



ETHNICITY IN LATIN AMERICA: A DEEPENING OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPERTORY?

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Over the past twenty years, many Latin American groups claiming indigenous or African origins have demanded special recognition for their identity. To the degree that these demands have arisen in the context of the transition from authoritarian rule, scholars have overwhelmingly tended to focus on their impact on the political sphere. Less attention, by contrast, has been given to the approach that consists in studying ethnicity in the everyday sociabilities of countries now claiming to adhere (however imperfectly) to a democratic ideal. Plainly, however, the normalization of ethnic relations, now lived in a more egalitarian and peaceful manner, contributes to a “democratic experience” that, as Pierre Rosanvallon defines it, “permanently links difficulties and promises”.¹ Indeed, institutional democracy would remain an unfinished construction if it did not allow for universal rights to be linked to specific rights in recognition of an historical situation that has produced inequalities. There is thus no question that taking diversity and ethnic difference into account deepens the democratic repertory, in everyday social relations as elsewhere.

Understanding the issues at stake in what is frequently described as an ethno-identity “revival” in Latin America presupposes revisiting the historicity of the phenomenon, that is, the way in which ethnic diversity has been managed – and even generated – by the various regimes that followed the Conquest.

¹ Pierre Rosanvallon, “L’universalisme démocratique: histoire et problèmes”, *Esprit*, 341, 2008, p. 117.

Starting with the foundation of the first settlements in the “Spanish Indies” in the 16th-century, the Spanish monarchy assigned the generic category “Indian” to the native peoples of the region and organized the administration of its subjects along segregative lines. Recognized as free, rational and susceptible to conversion, the Indians could not be reduced to slavery and benefited from the monarchy’s protection. In exchange for this protection and their use of royal lands, they paid a tribute and supplied personal service in the form of forced labor (*mita* or *repartimiento*). Considered minors from a legal and religious point of view, they lived in reserved villages and were governed by a set of particular institutions, the *cabildos de indios*. Taken together, these characteristics defined the “Republic of Indians”, which was clearly distinguished from the “Republic of Spaniards”.

The imposition of the status inequality specific to *ancien régime* societies was here mixed with the characteristic traits of a “colonial situation” and contributed to historically forging a “figure of the Indian” struck in the coin of alterity: to be an Indian meant belonging to a community, collectively working the land, paying a tribute, obeying the traditional authorities and having one’s own customs. As Jacques Poloni-Simard has noted,² moreover, this juridical conception was coupled with an extremely pejorative anthropological conception associating the Indian with barbarism, vice and laziness. This disparaging and fundamentally racist vision of the native populations has endured across the centuries.³

Very early, population movements and social dynamics recomposed this segregational order, which was rendered more complex by the introduction of black slaves into America and generalized miscegenation. Nevertheless, while town-dwelling Indians and freemen of color were freed from their original statuses, the stigma attaching to their initial condition as indentured servants or slaves continued to fuel social prejudice against them. The same held for the various categories of mixed-race individuals (*castas*), whose status was mainly defined in negative terms vis-à-vis whites.

² Jacques Poloni-Simard, “L’Amérique espagnole: une colonisation d’Ancien Régime”, in Marc Ferro (ed.), *Le livre noir du colonialisme, XVI^e-XXI^e siècle: de l’extermination à la repentance*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2003, pp. 180-200.

³ *Ibid.*

Yet what appears to contemporary eyes as undeniable discrimination was of a piece with the corporative and inegalitarian order characteristic of the *ancien régime*. With the exception of tribute and forced labor, the characteristics specific to Indian communities were considered corporate privileges and jealously defended as such by those concerned. The fact that Indians constantly appealed to royal courts to enforce their rights is a fundamental element that should be taken into consideration if one avoid falling into a Manichean and anachronistic vision of the colonial situation.

