

Human Rights and the Rights of Nature: The Displacements of Social Metaphor in Bolivia

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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 has been forged over the past century: “As we leave the shores of the twentieth century to move into the uncharted waters of the twenty-first, we look behind to take our bearings for the future” (23). This observation weaves a suggestive spatial/temporal image, calling for a shift in one term of its fluvial metaphor before it can be applied to the reality of Bolivia. If we change “shores” to “borders,” while leaving the phrase “uncharted waters” intact, we will have a much more precise metaphorical construction for the two explanatory processes of the course of the Bolivian social imaginary, both linked with issues related to human rights and to the rights of nature: first, the developmentalist and pedagogical dimension of the nation-state, and second, a more fluid conversation about whether, and how, cultural diversity might be recognized without attributing it solely to the politics of the state, but rather by liberating it from the oppressive baggage of power. Let’s call this the “dimension of deterritorialization.”

Metaphors about “National Pedagogy”

Hernán Vidal is one of the Latin American intellectuals who has worked the most diligently on the ways that narratives of identity are used to construct “national cultures.” As in many of his other works, in his essay “An Aesthetic Approach to Issues of Human Rights” Vidal defines the field of “the Humanities . . . as the study of the ways in which human beings create analogical, symbolic systems to give meaning to their environment,

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relationships, and purposeful actions therein” (14).¹ For Vidal, human beings experience their aesthetic acts “as coherent fields of intellectual-emotional-bodily responses” to the problems they encounter in society (14). For Vidal, whose concept of “narratives of identity” I draw upon, essays are clearly part of the narratives that found the nation.

Spread through literary texts—the *crónicas*, essays, and novels that represented through the imaginary the contemporary situation of the country’s culture—the historical process of nation building had a long and important trajectory, which in the case of Latin America was related to widely read essays that guided the formation of the various “national cultures.” One such case is that of Fernando Diez de Medina’s novels and essays written in the mid-twentieth century.

In this section, I will turn my attention to Diez de Medina, whom I believe to be the clearest example to be found in Bolivia of the way that an affirmation of the values of a “national culture” can turn into a dangerous authoritarian discourse that sets progress on a pedestal.

Inspired in equal measures by nationalist essays and by modernist poetry, Diez de Medina felt that the Andean lands held the spiritual power to combine the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. This spiritualization of the Bolivian landscape, with echoes of German pantheism, was a mystical attitude very characteristic of Diez de Medina’s intellectual labors, as he made the territory his own in order to construct with it an aesthetic realm of truth with his imaginary. For this Bolivian *letrado*, it was in the highest mountain peaks that the foundations of human behavior were to be sought.

In 1953, when Diez de Medina was serving as the minister of education in the country’s first National Revolutionary Movement administration (1952–1956), he took on the “problem of our national culture” and set in motion the tempering process that equated *mestizaje* with the nation’s spiritual growth. Literature once more played a fundamental role in this cultural construction. For Diez de Medina, Bolivian literature began in the mountains, in the great, solid, geographic myth of its nationhood. That was the “la cuna del alma nacional” (“El problema de la literatura nacional” 142) (cradle of the nation’s soul). Diez de Medina then said, in the same prophetic tones the liberals had used in prior decades, that “solo podemos hablar de una genuina literatura nacional cuando, en vez de simples contempladores, nos convirtamos en moldeadores del cosmos circundante” (138) (we can only speak of a genuine national literature when, instead of merely contemplating, we become the molders of the cosmos that surrounds us). In this anthropocentric view of culture—which we will see again at the end of this paper, when I look at the dangerous turn that the current plurinational Bolivian state seems to have taken—that Diez de Medina set forth in works such as *Nayjama* and *Mateo Montemayor*, he invoked themes and symbols that can be classified as having been constructed in the orbit of authoritarianism.

Moralistic and didactic—especially *Mateo Montemayor*, his last novelized essay—Diez de Medina’s writings developed hierarchical and conservative cosmic and political systems. Static, solid symbols such as the mountain made the higher condition of the soul visible, he claimed. Thus Illimani, the mountain that stands guard over the city of La Paz, turns into a “huracán petrificado de la material” (a petrified hurricane of matter) a “oráculo final donde están inscritos el destino de la ciudad portentosa y la suerte de cada uno de sus hijos” (Diez de Medina, *Mateo Montemayor* 251) (final oracle on which are inscribed the destiny of the marvelous city and the fates of each of its children). I should note that in this vertical, authoritarian aesthetic, the Indian becomes “the good savage,” regimented and educated by power.

The allegorical project of this “spiritual monumentalism” also refers to the “youth of America” by means of sociological laws of very dubious value, because they arbitrarily set up the interpretive “ups” and “downs” of reality. Diez de Medina’s essays contain many theatrical soliloquies founded on spatial scenography whose monumentalized execution turns the solid mountain into the fetish of national sovereignty. Its spiritualized ups, a zone of dazzling light that unites races and cultures in a “mestizo national type,” is none other than the narcissistic, authoritarian aesthetic exercise that sidesteps the ethical issue of healing the body politic. Instead we get these ideal republics produced by great creative geniuses—that is, spiritualized ideological productions that seek to redeem a social reality that has been tattered and torn asunder by years of authoritarian domination, including the “national revolution.” In Diez de Medina’s discourse we also find a clear equivalence between the content of the soliloquy, the monumentalized representation of reality, and the bodily posture of the mestizo protagonists. Virile, decisive attitudes and energetic, precise bodily movements form part of the kinesis that accompanies his allegorical-symbolic search for national unity. I particularly note, however, that this discourse ignores any downs, any need to mend and give outlet to civil society. Instead, the solid, fixed nature of the nation-state and its mestizo ideal, consubstantialized as the mountain, are mere stereotypes that have little to do with society.

