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Ethnicity and the Construction of Nationhood

To say "this combination of words makes no sense" excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary, it may be for various kinds of reasons. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players be supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may show where the property of one man ends and that of another begins. So, if I draw a boundary line, that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

From Conquest to Crisis: An Overview of Bolivia's Political Development

Bolivia is the most "indigenous" country in South America. Though ethnic boundaries are increasingly fuzzy, the population remains, by most accounts, nearly two-thirds indigenous. Of a national population of 6.4 million, one-third are Quechua and one-fourth are Aymara (Diez Astete 1995:31), while the eastern lowlands contain some thirty other indigeous groups.[1] Spanish has been the official language since colonial times, but the majority of Bolivians did not speak it until the latter half of this century. The Aymara and Quechua communities of the western highlands (*altiplano*) and central valley regions have endured more successfully than the eastern tribal groups, whose numbers and cultural cohesiveness are much more precarious

(with the exception of the Guaraní, who number approximately 50,000 in Bolivia and are renowned for their level of political organization).

If we imagine New World indigenous populations along a continuum—from small, relatively isolated tribes to those constituting large, more or less integrated sectors of the nation-state—the highland Andean peoples fall nearer the latter end of this continuum than perhaps any other group (Urban and Sherzer 1991:5). Though far from being the "dominant group" politically, indigenous people dominate Bolivia's cultural landscape, urban as well as rural, by sheer force of numbers and the cohesion of a distinctive complex of cultural traits. Questions of indigenous identity and cultural legitimacy arise in debates over virtually every aspect of national policy. Furthermore, the discourse of indigenous rights is inevitably, if uneasily, yoked to the discourse of class conflict, which seethes constantly here in the poorest of all Latin American countries.

Bolivia's political history has always been complex, and at times chaotic. The Spanish Conquest was disastrous for the Andean civilizations, as it was throughout the Americas; highland populations fared somewhat better than others, by virtue of their numbers, inaccessibility, and level of organization. During the colonial period, the indigenous population was decimated by disease and slavery; tens of thousands died in the immense silver mine of Potosí alone. Indigenous social organization was severely disrupted, but not destroyed; in fact, it remained strong enough to stage a series of rebellions that at times seriously threatened Spanish rule. These reached their peak between 1778 and 1781, at which point 80,000 Indians were massacred in retaliation (Barton 1968:143); nevertheless, uprisings continued sporadically for decades thereafter.

In 1825, the revolution led by Simón Bolívar won independence from Spain but did little to improve the lot of the indigenous majority. Political life was characterized by a series of coups in the capital and continuing Indian rebellions in the countryside. Economically, the country depended on exports of metals, mainly silver and tin. By the early twentieth century, Bolivian mining was dominated by three families, collectively known as La Rosca, who effectively dominated political life as well. The majority continued to live in conditions of serfhood until the 1952 revolution led by the Movimiento Revolucionario Nacionalista (MNR). Though many argue that its

true intent was simply another bourgeois takeover of the state apparatus, the coup catalyzed a groundswell of popular discontent and turned into a mass insurrection, with ramifications far beyond what its upper- and middle-class "leaders" probably had in mind.

One of the most significant changes was abolishing the literacy requirement for suffrage; "In one stroke, the Indian peasant masses were enfranchised, and the voting population jumped from some 200,000 to just under 1 million" (Klein 1982:232). The MNR also nationalized the mines, extended rural education, and introduced the country's first real land reform. This transferred land to the peasants, but also outlawed communal ownership, thus abetting in the disarticulation of indigenous land tenure systems and speeding the dissolution of many rural communities. Many Indians were granted small plots which, divided among subsequent generations, could not support an agricultural subsistence. The resulting land crisis has been a major cause of urban migration.