The same holds for the following period, that of the revolutions of independence and the formation of nation-states in the first third of the 19th-century. The status of native peoples evolved in a rather uneven manner across this period, something that is not always explicitly acknowledged in the historiography, which is characterized by two broad approaches.⁴

Tending to focus on social and economic history, the first of these emphasizes the heritages of the colonial period and sees the establishment of nation-states as an effort to exterminate the Indians' "difference" and specificities. Often taken up by an activist anthropology, this historiography⁵ holds that, faced with a social and political order that excluded native peoples from access to citizenship, deprived communities of their lands by extending the regime of private property and tolerated the perpetuation of forms of forced or servile labor,⁶ the situation of Indian populations globally deteriorated over this period. These intrusions on the part of the nation-state are said to have justified forms of "resistance" on the part of autochthonous populations that resembled "race war" and millenarian movements. More recently, a new current of this historiography has adapted the analytical categories of subaltern and postcolonial studies to the Latin America

⁴ Marta Irurozqui Victoriano, "Communautés indigènes et fondations républicaines. Citoyenneté et procès de nationalisation ethnique dans les Andes au XIX^e siècle", in the proceedings of the international colloquium, *Couleurs, esclavage, libérations coloniales: réorientation des empires, nouvelles colonisations Amériques, Europe, Afrique*, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 16-18 June 2011, forthcoming.

⁵ *Ibid.* Examples of this literature include Olivia Harris, Enrique Tandeter (eds.), *La participación indígena en los mercados del sur andino*, La Paz, CERES, 1987; Herbert S. Klein, *Ayllus y haciendas en el mercado boliviano en los Bolivia, 1880-1930*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1989.

⁶ Already in force under the *ancien régime* and designated, depending on the region and the period, by various terms (*peonaje, colonato, concertaje, pongueaje, tienda de raya*), these measures attached rural workers to the land by a system of perpetual indebtedness that could be renewed and passed on to the following generations.

context in order to emphasize continuity between the colonial situation and processes of national construction.⁷

Starting from the hypothesis that indigenous groups were actors in their own right in the construction of the nation-state, swam in the same political culture as their contemporaries and employed it in a rational manner, the second historiographical approach is oriented more towards socio-political and institutional issues and applies a vastly different analytical framework to the better part of the “republican” period (that is, the years 1820-1870). Its preconceptions are illustrated in works describing the manner in which communities used the arrangements of the Constitution of Cadix⁸ and the electoral practices of the revolutionary period⁹ to expand their prerogatives and preserve traditional community structures. For the years 1820-1870, other studies examine community political action and seek to demonstrate Indian integration into the nation via elections, the payment of tribute or military service.¹⁰ Yet these authors are in agreement in describing the appearance, beginning in the years 1870-1880, of a process of political enslavement and Indian exclusion, the combined effect of capitalist economic transformation, the thirst for land and the progress of racist ideas amongst the ruling elites. It was in this period that the latter, abandoning liberal utopian aspirations to create an egalitarian order, began to hold that the Indian population (and the fact of ethnic difference more generally) constituted an obstacle in the march of progress of these nations.

While it was at the origin of the first indigenist movements, this “ethnic exclusion” – at once social, political and cultural – characterized the “Belle Époque” in Latin America, a

⁷ Florencia E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995; Mark Thurner, *From Two Republics to One Divided: Contradictions of Postcolonial Nationmaking in Andean Peru*, Durham/London, Duke University Press, 1997.

⁸ The liberally inspired Constitution of the Spanish Monarchy, which was promulgated in March 1812. For a recent corrective, see Marta Lorente, José María Portillo (eds.), *El momento gaditano. La Constitución en el orbe hispánico (1808-1826)*, Madrid, Cortes Generales, 2011.

⁹ See in particular Antonio Annino (ed.), *Historia de las elecciones en Iberoamérica, siglo XIX*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995.

¹⁰ M. Irrozqui Victoriano, *A bala, piedra y palo. La construcción de la ciudadanía política en Bolivia, 1826-1952*, Seville, Diputación de Sevilla, 2000; Cristóbal Aljovín de Losada, *Caudillos y Constitución: Perú, 1821-1845*, Lima, Fondo de Cultura Económica/Pontificia universidad Católica del Perú/ Instituto Riva-Agüero, 2000; Gabriella Chiaramonti, *Suffragio e rappresentanza nel Perú dell'800*, Turin, Otto Editore, 2002; Cecilia Méndez, *The Plebian Republic: The Huanta Rebellion and the Making of the Peruvian State, 1820-1850*, Durham/London, Duke University Press, 2005.

time in which the wealth gap vis-à-vis the great powers seemed to be rapidly shrinking. Yet with the crisis of 1929 and the advent of “national-populist” regimes, a new project for a homogenous nation based on the figure of the people appeared in most Latin-American countries. Contrary to the liberal, capability-based project, the new project did not entail the sum of rational individuals but rather the collectivity of inhabitants and workers making up the nation and overseen by the state or the party that represented it.

