride in movement” (Gutiérrez, García Linera, and Tapia 2000: 154). Thus, the dense avalanche of the insurgent plebeians of Cochabamba was the “multitude form” that, “spreading like water” (ibid.: 155), flooded everything, even the terrains that neoliberalism had depoliticized.

It is very suggestive that the authors of the essay on “the multitude form” concluded their piece on present-day Bolivia, on plebeian Bolivia, by referring to it as the “high tide mark of the politics of vital necessities” (ibid.: 177), a metaphor that alters the ordered flow of the river waters and reveals their torrential and disorderly outlet into the sea. If the river is the endless flow, the endless becoming of mestizo identities, the “high tide mark” seems to be the contingent beginning of new social actors who no longer flow in an ordered way but quite the contrary,

becoming the wave, the avalanche, the torrential current, the high tide and the line of driftwood it leaves behind, the everlasting beginning-over, the collapse of the sense of the stream and of the democratic institutions it represents.

A significant fact about this “human wave” at the dawn of the twenty-first century, which the essayists celebrate for its multitudinarios force, was its discovery of the weakness of the neoliberal mestizo state, particularly its discovery of the progressive loss of its “symbolic” capacity, its unifying function. To keep itself in power, the state had to resort to armed violence. The actions of the neoliberal state began to lose legitimacy in the eyes of people on the inside and the outside, but especially for those who were called upon to carry out the arbitrary commands of power. In this way, the “human wave that overwhelmed the institutions of the state” (ibid.: 162) began the new, uncertain, “uncharted” cycle of “plebeian democracy,” whose “high tide” would inundate the spaces formerly depoliticized by the ruling system, and would once more open up the old nationalist schemes that seemed to have vanished with the neoliberal wave.

Having reached this point, I do not want to end my reflections on Bolivian locality without mentioning that the essay on the “multitude form”³⁾ concludes with a reminder that if one

3) Its antecedent is an essay, “Forma clase y forma multitud en el proletariado minero en Bolivia” (Class Form and Multitude Form in the Bolivian Mining Proletariat), that Zavaleta Mercado wrote in late 1970 in a less celebratory

function of the “return of the plebeian” was the “rehabilitation of the customs and traditions of the oppressed” (ibid.: 177), another function was to bring into the present day Marx’s old dream that “the archaic” would return to modernity under superior conditions, giving renovated use to communal agrarian structures. Thus the essay reminds us that “two far-reaching social projects remain standing: political and economic self-rule, and the widened community or *ayllu*” (ibid.). These are “the two discursive axes of the multitude in action” (ibid.).

We are now well aware that the reign of capital was not overthrown in Bolivia—we have returned instead to state capitalism—and that the production of a new horizon of communal self-rule is farther off each day. The current limitations on the “multitude form,” which no longer seems to correspond to the flowing metaphor of high tide but rather to the line of flotsam that marks how high it reached, shows the uncertain direction of indigenous campesino nationalities that call upon their customs and traditions to defend themselves from the very same plurinational state that, as it grows more invasive and authoritarian, contravenes the norms set by its own constitution and by international treaties to which Bolivia is a signatory.

In conclusion, the “deterritorializing dimension” that supposedly explains our expansive and complex present has serious

tone (Zavaleta Mercado 1983).

disadvantages for charting the future. This dimension sends us back to the doubts that Chakrabarty set out at the beginning of his essay on humanism. Without a genuine commitment to difference, there can be no dialogue, nor can a “culture of integration” be established. But the new dialogue will never become reality if we remain unable to integrate the baggage of our indigenous experience. This dialogue will have to be carried out in open communication with an ancestral home that, far from remaining static and petrified in its past, must also experience the modernizing changes of the present.

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