

## Whose Voice Counts? Diversity, Postcolonial Continuities and Participation in Plurinational Andean States

*Book Review Essay by Isabella Radhuber*

- *Dilemmas of Difference. Indigenous Women and the Limits of Postcolonial Development Policy*, by Sarah A. Radcliffe. Duke University Press, 2015.
- *El horizonte plurinacional* [The plurinational horizon], by Luis Tapia. Editorial Autodeterminación, 2015.
- *Demokratie und Dekolonisierung in Bolivien. Visionen und Praktiken jenseits des liberalen Paradigmas* [Democracy and decolonization in Bolivia. Visions and practices beyond the liberal paradigm], by Tanja Ernst. 2015, <https://kobra.bibliothek.uni-kassel.de/bitstream/urn:nbn:de:hebis:34-2015061648546/5/DissertationTanjaErnst.pdf>.

The three books under review address the role of diversity, difference and inequality in the politics of Bolivia and Ecuador. These issues signal the contours of an ongoing debate that I will try to sketch through the lens of these three books. The debate at stake tries to follow the discrepancies between the visions and practices attempted by these two countries to deepen their democracies. These visions – aimed at creating possibilities of participation in political decision-making – were brought forth by indigenous and social movements formerly excluded from the political system. Coming out of a context of high social diversity, including indigenous populations with their own social, political, legal and economics forms, they also try to achieve more possibilities for self-determination according to their ways of living. The category of difference becomes important in these visions referring to the de facto conditions of political dialogue taking place across and among differences of ethnicity, class, location, gender, sexuality and others.<sup>1</sup>

It is no coincidence that indigenous populations highlight the category of difference, as selected dimensions of social difference constitute the conditions and processes through which indigenous populations are labelled as different.

These processes are captured by the term indigeneity, ‘defined as the socio-spatial processes and practices whereby indigenous people and places are determined as distinct (ontologically, epistemologically, culturally, in sovereignty, etc.) to dominant universals’.<sup>2</sup> Imbedded in a postcolonial setting that indicates continuing colonial power relations after achieving formal independence, the category of difference has not only been given importance by indigenous visions; it has also been accessed by public policies, often with diverging meanings and contradictory consequences. Against this background, I will create a dialogue between the books and dedicate three sections to the three most burning issues they bring forth: the role of land and resource politics for a plurinational ‘deepening of democracy’, more than liberal participation in confronting postcolonial inequalities, and participatory spaces for a more active citizenship.

These significant oeuvres of the authors rely on large periods of fieldwork and long trajectories of conceptual work. All three books were published in 2015. Published by Duke University Press, Sarah Radcliffe’s book is an accumulation of seven years of collaborative and qualitative fieldwork with indigenous women’s representatives and village women in Ecuador. Luis Tapia’s book, published by the Bolivian publisher Autodeterminación, does not involve specific fieldwork but is the product of the author’s conceptual focus (following his PhD) on democratization and multiculturalism. Tanja Ernst’s PhD dissertation is based on years of close interaction and collaboration with Bolivian organizations; apart from previous visits to Bolivia, it is based upon two field visits in 2008 and 2009 as well.

These three books focus on the indigenous and social movements in Bolivia and Ecuador that have pushed the idea of plurinationality since the 1990s. Envisioning an equal coexistence of the diverse forms of living that exist throughout the country, their struggles culminated in the constitutional recognitions of Ecuador’s and Bolivia’s plurinational states (in 2008 and 2009, respectively). These are based upon a twofold meaning of the nation, as the self-identity of indigenous groups is now recognized within the Bolivian and Ecuadorian nations. In practice, however, these processes for creating more possibilities for participation, self-determination and equal coexistence remain incomplete and contradictory, nourishing debates that seek deeper understanding. In the Latin American region, plurinationalism and decolonial perspectives have flourished in the discussion of diversity and difference. Though indirectly connected, the discussion on resource extractivism has (re)emerged across regions and disciplines, bringing forth a critique of intensive resource extraction that is oriented towards raw material exports dispossessing people of their territories and getting in the way of enhancing possibilities for participation and self-determination. Building upon these debates, the books contribute with insights on diverse inequalities that slow participation in highly diverse societies.