In the most ethnically diverse countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, the effort to construct a nationality was accompanied by the exaltation of miscegenation, seen as synonymous with social homogeneity. The “people” was no longer limited to the ruling elites but rather identified with the working-class and rural worlds, with which it shared its phenotype. The Brazil of the *Estado Novo*, for its part, adopted the theories of the sociologist Gilberto Freyre,¹¹ which emphasized the crucial contribution of Africans to the national culture and associated Brazilian identity with miscegenation. This ideology also resulted from an identity that had since the early 20th-century been promoted in Latin America to counter the growing influence of the United States and foresaw a universal fusion of all ethnic groups – the famous “cosmic race” celebrated by Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos.¹² This policy of assimilation sought to tear away the Indian’s cultural and social specificities and add him to the melting pot: Indians were henceforth to be considered Mexican or Peruvian in political terms and peasants in social ones.¹³ In time with various rhythms, depending on the region and period, indigenist policies were established in the aim of making ethnic groups part of the national community via programs of land reform and infrastructural development. At the same time, the industrialization encouraged by the policy of import substitution had the effect of strengthening class identities, which were supposed to once and for all triumph over ethnic characteristics and thereby integrate all workers into the national project.

¹¹ Gilberto Freyre, *Maîtres et esclaves. La formation de la société brésilienne*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974 (1933).

¹² José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica*, Madrid, Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1925; Eduardo Devés Valdés, *El pensamiento latinoamericano en el siglo XX. Entre la modernización y la identidad. Tomo I: Del Ariel de Rodó a la CEPAL (1900-1950)*, Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2000.

¹³ Christian Gros, “Nationaliser l’Indien, ethniciser la nation. L’Amérique latine face au multiculturalisme”, in Christian Gros, Marie-Claude Strigler (eds.), *Être indien dans les Amériques*, Paris, Éditions de l’Institut des Amériques, 2006, pp. 263-272.

However, within these very social movements, overseen and supported by popular national regimes, a new form of protest emerged based upon demands tied to specific identities. In several countries – and, in particular, Andean ones – a new elite emerged within worker and peasant trade unions and movements and gave birth to the first indigenous organizations. Influenced by international movement for women’s and “minority” rights, demands for specific rights for Indians in Andean America and the descendants of Africans in Brazil and Columbia came to the fore of the social struggles of the 1960s and 70s.¹⁴ In the same period, a particularly intense effort was made to subsume ethnic identities in class membership in Bolivia and the first Indian organizations appeared in Columbia. In Equator, finally, the indigenous movement, which began on the coast, had by the 1980s reached the populations of the *sierra*, up till then organized in peasant trade unions. The creation in 1986 of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Equator (CONAIE) symbolizes this effort at unification. Remarkably, these organizations, taken together, accompanied their ethnic demands – the recuperation of ancestral lands and the defense of a specific identity – with more general denunciations of the social and political exclusion of underprivileged sectors and a call for equal rights for all citizens. In other words, the creation of indigenous organizations did not develop in contradiction with the aspirations of the national community but was rather part of a global process of democratization in Latin American societies.¹⁵

The same observation holds for the period that began in the early 1990s, which saw the principles of multiculturalism adopted by most Latin American nations. Exemplified and critiqued by today’s literature, this turning point is generally explained in terms of three series of interacting factors:¹⁶ the appearance in the region of a vast movement of regime democratization following the fall of dictatorships (particularly in the Southern Cone) and the end of civil war in Central America; the influence of the international

¹⁴ Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, London, Pluto Press, 2010.

¹⁵ This idea cuts across the entire work of the sociologist C. Gros. See, in this issue, Geneviève Verdo’s review of the book he edited with David Dumoulin-Kervran, *Le multiculturalisme “au concret”: un modèle latino-américain?*, Paris, Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011.