The shared excitement with which workers, peasants, and the middle class rushed to exercise their newfound political power temporarily concealed the deep social divisions in the revolutionary coalition. The limits of the MNR's revolutionary ideals soon became evident, as conservative party elements grew increasingly reluctant before the growing demands of the working class. No other mines were nationalized after those of La Rosca. By 1960, ten U.S. oil companies were operating in Bolivia and the government had resumed payments on defaulted loans from the 1920s, which the Roosevelt administration had itself declared fraudulent in 1943 (Klein 1982:240). The MNR, well aware of the U.S. response to Arbenz's radical reforms in Guatemala, was anxious to avoid the label of communist-inspired regime (Klein 1982:233). In return, the United States was mildly supportive, mistaking the MNR for a fascist Peronista-type party. But tepid U.S. support could not sustain the MNR against an impatient working class; the coalition's various factions grew increasingly hostile, until compromise was exhausted. The weakened government was ousted by a military coup in 1964, giving way to a series of military dictatorships characterized by frequent state violence and repression of dissent, lasting until 1982. Since then, Bolivia has enjoyed an unprecedented period of, if not democracy in the full sense of the word, at least the orderly transfer of power.[2]

During the research period, the country was governed by the "Acuerdo Patriótico" (AP), one of the more striking examples of "strange bedfellows" in recent Latin American politics. A principal member of this coalition was the Acción Democrática Nacionalista, the rightist political machine of General Hugo Banzer Suárez. Banzer previously ruled as dictator, seizing power via a military coup in 1971 and effectively suppressing dissent (with support from the United States) until ousted by another coup in 1978. The other major partner was the Movimiento Izquierdista Revolucionaria, led by Jaime Paz Zamora, who was president during the AP administration, despite having been imprisoned under Banzer's earlier regime. Founded in 1971 by a group of young Marxist intellectuals as an alternative to the hidebound syndicalism of the traditional leftist parties, the MIR later shiftly sharply to the right, eventually embracing the U.S.-blessed neoliberalism whose implementation has provoked heated debate at all levels of society.

The most prominent member of the opposition, and subsequent victor of the 1993 elections, was the MNR. Current president Gonzalo (Goni) Sánchez de Lozada[3] is a U.S.-educated millionaire whose formative years left him with such a marked English accent that he has acquired the nickname *el gringo.* Sánchez de Lozada's vice-president, apparently picked to offset the former's foreign image, is Aymara intellectual and former university professor Victor Hugo Cárdenas, heralded in the press as Bolivia's first indigenous vice-president (*NMH* November 25, 1992).[4]

While the election of an Aymara politician to such a prominent post is certainly a first, the 1993 election was notable for the strong presence of other candidates with indigenous ties. Among these were Max Fernández, a millionaire of humble Quechua origins, and Carlos Palenque, a charismatic musician and radio and television personality turned spokesman for La Paz's Aymara immigrant population.[5] Perhaps unsurprisingly, indigenous-identified politicians seem to enjoy their greatest popularity when not actually in power. In the wake of the MNR's unpopular policies, public opinion is as likely to paint vice-president Cárdenas as an ethnic token or political sell-out, as it is to laud him as a champion of the Aymara people. Nevertheless, the emergence of Aymara and Quechua leaders in the center of national politics suggests a trend that will not be turned back.

The programs and posturings of the major parties by no means exhaust the full range of Bolivian political life. Many smaller parties either form coalitions with the more powerful or eschew electoral politics altogether in favor of other types of action. Some have an explicitly pro-indigenous platform, though their success at mobilizing the indigenous masses has been limited. Much of Bolivia's urban working class and an even greater proportion of the peasantry have withdrawn from most political activity, disillusioned by continued poverty and corruption and skeptical of the ability or sincerity of elected officials; the ethnic solidarity inspired by indigenous politicians may abet that skepticism somewhat, but has by no means dissipated it entirely.

Yet while one source claims that 80 percent of the work force belong to no organized party,[6] it can be argued that, overall, Bolivians are politically involved to a degree rarely seen in North America. Voting (which is mandatory) may be one of the *least* important expressions of this involvement, which covers a wide range of activities (considerably restricted during past periods of government repression). Pressure tactics such as labor strikes, hunger strikes, and mass demonstrations are used frequently, though with less success under the current administration than previously. In turn, the MNR government hopes to incorporate popular political sentiment under an ambitious plan of "popular participation" that would organize citizen political activity at the community level.