‘I just want people to respect me’ is the attention-getting phrase that Sarah Radcliffe’s introductory remarks begin with. In her book *Dilemmas of Differ-*

ence she proposes to understand colonial legacies and postcolonialism in socially highly diverse Ecuador through a framework of intersecting inequalities. Her authentic decolonial vision brings forth indigenous *Kichwa* and *Tsáchila* women's knowledges and proposals for an active citizenship within a plurinational state. Engaging with these women's experiences from the highland province of *Chimborazo* and the lowland province of *Santa Domingo*, Radcliffe shows the extremely unequal distribution of secure livelihoods across the Ecuadorian territory. An intersectional perspective reveals the relational and qualitative nature of these inequalities. Inequalities are not merely additive but interconnected. '[G]ender inequality', for example, 'is layered on top of pre-existing racial hierarchies and onto prior class hierarchies' (Radcliffe, 2015, p. 38), while indigenous women with a rural background remain abandoned by development, including gender policies.

In *El horizonte plurinacional*, Luis Tapia exposes the plurinational horizon drawn by Bolivia's indigenous movement while striving for the recognition and empowerment of their own democratic forms. He shows how these forms set themselves apart from the liberal-democratic forms based upon political representation, personalized power and individual rights still promoted by the formal state, and how they highlight participatory, direct and collective forms of democracy. Community assemblies and direct presence in state institutions, for example, can transcend mere political representation, while rotating responsibilities aim at limiting personalized power. Indigenous cultural and political forms have long been excluded from formal state structures, which is why a merely 'apparent' state has emerged. This term was first proposed by Rene Zavaleta, Bolivian intellectual and politician in the 1970s; it refers to the formation of an incomplete state that could not permeate all national territory as it continued to exclude the existing political forms. Moreover Tapia suggests concrete political mechanisms that can support the horizon of a more inclusive plurinational state.

In *Demokratie und Dekolonisierung*, Tanja Ernst shows that contemporary Bolivia is the perfect 'playground' for tracing different democratic visions and practices that can complement liberal democracies with more participatory elements. Not only do liberal democratic forms exist based on the assumption that equal voting rights ensure society's majority interests and reduce social inequality. She also shows that traditional indigenous forms exist in the highlands, valleys and lowlands as well, as indigenous-unionized forms of democracy continue to occur. Ernst follows three indigenous communities as they attempt to constitute *autonomías indígenas originarias campesinas* (AIOCs), a legal tool provided by the 2009 Constitution to enhance participation within the plurinational state. She shows the incomplete and partly stagnating processes of strengthening such participatory elements in the traditional indigenous *Aymara*-speaking community of the *Jach'a Karangas*, situated in the highland municipality of *San Pedro de Totora* in Oruro department; the pluricultural group of the *Guaranís* in the lowland city and the rural district of *Charagua* in

Santa Cruz department; and the indigenous-unionized *Quechua*-speaking group in the Andean Valley municipal district *Raqaypampa*.

### **The role of land and resource politics**

All three books reveal that land and resource politics are at the base of persisting inequalities. They are also fundamental to indigenous agendas for enhancing more equal participation. Tapia points out that land and resource politics have already played a significant role as the Bolivian nation was built with the surplus created through the nationalization of mining, and later of hydrocarbons, resulting in state capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But land and resource politics are also key to the agenda of indigenous movements for a plurinational deepening of democracy. This monocultural, colonial nation state is being contested by indigenous movements and challenged through a proposal for recognizing diversity and heterogeneity that build upon mechanisms for common decision-making and a government body in order to deepen democracy. According to their proposal, the financial base for a plurinational state shall be provided with revenues generated by the nationalization of natural resources.

Apart from the historical and ongoing importance for nation-building processes, land and resource politics also determine inequalities affecting indigenous populations. Radcliffe narrates how indigenous groups have given priority to control over land and territories in their pleas for the recognition of ‘diversity within diversity’ and plurinationality. After massive landgrabs perpetuated colonial hierarchies throughout the nineteenth century, *Kichwa* and *Tsáchila* women report that land tenure inequality still primarily determines the vulnerable situation of the indigenous population. Land tenure represents dependency, as explained by the *Chimborazo* woman Delia: ‘If you have land, you have food, animals, somewhere to work – with that I’m not a worker for anyone else!’ (Radcliffe, 2015, p. 85).