Today, however, there is a felt need to go further, to overcome the hard, fixed, homogeneous nature of this nation-state. Thus, new arguments arise, many types of ideological and discursive positions (postmodern, postcolonial, and so on) question the rigidity of the boundaries constructed by nationalism, the modern narrative regulating history. While contrasting this fixedness with the much more fluid and changing nature of the multiple identities that reside within the nation—today we use the terms “plural nation” and “plurinationality” in Bolivia—the task of freeing the nation-state from the “hard boundaries” of modernity is a possibility that, while necessary, remains problematic. In any case, new demands for recognizing citizenship and human rights have arisen from the internal migrations of

recent decades, causing cracks in these “hard boundaries,” this mestizo condition, and making the metaphor much more fluid, much more sensitive to the ethnic demands of new social movements. This is how “otherness” is built, a fact that reveals the limits of the nation conceived as a homogeneous community. I thus turn to a new stage, a new interpretive dimension of the national.

Deterritorialization and the Metaphor of the Amphibian

Leaving the territorial boundaries of modernity behind, let us return to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s assertion that we have now sailed “into the uncharted waters of the twenty-first” century (“Humanism in a Global World” 23). 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 associated with the 1952 revolution, which introduced the social suture between the civic and the ethnic. How can this change be explained? What is this new kind of flow that modifies representation?

I think that the “deterritorializing dimension” cannot remain stuck in the “uncharted waters” of Chakrabarty’s image in his essay on humanism. I feel compelled to recover the theme of cultural integration. I refer to the need to restore the fruitful dialogue between “contemporaneously non-contemporaneous” spaces and times, such as that promoted by the first peoples of the lowlands in their March for Territory and Dignity and Search for the Loma Santa. Each of those mobilizations in 1990 led to powerful symbol building, which, as the author of a recent book on the subject notes, created a new utopia, a “resignificación territorial” (Canedo, *La Loma Santa* 52) (resignifying of territory), that argues for the establishment of a new social and economic order. The utopia created by these first peoples did not reject modernization; rather, it balanced modernization with ancestral symbols of identity that helped the inhabitants of the lowlands, of Amazonia, to resignify their territory. This return to the ancestors, to the mythical, religious past, promoted greater tolerance and understanding of the complex interaction between human beings and nature. In the same way, it generated new associations that crossed—defiantly yet peacefully—the territorial and pedagogical borders drawn by the state, including the limits on its current understanding of what “plurinationality” means.

The tenacity with which the indigenous people protected their land and their territory in that movement in 1990 led to a new modern way of

thinking. This approach does not simply give in to the plans already laid out by modernity; it scrupulously respects human rights but at the same time reaches back to Enlightenment humanism and turns it into a legacy for the dispossessed, for the rest of humanity. Since that time, the lowland movements have not sought to return to nationalism; instead, they have opted for something unprecedented, something that searches, lovingly and with utter generosity, for the whole self that modernity denied when it opted for mere individualism. I think that this territorial resignification is *sui generis*, for it does not claim to encompass Europe, nor to apply the programs of progress and development unreflectively. The new program returns to nature with the hope that nature might shelter humanity without being attacked and devastated by the blows of modernity and its globalized capitalism. As Arif Dirlik has recently expressed it:

The new times call for a new politics. The spaces for this new politics are to be found not outside of but in the contradictions of a globalized capitalism. The challenge presently is not to overthrow a globalized capitalism, or to replace the capitalist state with a socialist one, neither of which appears as an imminent possibility. The challenge rather is to build up a more just and sustainable society from the bottom up, to socialize the spaces offered by these contradictions. (54)

We noted earlier that, although the Andean mestizo “pedagogical dimension” built the nation-state, its “deterritorialization” produced, as a countereffect, the flow of identities that ended in its dismantlement. Beyond these two dimensions, here I postulate the concept of “integrating (re)territorialization”—that is, the capability held by today’s indigenous movements of building a dialogue, a “cross-fertilization,” between modernity and their ancestral culture. It seems to me that the amphibian is the metaphor that best expresses this new displacement. This is the metaphor that Orlando Fals Borda used in his analysis of the riverine world of Colombia. Today it is called for in analyzing countries and regions where, beyond the fixed mestizo representations of reality, cultural diversity is the source of renewed interpretive potential. The metaphor is useful because it “takes knowledge from one context and transfers it to another, reworking it in consequence of the new context” (Mockus 37). Let us take a closer look at this metaphor.