The most significant entity representing "the masses" and providing structure to their discontent is the Central Obrera Boliviana, a nationwide coalition of labor unions, peasant federations, and other popular organizations. In terms of political power and institutional longevity, the COB is unequaled in Latin America (Dunkerly 1984:43). Born of the currents unleashed during the 1952 revolution, its strength has waxed and waned over the decades; at times it held virtual veto power over the government's actions, while during other periods its leaders were forced into exile as the political space for dissent clamped shut. Though traditionally nonpartisan (the leadership shifts among coalitions of militants from various parties), the COB maintains a generally socialist orientation, serving as the watchdog of proletarian interests. The various and often hostile factions of the left seem to agree that, while far from perfect, the COB is the highest and most durable achievement of Bolivian

working-class power to date. Nevertheless, both its power and its credibility have been severely weakened by the economic and labor policies of the last decade (Davila 1991) and will likely decline even further if the privatization of state enterprises continues.

During the research period, Bolivia experienced a minor resurgence of armed revolutionary groups whose activities included sabotage and other acts usually characterized as "terrorism." The most active of these was the Ejército Guerrillero Tupac Katari,[7] whose political orientation was not so much communist as strictly *indigenista*, their fundamental demand being the return of the land to Bolivia's indigenous "nations." Though causing considerable alarm to Bolivian authorities, the EGTK was not nearly as large, well-organized, or single-mindedly violent as neighboring Peru's Sendero Luminoso; its members generally limited their attacks to infrastructure, rather than people, and in fact gained a reputation for being less than competent as terrorists (their first major action, against an electrical tower in Uyuni, cost the lives of two members through mishandling of explosives).[8]

No political overview of Bolivia would be complete without mention of coca and its derivative, cocaine. While cocaine use certainly exists in Bolivia, it is less common than in the United States (Bolivia's worst drug problem is unquestionably alcohol abuse). Furthermore, the city of La Paz is not a major drug trafficking center, certainly not in comparison to the burgeoning eastern city of Santa Cruz. However, La Paz is where political pressure from the United States is brought to bear upon the state decision-making apparatus, and this makes it an important battlefield in the cocaine wars.

Coca's role in Bolivian culture runs far deeper than the traffic of cocaine. Used by indigenous people for millenia, the leaf when chewed is a mild stimulant that provides temporary relief from hunger, cold, and fatigue. The benefits to a impoverished population that lives by arduous manual labor in a cold and rigorous environment are obvious. Beyond this, shared consumption of coca is an important element in many social and ritual gatherings and is central to Andean religion. Far from having been superseded by Christianity, this religion retains great significance for millions of Aymara and Quechua people, often existing in syncretized form along with Catholicism.

Coca is equally central to the Bolivian economy. The money it brings in (estimates range from $400 to 600 million a year) is close to that of all other exports combined (Andreas 1991). The coca industry employs 75,000 families and has led to the creation of another 175,000 jobs in other areas. Between 1980 and 1986, while the official unemployment rate rose to 25 percent, employment in the coca industry tripled. Clearly, coca is the buoy keeping a sinking economy afloat. The social upheaval that would be unleashed should its eradication become a reality (admittedly an unlikely prospect) can only be imagined. Yet, in an impressive display of political myopia, those touting the New Economic Plan (NEP) as the shock treatment for Bolivia's stagnation consistently leave coca out of their calculations; when asked how the International Monetary Fund was addressing the links between poverty and the drug trade, an IMF spokesman replied "We haven't looked at poverty in Latin America in this context" (Andreas 1991:15).