¹⁶ Salvador Martí y Puid (ed.), *Pueblos indígenas y política en América Latina. El reconocimiento de sus derechos y el impacto de sus demandas a inicios del siglo XXI*, Barcelona, Fundació CIDOB/Editorial Bellaterra, 2007.

organizations and NGOs which, by placing the question of native peoples on the international agenda (the ILO's influential Resolution 169 particularly comes to mind here), supplied a legal framework for the action of organizations and helped steer national policies in this direction;¹⁷ the adoption by most states of a neo-liberal model of governance, which gave rise to decentralization policies in which Indian movements became recognized interlocutors. The conjunction of these three factors deeply challenged a long-standing conception of the nation as well as state attitudes to the indigenous question. Indeed, over the course of the 1990s, most of these states adopted new constitutions recognizing the multiethnic, multicultural character of the nation and setting out specific rights for native peoples.¹⁸ Many measures were taken, from recognizing "ancestral lands" and a specific indigenous jurisdiction to granting increased political participation, introducing ethnic criteria in social program allocation and establishing bilingual education. The principle of specific treatment of indigenous populations in the areas of justice, government, health, education and the environment is recognized everywhere, if not always applied.

These measures have since been scrutinized by specialists in the social sciences, who are divided into two main groups. The first group sees these reforms as further contributing to the breakdown of Latin American societies, encouraging a drift towards communitarian isolation.¹⁹ The second group underscores that these reforms coincide with the imposition of a neo-liberal model and denounces the risk of "cosmetic" multiculturalism, which, they claim, does not fundamentally alter the situation of exclusion affecting those concerned.²⁰ Yet, whatever the authors' sensibilities, the fundamental question remains that of the democratization of Latin American societies. Whether they perceive these reforms as a threat to national cohesion or, on the

¹⁷ Alison Brysk, *From Tribal Village to Global Village: Indian Rights and International Relations in Latin America*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000; S. Martí y Puig, "emergencia de lo indígena en la arena política: ¿un efecto no deseado de la gobernanza?", in S. Martí y Puig (ed.), *Pueblos indígenas y política en América Latina. El reconocimiento de sus derechos y el impacto de sus demandas a inicios del siglo XXI*, op. cit., pp. 127-147.

¹⁸ Marco Aparicio Wilhelmi, *Los pueblos indígenas y el Estado. El reconocimiento constitucional de los derechos indígenas en América Latina*, Barcelona, Editorial CEDECS, 2002.

¹⁹ This tendency is perceptible in Valérie Robin Azevedo, Carmen Salazar-Soler (eds.), *El regreso de lo indígena. Retos, problemas y perspectivas*, Lima/Cusco, IFEA/CBC, 2009.

²⁰ Guillaume Boccara, "Multiculturalisme, néolibéralisme, démocratisation", in C. Gros, D. Dumoulin-Kervran (eds.), *Le multiculturalisme "au concret": un modèle latino-américain?*, op. cit., pp. 55-69.

contrary, consider them tools with which indigenous citizens may assert their rights, all underscore the importance of this new paradigm for the manner in which states deal with a form of social exclusion that, for historical reasons, entails a significant ethnic substratum.

The proven relationship between constitutional recognition of the multicultural nature of society and implementation of neo-liberal policies would not have been so strong had it not encountered in Latin America a conception of politics that accorded such an important place to collective subjects. Indeed, the attribution of collective rights to populations defined in ethnic or racial terms should not only be seen a tool for facilitating the territorialized management of reform or a stopgap for larger scale socio-political measures. It also coincides with a representation of the political process that is much more heavily based on group mobilization than on the exercise of the citizen's individual rights. Starting in the 1970s, the conception of democracy that developed among opponents of the military regimes was based on the belief that collective actors are called upon to play a major role in political transformation. While there were various conceptions of democracy and how to transition towards it, all found it more or less difficult to fully accept social division and the political representation of conflicting interests. And while, at first glance, it sharply conflicts with the central place long accorded to the state in the organization of society, the confidence now placed in "civil society" nonetheless reveals the continued primacy accorded the whole over its parts.²¹ Similarly, for all those who are in various ways inspired by Marxism, the emancipation of the individual is only conceivable in the framework of a collective struggle against domination. As a result, it is groups (the "workers", the "peasants", "women", "blacks", "Indians", the "poor", etc.), not the individuals comprising them, who occupy center stage.