In a broad sense, the term *amphibious*, meaning “both lives” or “both ways of life,” applies to every community that “develops reliably in more than one cultural traditions and that facilitates communication between them” (37). As a metaphor of communication between cultures, the image of the amphibian helps overcome the differences that crop up in contemporary societies with high levels of cultural diversity and social segmentation. On one hand, the metaphor brings law closer to morality and culture, thus

solving the discrepancies between them. On the other, the amphibian can glimpse the possibility of overcoming the violence to which power resorts in resolving conflicts. The metaphor of the amphibian illustrates the possibility of creating norms that are compatible with difference; it also shows that it is possible to build a dialogue between cultures.

Drawn from research by Basil Bernstein on education as a social process of the circulation of knowledge, the metaphor of the amphibian represents the capacity of cultural difference to “obey partially divergent systems of rules without a loss of intellectual and moral integrity” (Mockus 39). It is precisely that integrity that allows the amphibian “to select and rank bits of knowledge and morality in a given context in order to translate it and make it possible to appropriate it in another” (39). This applies to the dialogue between the ancestral and the modern; the March for Territory and Dignity of the lowland first peoples is a revealing example of the “culture of integration” represented by the amphibian.

The March for Territory and Dignity put forward a social demand that completely changed the way land grants were made and land was occupied—two processes that had figured as exclusively material phenomena in Latin American agrarian history. In the Amazonian peoples’ march, they were demanding that the state recognize not only their right to land but an imbricated set of material and symbolic values. Territory was therefore transformed into a symbol of the first peoples’ demands for autonomy from the state and other powerful groups that had subordinated them. As Álvaro Bello puts it in his prologue to the recent book by Gabriela Canedo, regarding the resignification of territory:

Frente a la legalidad del estado y de quienes buscan apropiarse de las tierras indígenas, el territorio es una evidencia material, demostrable y mensurable de los “derechos verdaderos” y originales porque es una “prueba” irrefutable de la pertenencia y del “lugar” de la identidad. Este es el caso de los mojeños que, como señala Gabriela Canedo, buscan representar a través del territorio el lugar central para la existencia y reproducción material, el lugar donde se desarrolla la caza, pesca, recolección y cultivo para la subsistencia. Pero es también, señala la autora, el lugar de los símbolos de la identidad étnica. La Loma Santa, el territorio simbólico, es una utopía movilizadora que propugna la instalación de un nuevo orden social y económico. Y por ello es que su defensa es un motor de la acción colectiva de los mojeños, pues a través de esta lucha han podido posicionarse como un actor político. (Bello 12)

(In the face of the legalism of the state and of those who seek to appropriate indigenous land, territory is demonstrable, measurable physical evidence of their original “genuine rights,” because it is an irrefutable “proof” of their belonging and of the “place” of their identity.

This is the case for the Mojeños, who, as Gabriela Canedo shows, seek to represent through territory the central role of place for their existence and material reproduction, the role of the place where they hunt, fish, gather, and cultivate the food they live on. But it is also, she argues, the place where the symbols of their ethnic identity reside. Loma Santa, their symbolic territory, is a mobilizing utopia that propels them to establish a new social and economic order. And that is why the defense of Loma Santa motivates the Mojeños' collective action, for through this struggle they were able to position themselves as a political actor.)

By living as much their ancestral life as in modern life, the Mojeños were expressing the capacity of cultural difference for crossing cultural codes, for demanding that legislation not consign custom to oblivion but, to the contrary, recognize and value it. Legalism as imposed through power was not enough, because the Mojeño—the lowland inhabitant, the interpreter and translator of cultures—insisted also that the written rule should not pretend ignorance of cultural customs. The marches in 1990 therefore demanded the “cross-fertilization” of law with morals and customs. And this fertilization also helped spread democracy, because it allowed what was legal to communicate with what was morally valid and culturally relevant, even if positive law did not specifically recognize them. In this way, the rise of new “soft boundaries,” amphibian borders that can connect the modern with the ancestral, allowed for the “(re)territorialization” of concepts that interwove to provide novel, creative answers to the predatory forward march of developmentalism. Arif Dirlik explains a view of amphibian borders that parallels my own:

Place as metaphor suggests groundedness from below, and a flexible and porous boundary around it, without closing out the extra-local, all the way to the global. What is important about the metaphor is that it calls for a definition of what is to be included in the place from within the place—some control over the conduct and organization of everyday life, in other words—rather than from above, from those placeless abstractions such as capital, the nation-state, and their discursive expressions in the realm of theory. (57)

In the face of the subjugation of community land, in the face of the colonization of rural spaces, the March for Territory and Dignity and the Search for the Loma Santa created the possibility that arguments from the distant past might “shortcut” the distance between custom and the law. Indeed, the power of culture sought to reduce the separation between ancestral customs and the specific procedures that were foreign to sacred interpretations and the ethical motivations that were beyond the grasp of positive law. The systemic functionality of law, its instrumental rationality,

also subject to goals, exempted the law from having to attend to religious and cultural arguments, and it emphatically distinguished between legal arguments and arguments by those human groups that found the values that broadened their freedoms in their ancestral morality and customs.