From another point of view, however, it would seem that this "quintessential expression of the market-driven enterprise" (Andreas 1991:15) does in fact play a role in economic policy. While a far cry from the "cocaine dictatorships" of the early eighties, when government involvement in the drug trade was pervasive and blatant, measures instituted by recent administrations—weaker disclosure requirements for the central bank, a tax amnesty for repatriated capital, and the prohibition of inquiries into the origins of all wealth entering Bolivia and of bank deposits made in dollars (this last was later rescinded)—indicate that government too knows on which side its bread is buttered.[9]

Nevertheless, the political exigencies of the Washington-imposed "war on drugs" generate a certain amount of aggressive and conspicuous action against the coca trade, including media campaigns of the "just say no" variety, half-hearted crop substitution programs, occasional military attacks on small-scale producers, and repression of the coca-growers' union. Law enforcement's abuses of peasants and other citizens, as well as Washington's demands for the extradition of drug traffickers, generate a good deal of resentment against the United States and have led virtually all parties of the left to adopt the free cultivation of coca ("for traditional uses") as a political plank, at the same time that they accuse their opponents of involvement in drug trafficking.

While the above sketch may suggest a nation barely held together at the seams, Bolivians have had plenty of practice in coping with such circumstances. In an urban atmosphere where marches, strikes, and tear gas are routine, even a national state of siege (such as the one that lasted through most of 1995) disrupts most people's lives only to a limited degree, though it may have extreme consequences for a small minority. Though wracked by severe difficulties and a disparity between rich and poor that would be shocking had such injustices not become commonplace, Bolivia is much less violently conflictive now than during the greater part of its history. Until the 1980s, coups were more common than elections and the country had had more governments than years of independence. The unprecedented decade of relative domestic peace (stressing the word *relative*) has permitted a new openness in political activity and broadened the spectrum of public debate. But while not in a period of such obviously convulsive change as a coup or a civil war, the economic, political, and social transformations being wrought in Bolivia are, arguably, just as revolutionary.

The central conflict that has divided Bolivia throughout most of its history derives from the schism between the poor indigenous majority and the elite *criollo* minority (with the small, mostly *mestizo* middle class aligning itself with one or the other as the situation warrants). Of course, this is a vastly simplified picture of a dynamic historical process involving shifting allegiances among the military, the peasantry, the urban proletariat, the business elite, and the burgeoning informal and service sectors. The most recent cluster of political crises springs from the government's shift toward neoliberalism and away from the country's long-term (though frequently interrupted) orientation toward more generally socialist goals. While many of the regimes of the last few decades were far from "socialist," they seldom threatened the economic changes implemented after 1952, such as the land reform and state control of the primary productive and service sectors.

In contrast, president Sánchez de Lozada has a technocratic approach to government (he is also credited with designing the plan that stemmed Bolivia's runaway inflation in the mid-1980s). Unsurprisingly, given his many years of study in the United States, he strongly supports the neoliberal model and bases his highly publicized "Plan de Todos" on a three-pronged approach: educational reform, "popular participation"

(via government-organized citizens' groups), and "capitalization"—viewed by many as a euphemism for the surrender of Bolivia's economic base to foreign interests. While many Latin American nations are undergoing economic restructuring to meet foreign debt obligations, that restructuring has been even more profound in Bolivia. Sixty percent of Bolivia's dwindling exports go toward servicing the debt; with an annual per capita income of $288 (U.S.), Bolivia's debt amounts to $552 per capita.[10] The World Bank and the IMF have imposed stringent belt-tightening measures, pressuring Bolivia to streamline or sell off state-run enterprises, often at bargain-basement prices. The first sign of a major shift in direction came with the decision to privatize the mines—Bolivia's greatest source of legitimate revenue—after laying off close to 20,000 miners (this massive dismissal was officialy dubbed the *relocalización*, but in fact miners were not "relocalized" anywhere).[11] The miners' union, for decades the backbone of the Bolivian labor movement, today finds itself in severely weakened condition, with thousands of miners out of work, thousands more working in small cooperatives, and much of its political clout neutralized.