In Latin America, the imaginary of multiculturalism and the political constructions issuing from it were thus the result of a conjuncture in which the coming democracy was frequently imagined as properly resulting from the coordinated political participation of

²¹ Daniel Pécaut, "La question de la démocratie", in *Quel avenir pour la démocratie en Amérique latine?*, collective volume, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 1989, pp. 7-15.

collective actors hitherto stifled by authoritarianism. Evidence of this can be found in the large literature devoted to new social movements since the late 1970s.²² In particular, this literature promotes the idea that the working class sectors of the population, which had up till then been controlled by populist leaders and the elites, acquired cultural and political autonomy. This allowed them to directly participate in political decision-making without having their interests diverted by representatives subject to the economic power of society's dominant strata.²³ Gone are the days when a Marxist vulgate reduced ethnic and racial categories to a manifestation of ideological superstructure, itself the reflection of economic infrastructure. Racism towards Indians and the descendants of Africans ceased, for example, to be primarily seen as a discourse intended to legitimate capitalist exploitation. Yet it would be an exaggeration to say that the rapid proliferation of indigenous and black movements resulted from the withering of Marxism on the continent. In contrast to Western Europe, where the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the communist parties that remained faithful to it thoroughly discredited Marxism as an interpretive framework, its retreat was less marked in Latin America. Indeed, organizations defending the interests of indigenous and African-descended populations often formulate their demands in language that claims to be compatible with the requirements of class struggle and many of their activists have not renounced the prospect of a radical transformation of society.

Nevertheless, over the course of the 1980s, a new representation of the social was gradually established. One result of this was that "peasant" demands were increasingly expressed by movements speaking in the name of indigenous people or blacks. While this new representation was still based on the idea of collective subjects bringing about social change through their political participation, the change was significant. In particular, it reflected the exhaustion of the national popular model, according to which the progress of society resulted from the gradual incorporation of all of its components

²² For an overview of this question, see Camille Goirand, "Penser les mouvements sociaux d'Amérique latine. Les approches des mobilisations depuis les années 1970", *Revue française de science politique*, 60 (3), 2010, pp. 445-466.

²³ Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, Arturo Escobar (eds.), *Cultures of Politics/Politics of Culture: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1998.

into the process of modernization.²⁴ With regards to the intellectual production concerning these objects, there are few epistemological debates on ethnicity that have not been touched on by research on Latin America. Work on the region has been extensively marked by the various approaches associated with this constantly growing domain of social scientific inquiry, from the question of the relationship between class and race to theories of intersectionality seeking to account for the manner in which class, ethnicity and gender interact with social relations of domination. In the second edition of what is the most thorough general treatment of the subject, Peter Wade thus remarks that, little over a decade after his book first appeared in 1997, it is even more difficult to grasp the diversity of analytical perspectives.²⁵ For this reason, we will content ourselves with a more limited ambition: that of reiterating the essential place occupied by the constructivist approach in the understanding of everyday ethnicity in Latin America.

Indeed, over the past two decades, the most thoroughly argued analyses have been inspired by recognition of the essentialism from which multiculturalism proceeds or to which it can lead. A great deal of research has been devoted to methodically studying the construction of ethnic and racial identities in a political context in which the cultural plurality of society henceforth enjoys legal recognition. After having been informed of a policy granting collective rights in land use, rural populations not claiming any particular origin and considered as consisting of small groups of peasants here and there came to think of themselves as belonging to a single indigenous group or as the descendants of runaway slaves.²⁶ While constructivism comes in many varieties, all of its

²⁴ Alain Touraine has of course best theorized this development. See Alain Touraine, *La parole et le sang. Politique et société en Amérique latine*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1988. It is nevertheless significant that, in the second half of the 1980s, Touraine and many other analysts had yet to fully grasp the escalating demands expressed by actors calling upon an ethnic or racial identity. That many contemporaneous observers saw these protest movements as above all resulting from the weakening of worker and peasant organizations is no doubt largely explained by the general impression of disorganization that dominated in Latin America as democracy took hold and the region passed through a period of severe economic crisis.