Using cultural and religious arguments belonging to the time “of the gods” (Chakrabarty) to influence the communicative acts that develop in the “public sphere” is tremendously difficult. Such arguments exceed the limits of the instrumental reasoning of power and of the positive law that legitimates it. But the amphibious peoples who cross cultures, who interrelate them, seem to understand the urgency of making these systems compatible and of adapting them to the needs of the present. Hence the “cross-fertilization” of law with morals and culture is surprisingly current today, for it has confirmed that the struggle for land and territory is not just about protecting the human rights of indigenous Amazonian peoples but about extending these rights to include the protection of nature, making this recognition the “main political and epistemological problem of the twenty-first century” (Komadina). Indeed, this “epistemological problem” appears with remarkable clarity in the recent march of lowland indigenous peoples. In their recent March in Defense of TIPNIS (Territorios Indígenas del Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécure [Indigenous Territories of Isiboro Sécure National Park]), which I will explain below, insisting that the state recognize the legitimate rights of indigenous peoples, they were demanding respect for the laws that guarantee them not only their human rights but also the rights that tie nature to the defense of territory. The observation of these rights also implies the need to investigate the very rationale of “plurinationalism” in more depth. Indeed, the rationale of the current Plurinational State of Bolivia is complicated when that state harms the very rights that it helped place in the Bolivian Constitution that went into effect in January 2009.

Plurinational State or Intractable State?

To identify itself with the principles that flow from the civic nation and to guarantee the rights of its ethnic nationalities, the present Bolivian state—defined in Article I of its 2009 Constitution as a “Unitary Social State of Plurinational, Community-Based Law”—took an unprecedented step in Latin America. By explicitly accepting the multiple nature of the nation, it called into question the logocentric reductionism that had hitherto made upper-class *letrados*—Diez de Medina’s mestizo and criollo perspective being the most representative—the key to observing Bolivian nationality. The state defines itself as “unitary” because it safeguards the integrity of the nation’s territory and guarantees unity among Bolivians, and as “plurinational” because it recognizes political, economic, and institutional pluralism. The current state thus links liberal democracy to communitarian

democracy and respects the prior existence of the indigenous peasant nations and first peoples. Its plurinational nature also accommodates diverse forms of economic organization: communitarian, state, private, and cooperative social organization. The new version of the state thus recognizes complex economic, social, political, and territorial structures that are embodied in different forms of institutional organization, at the department, municipal, provincial, and community levels.

The Constitution defines the state as plurinational and community based (*plurinacional, comunitario*) because it takes into account the diverse forms of community life at the economic, political, and cultural levels. The Constitution also institutionalizes the ancestral Andean principles of solidarity, reciprocity, economic complementarity, and equitable distribution of wealth. Since it recognizes the existence of nations and indigenous peoples predating the colonial period, it expressly affirms these peoples' and nations' ancestral dominion over their territories and guarantees their freedom of self-determination. The Constitution expressly recognizes the right that these peoples have to self-government and allows for their consolidation as autonomous territorial bodies.

This recognition of regional and indigenous autonomy is linked to the right of first nations to be consulted before any action is carried out that might affect their territory. The Bolivian state has raised this right of consultation to a constitutional level by signing relevant treaties on human rights, particularly Convention No. 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which guarantees the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples regarding their peaceful possession of their territories.² Similarly, the 2009 Constitution establishes that first peoples have the right to

Be consulted through the appropriate procedures, and in particular through their institutions, whenever legislative or administrative measures are adopted that might affect them. Within this framework, the right to obligatory, systematic prior consultation, realized by the State in good faith, shall be respected with regard to the exploitation of non-renewable natural resources in the territory that they inhabit. (Article 30, section II, paragraph 15.)

The Constitution recognizes a right to “free, prior, and informed” consultation with the people who would be affected by natural resource exploitation in their territory and to respect for “their norms and local procedures” (Article 352). In other words, consultation with indigenous peoples is to be “binding and obligatory” because it derives from an explicit mandate in the Constitution (Article 203). This mandate obliges the state to solicit the informed opinion of indigenous peoples. It also obliges the state to wait until the first peoples make a determination about proposals that might alter or modify their rights to their territory.

Despite the tremendous step forward that the Constitution represents in the recognition of the rights of first peoples, the logocentric model that limits “the national” to a homogenized perception of reality persists in the Plurinational State. This perception, which is now spreading to the recognition of plurinationality, falls short of fully becoming “una agenda nacional ‘otra,’ pensada desde los sujetos históricamente excluidos en la visión unitaria del Estado, nación y sociedad” (Walsh 142) (an ‘other’ national agenda, thought from subjects historically excluded in the unitary vision of state, nation, and society). In other words, the fact that the Plurinational State is constitutionally obliged to recognize these rights is not enough, it seems, to guarantee that it will respect them.