While many areas of the economy have suffered cutbacks (with the notable exception of the military), the mines provoke especially strong reactions. Aside from being the cornerstone of the legitimate economy, their nationalization was one of the centrally symbolic acts of the revolution; its reversal is practically unthinkable to many. Popular reaction to the continued privatization of other state enterprises has been intense and volatile. Not only is the working class alarmed at seeing the gains of the revolution melt away, there is also public outrage at what is seen as the surrender of national sovereignty to U.S. and multinational interests. Every step the government takes toward the neoliberal horizon provokes a new wave of public protest, but implementation of the NEP continues, albeit haltingly and with much resistance. The NEP's impact extends to the educational system as well; the direct effect this will have on the majority of the population, combined with the decline of the miners, has brought teachers to the fore as the most visible and combative sector confronting the government. Dominated by the Trotskyite Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR), the teachers' union attempts to channel the tide of popular discontent toward the long-term goal of socialist revolution, with only limited success.

The global decline of socialism has provoked a crisis of another sort in some sectors of the working class. The traditional parties of the left find themselves swimming against the tide of world politics; even those who never supported a Soviet-style model have suffered the ideological fallout of events in eastern Europe, Nicaragua, and Cuba. The POR marches doggedly onward, attributing the Soviet collapse to the failure of Stalinism, not socialism, and characterizing the current era as "the crisis of capitalism." While such a claim may indicate more bravado than discernment, Bolivia's beleaguered and demoralized working class is clearly not ready to give up the ghost. On the contrary, as the crisis deepens, more fundamental questions of nationalism, ethnic identity, government responsibility, and class interests are drawn into the debate.

The Indigenous Metropolis: Urban Aymaras in La Paz

La Paz, Bolivia's capital, contains one-fifth of the country's population (INE 1992) and a similar fraction of the continent's Aymara speakers; one-half of its population is Aymara (Albó 1988:30). La Paz has a uniquely Indian-urban flavor, its meld of occidental and indigenous traits due to the thousands of rural immigrants from the surrounding *altiplano*. The "two faces of La Paz"—*criollo* and Aymara—are notable in the contrast between "inside" and "outside." Indigenous faces, dress, food, and language are ubiquitous on the street, but rarely pass the doors of expensive shops, restaurants, or hotels, where *de facto* segregation still reigns. Descending the steep cobblestone streets to the wider thoroughfare of the *prado*, one moves through a cultural scene busy with street vendors and the crush of passersby, as well as the numerous beggars and homeless, many of them immigrants who fled rural poverty only to confront an equally harsh reality in the city.

In La Paz, one seldom needs to enter a store; nearly everything one could want, from food and clothes to handicrafts and small appliances, is available from street vendors, many of them Aymara women wearing the characteristic multi-layered skirt (*pollera*) and bowler hat. Stooped *aparapitas* (porters) wearing the rural *lluch'u* (knitted cap) and *wisk"u* (sandals) maneuver impossibly bulky loads through the crowds; even on middle-class men, the *lluch'u* can often be glimpsed under the

popular western fedora. Only upon entering an upper-class shopping mall or office building does one realize that Hispanic language and culture still hold exclusive sway in La Paz's formal sector. In the buildings where the city's business is done, the indigenous ambience gives way to a thoroughly hispanicized atmosphere. The powerful racism that still exists in Bolivia reveals itself when the two sectors are brought into contact; many establishments are off limits to women wearing the *pollera*, and one of the most difficult and humiliating experiences for a monolingual Aymara speaker is trying to get waited upon in one of the city's many government offices.[12]

Though most Aymaras are peasants (and in the *altiplano* virtually all peasants are indigenous), they are also an urban people and have been for generations (Albó 1990). In the familiar Third World pattern, urban migration increases with each passing year. In 1950, one-third of those living in the department of La Paz were urban dwellers; by 1992, that proportion had nearly doubled (INE 1992). The largest concentration of Aymara speakers is La Paz's sister city, El Alto, a rural-urban border zone where adobe is interspersed with brick and tin housing. As the principal point of arrival for rural migrants, El Alto grew from just under 100,000 inhabitants to over 400,000 between 1976 and 1992 (INE 1992). By 1988 it was the fourth largest urban center in Bolivia (after Santa Cruz, La Paz, and Cochabamba) and was officially declared a separate city. In character it is more Aymara, more working-class, more closely connected to the surrounding rural communities, and more removed from metropolitan cultural pursuits than is "La Paz proper" and is home to much of the light industry and cheap labor on which the latter depends.