²⁵ P. Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Jean-François Véran, *L'esclavage en héritage (Brésil). Le droit à la terre des descendants de marrons*, Paris, Karthala, 2003; Carlos Agudelo, *Politique et populations noires en Colombie. Enjeux du multiculturalisme*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004; Jan Hoffman French, *Legalizing Identities: Becoming Black or Indian in Brazil's Northeast*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2009; Guillaume

representatives seek to underscore the fact that entities and classifications that seem to go without saying refer to no primary group that might be considered an “essence”; rather, all result from a process of construction.²⁷ According to this approach, after several centuries of intense and continuous miscegenation, the terms “Indian” and “black” were no longer capable of designating individuals with clearly defined origin and characteristics. Instead, they must be understood as the product of power struggles between actors – among them, the above-mentioned objects of categorization – to designate a population to be discriminated against or mobilized. This holds for issues of cultural heritage: in reality, what is claimed as “African” by groups linked to the Brazilian Black Movement – whether it be in the religious, culinary or artistic domains – results from and permeates large spheres of the population well beyond those constituted by individuals who acknowledge African ancestry.²⁸ In Andean countries, the same can be said of many cultural practices: originating in various forms of syncretism, they cannot be reduced to the survival of pre-Columbian elements in the present.

Fredrik Barth’s theory of ethnic frontiers is at the heart of much of the scholarship that insists on the situational and constructed dimensions of ethnicity.²⁹ For this Norwegian anthropologist, the frontiers of an ethnic group do not reflect a concrete culture consisting of stable and definite content. In a novel manner that contrasts sharply with essentialist and primordialist approaches to ethnicity, Barth claims that ethnic groups do not exist in themselves independently of the relations they maintain with other groups but are rather constructed by drawing frontiers in their interactions with the latter on the occasion of contact, exchange and conflict. In Latin America, where supporters of multiculturalism claim to see an identity-based awakening among populations that have up till now been smothered by centuries of colonization and the assimilationist ideology of miscegenation, the constructivist approach demonstrates the importance of political

Boccaro, Patricia Ayala, “Patrimonializar al indígena, Imagi-nación del multiculturalismo neoliberal en Chile”, *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, 67, 2011, pp. 207-227.

²⁷ Razmig Keucheyan, “Comment peut-on être constructiviste? Sur le constructivisme dans les sciences sociales”, in Razmig Keucheyan, Gérald Bronner, *La théorie sociale contemporaine*, Paris, PUF, 2012, pp. 67-80.

²⁸ Michel Agier, “Ethnopolitique: racisme, status et mouvement noir à Bahia”, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 32 (1), 1992, pp. 53-81.

²⁹ Fredrik Barth, “Les groupes ethniques et leurs frontières”, in Philippe Poutignat, Jocelyne Streiff-Fénart (eds.), *Théories de l’ethnicité*, Paris, PUF, 1995 (1969), pp. 203-249.

strategies and NGO intervention in the appearance of groups claiming to represent a single origin, whether indigenous or African. By doing so, it intends to counter the reification of populations now defined by rights-attributing legal categories and therefore recalls the particular context that favored their emergence. In particular, it refuses the idea of culturally specific isolates and to the contrary insists on the frequent absence of substantial difference between groups defined in ethnic or racial terms and the neighboring populations from whom activists seek to distinguish them. For while differentiation exists, it is due, not to distinct origins, but rather to the effects of designation by others and/or an identity-based discourse – sometimes inspired by the social sciences – that is supplied by activists to those they draw together under a single appellation.³⁰

Yet this constructivist perspective does not always elude the criticisms that are made of it in Latin America and elsewhere. Indeed, emphasizing the social construction of ethnicity can encourage claims of belonging to be seen as merely invention or manipulation, as if no historic continuity existed between a population and the group from which it claims to be descended. Culture does not have stabilized limits, it is true, and is not transmitted as such across the ages but it would be difficult to understand certain forms of organization and social hierarchization without relating them to the dynamics generated by colonization and slavery. Similarly, insisting on the possibilities of negotiation available to the actors regularly leads to minimizing or neglecting the structural constraints that are imposed upon them. The insults to which those with the characteristics of peasants from the Andean high planes are subjected in the city or the suspicion cast upon black-skinned passersby are examples of everyday situations that recall the inferiority with which Indians and African slaves have historically been seen. Claiming that no group ever appears *ex nihilo* and that its frontiers are born of a labor of ethnogenesis can thus call into question the legitimacy of a demand formulated in the name of subjective identification with a single origin or situation. As the sociology of