Catherine Walsh notes that although “la propuesta del Estado Plurinacional ha sido un componente central de las luchas y estrategias descolonizadoras de los movimientos indígenas” (142) (the project of the Plurinational State has been a central component in the decolonizing struggles and strategies of indigenous movements), this refounding of the nation, conceived “from down below,” is manifested in norms that still establish an epistemic comparison between “los conocimientos universales y los saberes colectivos de las naciones y pueblos campesinos, dando así la impresión de la superioridad científica de los primeros sobre los segundos” (Walsh 146) (items of universal knowledge and the collective wisdom of the indigenous peasant nations and peoples, thus giving the impression that the former is scientifically superior to the latter). In other words, Walsh broadens her view of the problem to include the Constitution itself in which it is apparent that the anthropocentric vision is incapable of conceiving of nature as a living thing with rights of its own. As Walsh notes, in the Constitution, man “sigue siendo el guardian de la naturaleza” (147) (continues to be the guardian of nature). As a consequence, for both the Constitution and the social power that guarantees compliance with its provisions, ancestral logic and the “time of the gods” are still inconceivable and form “una amenaza a la óptica racionalista, a la estabilidad económica y al control social” (147) (a threat to the rationalist optic, to economic stability, and to social control). The Constitution, which continues to stand by the “colonialidad de la naturaleza” (138) (coloniality of nature) and of life itself, is based “en la división binaria naturaleza/sociedad, descartando lo mágico-espiritual-social, la relación milenaria entre mundos biofísico, humanos y espirituales, incluyendo el de los ancestros, y que da sustento a los sistemas integrales de la vida y de la humanidad misma” (138) (on the binary nature/society divide, discarding everything that is magical-spiritual-social, the age-old relationship between biophysical, human, and spiritual worlds, including the world of the ancestors, which sustains the holistic systems of life and of humanity itself).

The struggle between these opposing views of reality is not mere ingenuous speculation, for it is embedded in the core of the social upheavals

now taking place in Bolivia's Amazonian lowlands. Indeed, I see the recent March in Defense of TIPNIS—the Indigenous Territories of Isiboro Sécure National Park—as confirmation not only of the surprisingly current nature of the first peoples' struggle to defend land and territory, but also, and more importantly, of the renewed presence of paradigms of knowledge that are in conflict today. This clash can be observed in the two metaphors that sum them up: on one hand, the primacy of the “highway,” a metaphor of power that, setting aside the roads that may lead to the liberation of the peoples who have been subjugated since colonial days, sums up the developmentalist project of the current state, obdurate in its industrialization process even if that means social imbalance and trampling on the rights of others; on the other hand, the metaphor of the amphibian, which, as expressed by one of the inhabitants of Sécure Alto who said that “mi carretera es el río Sécure, no necesito más” (Quispe 1) (my highway is the Sécure river, I don't need any other), affirms the indigenous peoples' need to commercialize their products. The amphibian rejects the “civilizing” process that remains embedded in the spheres of power, demanding instead that its legally agreed-upon rights should include the rights of nature—that is, that the reach of constitutionally guaranteed rights should also, as I have indicated above, make moral and cultural change possible. The amphibian metaphor is opposed to the social and economic “superhighway” metaphor envisioned by the state. Opposed, because it trades it for a just and balanced social life that will only be possible if culture and morality can continue to play regulating roles that are not sufficiently guaranteed by law.

Let's look at how the amphibian represents the situation of Bolivia's Amazonian lowlands. Covering nearly 11,000 square kilometers (more than 4,200 square miles) between the savannah of Beni department and the Andean foothills of Cochabamba, TIPNIS is an indigenous territory and, at the same time, a national park that has enjoyed the protection of the Bolivian state since the 1990s. This territory nevertheless was under pressure from various socioeconomic demands that have affected its ecosystems over the past twenty years. The south of TIPNIS, around the sources of the Isiboro, Moleto, and Ichoa Rivers, has been affected by the incursion of coca farmers and a road that Shell built for oil exploration in the 1970s. The forested mountains here thus underwent drastic transformations that have harmed the ability of its aquifers to replenish themselves and of its wildlife to reproduce. Central TIPNIS is in a better state of conservation; this is an immense region of rivers and tributaries that guarantees a good living for the indigenous peoples who hunt and fish there. The wetland forest in this central region teems with snakes, lizards, turtles, and a huge diversity of fish and birds. A third region, characterized by important riparian forests adjacent to the Isiboro and Sécure Rivers, makes it possible for a great diversity of wild grasses and fish to reproduce; this region is settled by peasant communities devoted to livestock raising. Finally, a fourth region lies in the upper Sécure

river valley, an Andean piedmont zone settled by indigenous communities that are also devoted to hunting and fishing.

The state resolved to build a highway whose second phase would cross this protected area, from the Cochabamba foothills to the Amazonian flatlands of Beni. Financed by a loan from Brazil and built by a Brazilian corporation, the highway threw a spotlight on the importance of TIPNIS and the proposals and principles of the new Constitution of the Plurinational State. As I have explained above, the state had pledged to comply with the principle of “prior consultation” with the peoples who inhabit these territories and was legally unable to set aside or alter their rights unilaterally. In reality, the highway planned by the state would not have much of an effect on the south of TIPNIS, where the environment has already been heavily affected by coca farming. However, by cutting through TIPNIS, it would have a very significant impact on the other regions. Not only would it alter the fragile ecosystem that makes human and animal life possible throughout the area; it would also split the central zone, carving the best-conserved rainforest anywhere in South America in two. Even if the highway were to skirt the piedmont region, it would disrupt the biological cycles that link the piedmont, the wetland forests, and the savannas. As social anthropologist Sarela Paz notes,

Si el trazo de la carretera atraviesa el pie de monte o iría bordeando el pie de monte del TIPNIS, el impacto económico, social y cultural para la región centro y la región de la confluencia de los ríos Isiboro y Sécore tendrá varios rostros. Un primer impacto vendrá a mediano plazo afectando directamente el sistema de adaptación cultural que han logrado las comunidades indígenas y que reproduce los ejes básicos de la economía étnica; eso es, agricultura, caza, pesca, recolección . . . (4–5

(If the path of the highway crosses the piedmont or follows the piedmont line inside TIPNIS, its economic, social, and cultural impact on the central region and the region where the Isiboro joins the Sécore will have several faces. Its first impact will become apparent in the medium term, directly affecting the system of cultural adaptation that the indigenous communities have achieved, which reproduces the basic pillars of the ethnic group’s economy—that is, agriculture, hunting, fishing, gathering . . .)