Social scientists only recently have turned their attention toward this vital urban expression of Andean culture. Archondo (1991:23), in one of the few book-length treatments of the urban Aymara, notes that "when one looks for studies about things Andean, one finds that the majority have chosen rural or agricultural settings as their point of observation . . . Investigation of the urban environment of Andean migrants has yet to spark great interest."[13] In the *altiplano*, links between city and country are vital to the economic survival of both. One might consider urban-rural ties a modern extension of the Andean "archipelago" subsistence strategy described by Murra (1972), in which ecological niches at different altitudes are exploited in

complementary fashion; the city can be considered yet another "level" of economic niches and resources.[14] Due to the importance of the urban-rural interchange, Aymara cultural patterns have melded with urban influences to form a unique way of life that in many ways still manifests the cultural and economic logic of more traditional highland communities (Albó 1988, 1990; Archondo 1991; Farthing 1991). As Muñoz (forthcoming) has noted, conceptions of migration as a "modernizing" force have had to be revised or discarded. Correspondingly, in addition to the growing penetration of Aymara culture by urban influences, migration has also given rise to a powerful indigenous cultural presence in the very heart of the metropolis.

Popular Culture and "The Language Problem"

The popular culture of urban La Paz spans a continuum from exclusively western-oriented to traditionally Aymara, with many combined and syncretized forms in between. Many upper- and middle-class Bolivians, especially youth, take their cue from the United States for fashion, music, and leisure pursuits. Children's products display images of Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers, and video jockeys on the Latin American version of MTV drop English phrases ("Hey, what's up?" "That's right!") into their between-song patter. Madonna and Michael Jackson are popular radio fare, and movie marquees advertise the latest films of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Kevin Costner. Nevertheless, there is a thriving folkloric music scene, and Aymara and bilingual radio stations are nearly as common as Spanish ones. La Paz's biggest festival is the Día de Nuestro Señor de Gran Poder, which attracts thousands of spectators with a parade through the historically Aymara neighborhoods; many of the 80,000 dancers and musicians are Aymara, either native *paceños* or rural immigrants.[15] Another event produced by and for the popular sectors is the annual Cholita Paceña contest sponsored by Carlos Palenque's Canal 4—a sort of beauty contest for the *de pollera* set, but focusing more on personality, eloquence, and skills such as dancing and singing than on physical attractiveness. Just as noteworthy is the cultural production of indigenous and *indigenista* intellectuals. Prominent among these is film director Jorge Sanjinés, whose considerable output (most of it combining Aymara and Spanish language) domi-

nates modern Bolivian film, focusing on themes of Aymara identity, *mestizo* and Yankee exploitation, and urban-rural linkages. In music, indigenous elements appear in the repertoires of formally trained jazz and classical composers. There is also a growing body of scholarship by Aymara social scientists (including vice-president Cárdenas), and as Aymara linguistics continues to advance, occasional Aymara newspapers such as Juan de Dios Yapita's *Yatiñasawa* and Felix Laime's *Jayma* have appeared on the scene. There are plans to initiate an all-Aymara television station by the year 2000.

The emergence of Aymara in the mass media reflects a broader change in language attitudes. Disdained as a mark of low status since colonial times, Aymara is now enjoying a revitalization; rather than denying knowledge of the language for fear of being socially stigmatized, many now express pride in being able to speak it. Organizations such as ILCA (Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Aymara) and THOA (Taller de Historia Oral Andina) pursue original linguistic and anthropological research under the direction of native Aymara speakers. Still, Spanish remains dominant in the upper levels of society. English, though rarely used in everyday communication, has even greater prestige; studying English is a popular pursuit among those who can afford it, and even in rural areas, schoolchildren bombard visiting foreigners with requests to teach them a few words. At present, the languages taught in public schools are more often English and French than Aymara or Quechua, though results are meager; teachers are seldom fluent themselves, and most students never get to use the little they learn.[16] Previously, bilingual education programs targeted only those students whose lack of Spanish fluency made them a necessity; but bilingual/intercultural education is a cornerstone of the current educational reform, which aims to halt the decline in indigenous language fluency in the younger generations and raise Aymara, Quechua, and Guaraní to the status of truly "official" languages. If this plan is maintained throughout the coming years, Bolivia should see significant changes both in language demographics and in language attitudes.