Radcliffe underlines her conceptual proposal with illustrative quotes and experiences of the women’s groups she accompanied. She narrates how land tenure is simultaneously structured along multiple and intersectional inequalities. Participation in land distribution and in decision-making are not only highly unequal among indigenous and non-indigenous people, but also among indigenous women and men, as the following quote exemplifies: ‘Tsáchila women generally received just under 3 hectares in inheritance; by contrast, husbands brought around 5.69 hectares into the household’ (Radcliffe, 2015, p. 85). In addition, men often migrate for work in the booming export-led resource sectors while women become even more relegated to domestic spaces and agricultural work in order to guarantee food supplies, thereby increasing gendered labour markets. While there is no doubt that these multiple and intersecting inequalities related to land tenure and indigenous territories do exist, they are, interestingly, perceived in very different ways. The following quote

illustrates this very well: 'Whereas sonala [*Tsáchila* women] understood access to resources and projects to be mediated by men, warmikuna [*Kichwa* women] viewed themselves as claimants to resources in their own right' (Radcliffe, p. 352).

The importance for indigenous populations to have control over their lands explains why they have posited indigenous autonomies at the core of their plurinational state project. In Bolivia, cultural and territorial self-determination gained importance alongside the instrument known as ILO Convention 169, which was approved in 1989 to grant indigenous peoples' rights. Indigenous highland and lowland peoples started to build alliances throughout the 1990s that resulted in the recognition of communal land titles such as Communitarian Lands of Origen (*Tierras Comunitarias de Origen*, TCO) in the 1996 Land Law, alongside the formal recognition of Bolivia as a plurilingual and multi-cultural country, established in the 1994 Education Law and the reformed Constitution of 2009. Within the plurinational state as specified in article 44 of the Bolivian 2010 Framework Law on Autonomy and Decentralization, TCOs as well as municipalities and indigenous regions can now be designated as indigenous autonomies. Ernst states that nineteen municipalities have attempted to become autonomies. Only twelve of these finally handed in the request, mainly due to bureaucratic obstacles. Eleven of these voted in favour to proceed with the elaboration of autonomic statutes in the referendum of 6 December 2009 (*Curahuara de Carangas* voted against proceeding, which was due to internal fragmentation).

According to Tapia, collective land determines the strength of the plurinational state (while collective control over lands and territories is endangered by capitalist expansion of natural resource exploitation). All three books discuss the importance of collective rights in the agendas of indigenous movements. For example, Ernst shows that the alternative democratic forms she analyses generally give more importance to collectivity. Radcliffe lays out that even though indigenous women have supported intercultural programmes such as those brought forth by the Council of Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador focusing on collective rights (e.g., to territories), they have combined that with decolonial constructions of women's rights.

Tapia specifies that the collective rights claimed by indigenous movements refer to binding consultations, common decision-making concerning the exploitation and exploration of natural resources and a common governmental administration. Although these collective indigenous rights were included in the government's agenda, they have been cut back significantly over the past years. Self-government of indigenous territories has only been recognized in a very restricted way as a constitutive element for reforming the central government. Binding consultations before resource extraction on indigenous territories have not been granted, and other representative democratic possibilities such as parliamentary quotas for indigenous peoples have been cut back significantly. Tapia concludes firmly that the 2009 Bolivian Constitution maintains a

neocolonial basis and that plurinationality has been reduced to a liberal multi-cultural model.

### **Confronting postcolonial inequalities and deepening democracy**

The three books reviewed in this essay show how critical proposals coming from formerly excluded groups have contested inequalities that have been blurred alongside the rise of liberal democracy after World War II, and how they have brought the deepening of liberal democracy in Latin America back to the agenda.