Adding to her reflection on the amphibian character of human life in this territory, Paz points out that

Las comunidades indígenas que se encuentran habitando ambas regiones han iniciado un ciclo de economía combinada que integra la economía étnica con actividades comerciales en algunos rubros. Es el caso del

cacao, venta de cueros, de saurios y la actividad ganadera. Podríamos pensar que para dichas actividades la carretera es una oportunidad de vinculación comercial y facilitaría el traslado de productos. Sin embargo, si la carretera pasa por el pie de monte u orillando el pie de monte del TIPNIS, las comunidades de ambas regiones no tendrían ningún beneficio con la carretera porque ésta se encontraría distante de sus asentamientos. Ni las actividades agroforestales del chocolate, ni el aprovechamiento de saurios, ni la ganadería pueden ser actividades susceptibles de trasladarse a la zona de la carretera. (5)

(The indigenous communities that live in both regions have initiated a cycle of combined economy that integrates their ethnic economy with certain forms of commercial activity, such as cacao cultivation, the sale of snakeskins, and livestock raising. We might think that, for activities such as these, the highway is an opportunity for commercial ties that would make it easier to transport their products. However, if the highway goes through or around the piedmont in TIPNIS, communities in both regions would see no benefit from the highway because it would be too far from their settlements. Neither their cacao agroforestry, nor their exploitation of reptiles, nor their livestock raising could possibly be moved closer to the highway.)

It should be added that the highway would also affect the indigenous political structure, which maintains the family and clan exchanges that reproduce the logic of the first peoples of the forest region, as well as the religious expressions that remain just as important as when the Mojeños undertook their Search for the Loma Santa. It is clear, then, that the highway would have a very significant human and environmental impact if it were to enter this protected zone.

It was in defense of this territory that one of the most important fights to conserve the environment and to safeguard human rights and the rights of nature has been carried out since June 2011. This is the March in Defense of TIPNIS, which, though violently suppressed by the state, has still not ended, despite a law passed by the Plurinational Legislative Assembly in October 2011 that prohibits the construction of the highway through the territory and declares the park an “untouchable” zone.

The march for TIPNIS is a second edition of the original March for Territory and Dignity held in 1990. Indeed, the march is about the constitutional right of indigenous peoples to govern their own territory. Also, not only does it touch on deciding between a civil engineering project—the highway—and a national protected area, but it also shows, as clear as day, the clash between two worldviews. The first is anthropocentric, devoted to the pronouncements of man as the lord and ruler of nature; the other is polycentric, conceiving of nature as a legal subject with the “poder

de hacer hablar a todos los que se reúnen para discutir sobre ella. En todo caso, como lo demuestra el conflicto del TIPNIS, ella habla una lengua incomprensible para el poder político” (Komadina 1) (power to give speech to all those who gather there to argue over it. In any case, as shown by the conflict over TIPNIS, nature speaks a language that is incomprehensible to political power).

The anthropocentric view is the one the state takes when looking at the conflict. It is disquieting to see how the state unilaterally assumes the ability to define social dilemmas, twisting them and subjecting them to laws of refraction that distort them. I wonder, then, whether the Plurinational State isn't trying to reintroduce the “national culture” project that nationalist elites set in motion in the mid-twentieth century. Its developmentalist logic, which renews the old quest for national integration, seems to confirm the suspicion that, if this logic persists, it runs the risk of ending up as a form of authoritarianism just as irksome as what we have had in past decades.

Newly regulated by the teleological historicism flowing from the pedagogical and developmentalist dimension of nationhood, the highway has the same physical and symbolic importance as the old territorializing desires of the 1952 National Revolution. This developmentalism grew from the conviction that nature must be tamed, just as the Indian must be assimilated into the nation-state. And just as the development discourse of 1952 was an erasure of difference, those responsible for such erasure today are not just faraway development bureaucrats but the very advocates of the Plurinational State, native leaders who have internalized the culture of developmentalism, which is a problem that describes the complicity in erasing differences of all modernizing states. As Dirlik puts it:

Indeed, it is difficult to say in historical hindsight which, a voracious capitalism ever invading places or a nation-state inventing homogeneities, has been the bigger problem in the creation of such generic categories. The question may ultimately be moot because the complicity of state and capital (or in the case of existing socialisms, of state and managerial bureaucrats) extends over the history of modernity. . . . It inevitably raises questions about the universality of categories of social analysis, which are all products of the same modernity that produced developmentalism, and are implicated in it one way or another. (58–59)