³⁰ Enrique Herrera proposed one of the most radical versions of this type of reasoning. After having contributed to the appearance of the Tacana ethnonym while drafting one of the latter's origin stories as an employee of the Bolivian state, he wrote a point by point deconstruction of the reasoning behind this act of ethnogenesis. Enrique Sarmiento Herrera, "Multiculturalisme et ethnicité en Amazonie bolivienne. La gestion publique des différences ethniques et l'invention des Indiens Tacana", PhD. dissertation in sociology, Université Paris III, 7 November 2011.

collective action has abundantly shown, all mobilizations presuppose that those who are the object of mobilization be specified; by deconstructing the groups that underpin protest movements, the scholar's work therefore also contains the possibility of undermining their validity.

Yet the social sciences have never before been so extensively called upon as in the political debates that today cut across Latin American democracies. The identification of beneficiaries of intervention programs inspired by multiculturalism is often based on the prior work of designation carried out by anthropologists, demographers and sociologists. The latter can be led to express themselves on the limits of an indigenous population's territory or the Maroon origins of a locality peopled by the descendants of Africans.³¹ Efforts to count the number of "Indians" or "blacks" in the course of censuses and the implementation of affirmative action measures in higher education have also given rise to heated polemics.³² Some proponents of policies to reduce inequality may of course see the introduction of new categories of identification as indispensable. But these categories can just as well be the object of significant reservations on the part of those who claim that they generate conflict around identities that have been artificially created on the basis of statistical categories.³³

The fact that controversy over these questions today drives both public and scholarly debate illustrates how difficult it has been for Latin American societies to reach a

³¹ J.-F. Véran, *L'esclavage en héritage (Brésil). Le droit à la terre des descendants de marrons*, op.cit.; J. Hoffman French, *Legalizing Identities: Becoming Black or Indian in Brazil's Northeast*, op.cit.; Odile Hoffman, *Communautés noires dans le Pacifique colombien. Innovations et dynamiques ethniques*, Paris, IRD-Karthala, 2004.

³² See, for example, Jean-Pierre Lavaud, Françoise Lestage, "Compter les Indiens (Bolivie, Mexique, États-Unis)", *L'année sociologique*, 55 (2), 2005, pp. 487-517; Peter Fry, Yvonne Maggie, Marcos Chor Maio, Simone Montreiro, Ricardo Ventura Santos (eds.), *Divisões perigosas. Políticas raciais no Brasil contemporâneo*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Civilização brasileira, 2007.

³³ In Latin America, debates over census categories are nevertheless part of a long history calling upon various representations of the nation. See, for example, Mara Loveman, "The Race to Progress: Census-Taking and Nation-Making in Brazil (1870-1920)", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 89 (3), 2009, pp. 435-470; Élisabeth Cunin, Odile Hoffman, "Description ou prescription? Les catégories ethnico-raciales comme outils de construction de la nation. Les recensements au Belize, XIX^e-XX^e siècles", *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, 67, 2011, pp. 183-205. For a very good survey of the positions adopted by social scientific scholars regarding the issues at stake in the establishment of reserved places for descendants of Africans in entry competitions for Brazilian public universities, see "Introdução ao debate sobre cotas" in the journal *Horizontes antropológicos* (23, 2005). For a presentation and discussion of certain of these questions in Brazil, see, in this issue, Dominique Vidal's review of Stanley R. Bailey's *Legacies of Race: Identities, Attitudes, and Politics in Brazil*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009.

minimally consensual representation of their history in a democratic framework.³⁴ The ideal of miscegenation that nourished the conception of the nation did not disappear with the advent of democracy. More than ever, however, the scale of the task involved if one is to recognize the divisions that characterize these societies – in both cognitive and political terms – remains to be determined.