Ernst argues that liberal democratic paradigms have historically limited democratic participation for not being able to adequately deal with cultural difference and social inequality. What she calls participatory-emancipatory democracy has the potential to complement and extend liberal democratic frameworks as it provides several ways to increase participation. It contains more consensual-deliberative and power-limiting elements and it gives more importance to the collectivity. Furthermore, it makes no separation between the public and the private sphere and no division between layers of power. Her book is particularly strong in rethinking democracy and inequalities in post-colonial contexts. Ernst argues for the possibility to deepen democracies through complementing liberal-representative democratic forms with other existing democratic practices. She builds upon a decolonial approach towards democratic pluralism as proposed by Bolivia's indigenous movement. Accordingly, democratic pluralism does not only imply the existence of norms and procedures that guarantee competition between societal interest groups, as would be the case in a liberal-democratic model. Their decolonial stance highlights the co-existence and articulation of *de facto* differences in the way in which democracy is practiced throughout the country. She also offers an innovative approach through adapting and extending Nancy Fraser's concept of participatory parity for an intercultural and plurinational context. She builds upon its central claim by taking into account two stances – cultural recognition of difference and socio-economic distribution – that are often separated in the literature.<sup>3</sup> Her empirical analysis of the institutionalization of indigenous autonomies focuses on the recognition of direct, participatory and communitarian democratic forms and examines the possibility to 'deepen democracy' in Bolivia. In this endeavour, she focusses more on the institutionalization on state terrains and less on the social dynamics situated beneath the presence of the state.

Radcliffe gives the most in-depth account on the quality of inequalities that get in the way of participation. She criticizes the actions of development policies that have blurred or stereotyped diversity and therefore failed their goals of fighting poverty and enhancing participation. Indigenous groups have experienced interlocking exclusions and inequalities based on class, ethnicity and territory, and therefore primarily addressed what she calls (post)colonial inter-

secting hierarchies. The two women's groups she did research with have dealt with feminism's liberal politics, based on the assumption that women in the global South would be empowered more by safeguarding individual rights rather than (ethnic) collective rights. Mestizo developmentalism after the 1950s confronted indigenous women with external ascriptions as 'mestiza subject, a nationally endorsed form of whitening, modernizing femininity' (Radcliffe, 2015, p. 46). Neoliberal multiculturalism obliged them to cope with 'a top-down cultural politics of recognition founded on postcolonially inflected concepts' (Radcliffe, 2015, p. 61). Under the banner of vulnerability, indigenous women were primarily stereotyped as a vulnerable and underprivileged group, a stereotype that rendered them from being invisible to becoming excessively visible. Radcliffe contributes to the field of development studies with a strong and innovative postcolonial lens. She explains that the formal rights and possibilities that exist on paper for these stereotyped rural women to get involved and participate in state institutions are actually often inaccessible as barriers get in the way. Lack of recognition, social inequality, racism, geographical distance between their hometowns and the locations of the state institutions, and poverty often make it impossible for these women to effectively exercise their rights. In addition, these barriers have proven to act not merely in a cumulative way but also to reinforce each other. This is why indigenous women in Ecuador have pointed to the fact that formal rights can be insufficient, and perpetuate inequalities when they contain provisions to limit full enjoyment of substantive rights.

Finally, Luis Tapia provides a vocabulary for grasping the plurinational state project and suggests mechanisms and instruments that could support such a state project. Among them figure consensus-oriented and collective decision-making (what he calls 'collegiate government body') as well as power sharing that reconciles forms of fragmentation (known as 'consociationalism'). Also, proportional principles could encourage minority indigenous peoples, and nations' participation, and rotation principles could limit personalized power. His book reflects a conceptual debate taking place in Bolivia and, to a slightly less extent, in Ecuador. It might be a bit challenging at first for the reader to get used to his conceptual vocabulary, given that he does not provide many everyday examples, but this pioneer work conceptualizes an innovative proposal that is emerging.

### **Participatory spaces for a more active citizenship**

Finally, all three books share a focus on those participatory spaces during Bolivia's and Ecuador's separate attempts to deepen the democracies that had opened up and then shut down. Radcliffe describes how indigenous women used and redefined these given participatory spaces. She shows that policies using statistical methods from the 1980s and 1990s increased indigenous women's participation by turning them into objects of technical interventions. Alt-

though their levels of participation appeared to be high during these decades, participatory spaces often remained merely formal and did not provide the possibility to actually practice these rights. Radcliffe considers such methods as a part of biopolitics (referring to Foucault's notion of how political power regulates all aspects of human life), as they address sexuality, reproduction and intimate relations to channel resources to needy groups.