According to Carlos Romero Bonifaz, the then Minister of the Presidency and official spokesperson for the Plurinational State, the highway across TIPNIS “will give cohesion and historical sense” (Bustillos Zamorano 1). This statement—a modernized version of the old paradigm of a struggle between “civilization” and “barbarism”—seeks to turn the supposed territorial “chaos” of the first peoples into a new nationalist

strategy, constructed by a way of seeing that newly refracts, distorts, and breaks reality because, while the highway represents an objective truth—it is obvious that development is necessary—, it is also concerned exclusively with the route it will take, discarding all other roads proposed by the indigenous people of this large territory as less spectacular. And this logic is well aware that reality can become a frail enemy when the state has armed itself with good rhetoric. Thus, the Bolivian reality that the minister sees is like a measuring rod placed in the water along the banks of a river: it first bends, then breaks. Refraction is the phenomenon I am describing here. Developmentalist thinking is refractory because it participates distortedly in reality, causing serious violations of human rights and nature. The minister's way of seeing is refractory because his anthropocentrism understands human action as an interference in nature with the purpose of orienting it exclusively toward material productivity.

If the highway “gives cohesion and historical sense,” that imposition emanating from power sets apart and marginalizes anyone who thinks differently, calling them “barbarians,” enemies of progress. As an important member of the new team of epic builders, the minister counters ethnic pluralism and substitutes for it coveted cultural homogeneity, which can be more easily administered, and whose manifest destiny is none other than to bear witness to the supreme victory of man over the forces of nature. For that is what the highway will be, if it cuts across TIPNIS: a battlefield on which nature, the ancient enemy of progress, will at last sign its unconditional surrender. As Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, the discourse of power is completely uncritical of modernization, making “the figure of the engineer”—or the highway builder—“one of the most eroticized figures of the postcolonial developmentalist imagination” (“The Legacies” 53). It is precisely this emphasis on development that marks the split between those who hold power and the subaltern sectors living in the farthest reaches of the territory. Behind this new pedagogical politics crouch the officials of the emerging Plurinational State, making excuses for their developmentalism at the expense of diversity.

The polycentric view, contrary to the anthropocentric, observes nature's ability to articulate a multiplicity of voices (Komadina 1). When it communicates the outcry of the first peoples, nature becomes polyphonic, for it harmonizes their demands not only with those of environmentalists and members of the scientific community who support the indigenous protest, but with the sentiments of the general citizenry. Nature communicates “la sorprendente capacidad de movilización de la sociedad boliviana para rechazar los actos de violencia estatal” (Wanderley 1) (the surprising capacity of Bolivian society to mobilize in rejecting state violence). The protest slogan “TIPNIS is all of us—another kind of development is possible” translates the feelings of a citizenry who “reclama el cumplimiento de los compromisos del ‘proceso de cambio’: profundización de la

democracia, inclusión social y política de los grupos históricamente excluidos, sostenibilidad ambiental en el marco de un nuevo modelo de desarrollo” (Wanderley 1) (demand that the promises of a ‘process of change’ be carried out: deepening democracy, social and political inclusion for historically excluded groups, environmental sustainability within the framework of a new model of development).

Beyond the old developmentalism, a genuinely post-neoliberal and postcapitalist state now faces the challenge of setting public policy on a path “hacia un nuevo patrón de generación y de distribución de riqueza posextractivista” (Wanderley 1) (towards a new, post-extractivist pattern of wealth generation and distribution). This effort will call for new institutional mechanisms capable of connecting civil society with the state, above and beyond the corporate interests that ultimately represent the people who have power. In this new quest, the presence of cultural amphibians can no longer be left behind, forgotten; their arguments—not only economic ones but moral and religious as well—must be recovered and explicitly taken into account. Consequently, these new mechanisms will inevitably call into question our ways of knowing, and will demand a knowledge that serves the purposes not of capital or the state, be it plurinational or not, but of human survival and justice. Since knowing and living are intricately interrelated in the “culture of integration,” there is no distinction in these convictions between knowledge and ethics.

Since man cannot be the lord and master of nature, the statement that “my highway is the river, I don’t need any other” conflicts with the anthropocentric view of reality. The metaphor of the cultural amphibian is displaced between cultures and follows the course of the river to examine roads and paths that situate human action as one part, one fragment of reality, one more inscription in the constellation of signs.

If nature “speaks and feels” through natural disasters and through the countless voices that represent it, its demands are not contrary to the “other” modernity, which respects ancestral traditions and customs. But its spatial-temporal view is different because it requires the past to rejoin the present. Indeed, while Mojeños speak in the language of the past, the language is informed more by vision than by empirical evidence that the vision was ever realized at any time in the past. Mojeños, in other words, have a strong utopian religious present.

Fundamental to any claim to Mojeño identity is an assertion of an inalienable connection between community and land, and, by extension, between society and nature. As one of the directors of TIPNIS has stated, “Hace falta una visión de desarrollo en que se vincula, vía ríos y caminos, a la gente sin matarla; que se transporte mercadería sin desintegrar territorios, y que se genere desarrollo sin promover la desaparición de la fauna” (Bustillos Zamorano 2) ([T]here’s a need for a view of development in which people are linked via rivers and roads without killing them off; in

which merchandise can be transported without destroying territories, and which generates development without leading to the disappearance of the fauna). For cultural amphibians, affirming what is indigenous does not imply denying modernity but rather balancing it, through respect for customs and traditions, which, like “embers of the past,” return in the present.