Most contemporary works dealing with these questions are characterized by an inclusive approach.³⁵ One by one, they address the emergence of Indian movements, the transplantation of multiculturalism to Latin America since the 1990s, the role played by NGOs and large international organizations in bringing about this paradigm shift, its ambiguous ties with the adoption of neo-liberalism, the introduction of policies recognizing indigenous peoples, the institutional responses or inventions of the interested parties and, finally, the various domains concerned by these changes. Contemporary specialists of ethnicity, for their part, address the themes of political participation among Indians and the descendants of Africans, the latter's inclusion in multicultural policies, the judicialization of indigenous struggles, the challenges presented by the implementation of legal pluralism and multicultural education and the relationship between indigenous self-determination, the environment and bio-diversity.

We have sought to privilege a particular point of view: that of the reconstitution of ethnic identities via everyday sociabilities, whether civil or political. While it has sometimes been brought about by a change of historical context, as shown by Cécile Casen in her study of Bolivian Katarism, in the contemporary period this reconstitution is often the result of actors' increased mobility. Such has been the case, recently addressed by the social sciences, of urban-dwelling populations of Indian origin. Despite their large numbers, their association with the land – the result of an historical situation reinforced

³⁴ On this subject, see Paula López Caballero, "Altérités intimes, altérités éloignées: la greffe du multiculturalisme en Amérique latine", *Critique internationale*, 51, 2011, pp. 129-149; C. Gros, D. Dumoulin-Kervran (eds.), *Le multiculturalisme 'au concret': un modèle latino-américain?*, *op.cit.*; Anahí Ariel de Vidas, Odile Hoffman, "Beyond Reified Categories: Multidimensional Identifications among 'Black' and 'Indian' Groups in Columbia and Mexico", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35 (9), 2012, pp. 1596-1614.

³⁵ Among recent publications, see C. Gros, M.-C. Strigler (ed.), *Être indien dans les Amériques*, *op.cit.*; S. Martí y Puig (ed.), *Pueblos indígenas y política en América Latina. El reconocimiento de sus derechos y el impacto de sus demandas a inicios del siglo XXI*, *op.cit.*; V. Robin Azevedo, C. Salazar-Soler (ed.), *El regreso de lo indígena. Retos, problemas y perspectivas*, *op.cit.*

by policies of territorialization – has nearly rendered invisible these city-dwellers who continue to see themselves as Indians.³⁶ Yet as shown by the articles of Kévin Maenhout and Doris Buu-Sao, urban migration is always accompanied by a transformation of social belonging. Similarly, migrations between Latin American countries serve as a distorting mirror, offering the occasion to reconsider the ethnic and cultural stereotypes at work in social relations. Dominique Vidal thus studies Bolivian migrants in São Paulo from the perspective of the intersecting gaze of migrants and host society.

The contributions offered in the present issue seek to take the plasticity of contemporary social relations in Latin America into account by relativizing the place of the ethnic factor via the introduction of other variables – geographical origin, family or professional solidarities, national feeling – that, taken together, constitute so many “grammars of alterity”.³⁷ They also seek to show that the actors’ strategies do not necessarily obey a univocal and collective rationale and can contain apparently contradictory elements. In reality, the foregrounding of “ethnic” considerations must be understood as a language allowing these actors to enhance their visibility and thereby better advance their demands. These demands, however, are not limited to the recognition of specific rights; they also contain a call for social justice, equality and participation. In sum, native populations and the descendants of Africans in Latin America are insisting that they be incorporated into the nation in a way that fully recognizes both their cultural characteristics and their social and material circumstances. Interethnic relations in this region are thus freighted – and in the most quotidian ways – with profound democratic aspirations.

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³⁶ 2.4 million in Mexico and 300,000 in Columbia, according to data supplied by Luisa María Sánchez, “Au nom de la culture: migrations indiennes, espaces d’action et sens d’appartenance (Bogotá, Colombie)”, in C. Gros, D. Dumoulin-Kervran (eds.), *Le multiculturalisme ‘au concret’: un modèle latino-américain?*, *op.cit.*, pp. 335-336.

³⁷ P. López Caballero, “Altérités intimes, altérités éloignées: la greffe du multiculturalisme en Amérique latine”, cited above.

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