Indigenous women have stressed intersecting postcolonial forms of exclusions, which constitute a form of postcolonial violence that is 'multifaceted, historically rooted, and geographically specific.' (Radcliffe, 2015, p. 182). The author convincingly shows how they have re-politicized the category of 'indigenous women', using the participatory space of intercultural biopolitics set up during neoliberalism as a public space of 'subaltern counter-publics' (paraphrasing Fraser, 1997) for indigenous representation. This makes me curious whether these indigenous women tackling development policies actually include the term development in their own vocabulary.

Simultaneously, these women have reworked the spaces by no longer self-identifying as beneficiaries but as active citizens. Building upon the irreducibility of social heterogeneity and a broader framework to claim recognition of 'diversity within diversity', they brought forth a proposal for an active citizenship. Surpassing liberal frameworks, this proposal stands for the consideration of intersectional inequalities in order to achieve real participation. 'Indigenous women in this sense rework, demonstrate resilience, and organize resistance to intersecting hierarchies as expressed through citizenship practices and political theory.... Comprehending the unequal distribution of resources and power, indigenous practices constitute an uneven and precarious form of insurgent citizenship' (Radcliffe, 2015, p. 254f).

This focus on participatory spaces is also shared in the other two books. Ernst scrutinizes whether the process of establishing indigenous autonomies have opened up participatory spaces, especially, but not exclusively, for women. She concludes that even though these spaces opened up at first, they were soon shut down again. During the elaboration of indigenous autonomies' statutes in *Raqaypampa*, women's rights and social control were strengthened, but then gender parity was only introduced in the executive and legislative body and not in the internal union structure. In *Charagua*, women used discussions around autonomy for positioning their topics, and even though their participation was strengthened during these discussions, their demands for gender specific rights that they had also elaborated were not included in the autonomous statute approved by the Constitutional Court in 2013.

Tapia gives a conceptual account on participatory spaces for deliberation that should complement the politics of recognition in Bolivia. He lays out how these have to be shaped by the three principles of equality, justice, and difference, as he further explains in his book. The spaces opened up by indigenous movements were shut down again by the government party 'Movement to Socialism'. Even though the party maintains a discourse based upon these princi-

ples, in practice the closure of participatory spaces has resulted in a denial of several demands brought forth by these movements. These unattended demands include the claim for common decision-making processes in politics, for collective land titles and binding consultations before extraction over natural resources takes place on their territories.

The role of natural resource politics for the closure of participatory spaces is also highlighted in the other books. Ernst recaps that despite contrary discourse, the Bolivian government has rescinded democratic reforms. She traces this back to a prioritized agenda resting upon extractivist political economy that can be more easily defended by liberal-representative forms than intercultural democratic forms. Radcliffe concludes that the decolonial Sumak Kawsay agenda (Quechua for 'good living') that indigenous women built is based on the notion of 'life forces' and represents a form of knowledge production that is being marginalized. Even though indigenous women dealing with interlocking hierarchies have learned to demonstrate the powerful inequalities they experienced in a highly heterogeneous society, their agenda has ultimately been shelved by the dominance of an extractivist political economy. Hence, all three books show that resource politics have been fundamental to the closure of participatory spaces that intended to tackle existing inequalities, though the process is ongoing as is history. The described experiences and conceptual proposals that the authors bring forth bear specific academic and political potential.

Regardless of the disciplines that the books reviewed here fall under – geography, political science or sociology – and despite the different geographical and linguistic contexts – one book published in Spanish in Bolivia, one in English and one in German – they all reveal the contours of an ongoing debate about the roles of diversity, difference and inequality in the processes of democratization. The emphasis on intercultural democratization within plurinational states has opened up a new and highly relevant panorama, as there are no monocultural societies beyond the borders of Bolivia and Ecuador either. It is crucial that democratization, by definition, must recognize the intercultural dimension, as it puts democracy in a place where it could actually fulfil its basic promise of broadening participation and achieving more political and socio-economic equality.

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## Notes

1. Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2006). *The post-colonial studies reader*. Taylor & Francis.
2. Radcliffe, S. A. (2017). Geography and indigeneity I: Indigeneity, coloniality and knowledge. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41.2, 220-229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515612952>
3. See, for example, <https://newleftreview.org/I/212/nancy-fraser-from-redistribution-to-recognition-dilemmas-of-justice-in-a-post-socialist-age>.