Today we are witnessing a fight between two paradigms that, as they face off against one another, clearly express the disagreements between the notions of “progress” and “decolonization.” For the logic of progress, “knowledge and the acts of knowing and learning” do not go “beyond individual, instrumental means–ends rationality,” whereas for the logic of decolonization, “los saberes ancestrales tienen el estatus de ‘conocimiento.’ Su relevancia e importancia no son solo para los pueblos indígenas, sino para todos; son parte de una nueva constitución articuladora de conocimientos en plural, que da concreción y sentido a lo plurinacional” (Walsh 145) (ancestral wisdom has the status of ‘knowledge.’ Its relevance and importance are not for indigenous peoples alone, but for everyone; it is part of a new constitution articulating a plural form of knowledge, giving concreteness and meaning to being plurinational).

A basic aspect of decolonizing logic is that knowing is interwoven with living. Decolonization, says Walsh,

Abre y desafía la epistemología moderna—la que nos hace pensar que “se llega al mundo desde el conocimiento”—, alentando otra lógica epistemológica, la que rige y tiene sentido para la mayoría. Esa es: “se llega al conocimiento desde el mundo,” y que apunta a lo que he referido en otros lugares como “una epistemología y pedagogía decolonial” . . . principio que no es solo social y económico (como suele ser el caso en el “vivir bien” de la Constitución boliviana) sino que también es epistemológico. (146)

(Opens up and challenges modern epistemology of the sort that makes us think that “you get at the world through knowing about it,” instead cherishing a different epistemological logic, the one that prevails and makes sense for the majority. This logic is: “you get at knowledge through the world,” and it points to what I have mentioned elsewhere as “a decolonial epistemology and pedagogy,” . . . a principle that is not only social and economic (as is usually the case with the idea of “living well” in Bolivia’s Constitution), but that is also epistemic.)

As noted above, the current Constitution, aiming at the development of society as a whole, establishes a distinction between universal knowledge (*conocimientos universales*) and collective wisdom (*saberes colectivos*); it also specifies that the former is scientifically superior to the latter. Indeed, nature is not considered in the Constitution as a subject of rights, but rather

as a collection of natural and environmental resources that must be protected by the state. At base, the Constitution continues to assert the superiority of rationality, for which thinking through ancestral forms of logic is not only inconceivable but an actual threat to economic stability and social order. As Walsh puts it,

El “buen vivir” no es solo el “vivir bien” contemplado en la Constitución, sino la posibilidad de concebir y agenciar de una manera “otra,” una manera distinta concebida desde la diferencia ancestral y sus principios pero pensada para el conjunto de la sociedad. Plantea la posibilidad de un contrato social enraizado en la relación y convivencia ética entre humanos y su entorno, con el afán de retar la fragmentación y promover la interculturalidad. (148)

(The “good life” is not simply the “living well” considered in the Constitution, but the possibility of conceptualizing and having agency in an “other” way, a different way, conceptualized from one’s ancestral difference and its principles, but thought through for society as a whole. This poses the possibility of a social contract rooted in the ethical relationship and coexistence between humans and their environs, with the desire to challenge fragmentation and promote interculturality.)

Violently suppressed by the state, the March in Defense of TIPNIS is a clear example showing that the paradigm of “the good life” is not tolerated by the state. The same thing happened decades ago to “revolutionary nationalism,” whose pedagogical dimension and plans for colonizing the Amazonian lowlands were impervious to indigenous demands, and whose reformism called for a homogenizing *mestizaje*—which, as I noted in the case of Diez de Medina, in the end stood by authoritarianism.

If colonizing territories was always the way to justify the destruction and nonobservance of the rights of nature, developmentalist discourses that hide such destruction serve to remind us that human thought has never constructed absolute truths. Today the risk is that political power, that Gorgon turning anyone who looks at it to stone, will just take out its refracting wand and make reality fit its interests. The discourse of power is often inexact and immoral—inexact because it has lost the Aristotelian ethical precept that it is necessary to adjust means according to what the occasion demands, as we see in the art of medicine and in navigation; immoral, because the essence of morality includes compassion and a commitment to keeping your neighbor from suffering. The inconsistencies of power reveal, in the two cases looked at in this essay, that of Diez de Medina and that of the current Plurinational State, that developmentalist gospels are characterized by refraction. The Plurinational State will deserve no credit from future generations unless it adjusts its viewpoint and pays

attention to the demands of those who question it with well-founded right. Not to do so implies a presbyopia or myopia, which in the recent TIPNIS case would call into question the very construction of plurinationality. I will say it quickly, without anesthetics: we have changed the country's name and its Constitution, but the doubt remains whether we have done this in order to integrate the voices of the voiceless. Let us hope we have not acted like a snake shedding its skin, only to plunge headfirst once more into the depths of authoritarianism.

Notes

1. Vidal's essays have been collected in *La literatura en la historia de las emancipaciones latinoamericanas*.
2. Anticolonial struggles after World War II, but especially starting in the 1960s, also empowered indigenous peoples and brought them together across national boundaries, a process that led in 1975 to the founding of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. The United Nations and other international organizations such as the ILO provided a new political space for indigenous self-assertion. These efforts culminated in 2007 in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (see Dirlik).

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