While "the language problem" has been identified by Bolivian policy makers as a crucial obstacle to national unity, and presents many pragmatic problems in terms both of pedagogy and of public policy, it has also served as a foil for ethnic

rivalries and ideological debates that run deeper than linguistic difference. As Clifford Geertz argued, "The 'language problem' is only the 'nationality problem' writ small, though in some places the conflicts arising from it are intense enough to make the relationship seem reversed. Generalized, the 'who are we' question asks what cultural forms—what systems of meaningful symbols—to employ to give value and significance to the activities of the state, and by extension to the civil life of its citizens" (1973a:242).

In a sense, language is only one among numerous symbolic systems that vie for advantage in the public arenas of cultural production. But language is qualitatively different from other systems in the unique way that it structures both personal and group identity. Of those traits that provide a basis for communal relationship, a shared language creates the strongest bond among people who feel that they "belong together." "Common language and the ritual regulation of life . . . everywhere are conducive to feelings of ethnic affinity, especially since the intelligibility of the behavior of others is the most fundamental presupposition of group formation" (Weber 1978:389). The social gulf between Aymara speakers and Spanish monolinguals is partly due to the fact that they do not find each other's behavior intelligible; they lack the mutual understanding, the joint interpretation of interactive cues and contextual knowledge, that people who share a language and culture enjoy.

Furthermore, the high awareness of linguistic conflict makes it a likely point of attack in a wide range of social situations. Individuals are frequently ridiculed for their speech when it is their politics, social position, or cultural behavior that is "really" at issue. But as the epigraph that began this chapter suggests, virtually every time Spanish or Aymara is used in La Paz, a subtle but significant territorial claim is made: to the right to use the prestige language, although imperfectly; to the right to use the indigenous language in a public space, though it may offend some ears; to reinforce the boundaries of Spanish and deny the legitimacy of indigenous languages by refusing the latter a response in "official" domains. All of these situations and many others remind speakers on a daily basis that "for any speaker of it, a given language is at once either more or less his own or more or less someone else's, and either more or less cosmopolitan or more or less parochial—a borrowing or a heritage; a passport or a citadel" (Geertz 1973a:241).

Language is also the medium in which social categories and identities are defined. As such, it plays a unique role in the incessant "war of position" over what constitutes both the national interest and the national character. At stake is "not just the replacement of one language by another, but the taking over of both the public and the personal functions of language . . . the means of communication and the consciousness behind this communication, including self-concepts, identities, and voices" (Walsh 1991:43). In this sense, the pressure to adopt Spanish is crucial to the identity formation of indigenous peoples and to the construction of a collective national subject.

In mapping the respective positions and strategies of "Aymara culture" and "occidental culture" (taking these as two essentialized extremes that in reality flank a wide range of syncretized forms), it is useful to draw upon two abstractions often employed in nationalist debates: the "Indigenous Way of Life" and the "Spirit of the Age." Geertz (1973a:240) saw the problem of defining the collective national subject as revolving around the "content, relative weight, and proper relationship" of these two abstractions, one stressing local traditions, practices and institutions, the other oriented toward a more global history and direction. He designated these two perspectives "essentialist" and "epochalist," claiming that national language debates hinge on the tension between them. More than an intellectual rivalry between differering philosophies, this tension is a struggle between opposed social institutions and the human groups that control them (252).

In Bolivia, the essentialist/epochalist schism can also be read as a dynamic between "inward-oriented" and "outward-oriented" perspectives. The first is typified by the valorization of traditional cultural forms, such as indigenous languages, food, music, rituals, and other aspects of rural life; it finds its fullest expression in indigenous revitalization movements and the intense patriotism that is so marked in Bolivia. The outward orientation focuses on an external cultural ideal (usually the United States), assigning much greater prestige to foreign and/or urban products, languages, and lifestyles than to local ones; this view is often expressed in racist practices or the derogation of Indians and indigenous culture.[17] Language attitudes are thus one facet of a broader struggle in which *lo propio* and *lo ajeno* (the native and the foreign) are set in opposition to each other and constantly compared.

The cultural production and consumption characteristic of the inward orientation is likely to be considered "vulgar" relative to that of the outward orientation. The charge of vulgarity also appears frequently in attacks that are at their heart political, such as middle-class criticisms of political leaders whose constituency is indigenous or working-class.[18] The outward orientation is stronger as one moves up the class hierarchy; in this sense the two orientations roughly correspond to two "class cultures" (though this simplified view overlooks, for the moment, the significant divisions within classes, as well as the presence of contradictory elements within any one group's cultural repertoire). Each orientation is linked to macro-level phenomena that belie a more direct class interest; inward-oriented sectors generally oppose the political and economic trends favored by the outward-oriented, and vice versa. Still, the correspondence between class position and cultural orientation is far from complete, most notably in the adherence of working-class youth to outward-oriented cultural products. Personal economic strategies also play a part, as when ethnically indigenous, working-class individuals adopt an outward orientation for reasons of social mobility.

In addition to those cultural practices expressing one or the other orientation, there are second-order phenomena that can be read as reactions *against* each of them. For example, Farthing (1991) notes that the decline in the power of the urban proletariat (an indicator of an increasingly outward orientation) has led many Bolivians to turn back to the family as the principal economic unit, rejecting traditional union structures in favor of community-based organizations. Similarly, government attempts to eradicate coca, which can be read as an attack against inward-oriented religion and culture (at the behest of outside actors such as the United States), have spurred the revalorization of coca by opposition political parties. Another example would be the intense popular protest sparked by the (outward-oriented) privatization of state enterprises. One indicator that the New Economic Plan is popularly viewed in terms of outward vs. inward loyalties is the use of the term *vendepatria*—one who sells his own country to outsiders—as the archetypal political insult.

Reactions against the inward orientation tend to be more subtle and indirect, perhaps because few Bolivians are willing to state explicitly their cultural preference for the foreign. Such

biases are often expressed in jokes that ridicule either indigenous culture itself—as in the extensive genre of "stupid peasant in the big city" jokes, which mock indigenous culture and people as inadequate to the demands of modern life—or the ideological stance of valorizing that culture. The following example of multilevel humor derides the inward-orientated stance *per se*:

> Jaime Paz, George Bush, and Mikhail Gorbachev schedule a top-secret meeting to be held in an airborne jet, to ensure maximum security. The meeting is in progress when the motor fails and the plane begins to descend rapidly. Bush, unruffled, says "Well, mine is a highly developed country and we have the technology to deal with any situation, so I'm not worried." He leaps from the plane and presses a button on his pen, which opens into a parachute and floats him safely to the ground. Gorbachev then says, "Well, my country also has a highly developed technology; maybe the economy is in crisis, maybe perestroika isn't working, but I too am unafraid." He jumps from the plane and pulls out a pocket calculator, which at the touch of a button opens up into a parachute, and floats safely to the ground. Paz then says, "My country has its own technology, handed down from our ancestors, which has served our people for thousands of years, so I'm not worried." He jumps from the plane and plummets to the ground like a stone. Bush and Gorbachev find his broken body with its fist tightly clenched around an object; upon prying it open, they find a little tin that reads "*MENTISAN—alivia todo: para resfríos, para quemaduras, para caídas . . .* "[19]

Appreciating this joke requires a familiarity with the product Mentisan, a petroleum jelly whose TV commercials state proudly and prominently that it is a product of *la industria boliviana*. The familiar green tin—which formerly carried a slogan like the one in the joke—is such a staple of the Bolivian household pharmacy that it can perhaps be considered the archetype of Bolivian small industry. It appears here as a foil for the "traditional science and technology of our ancestors" extolled by *indigenistas* and other inward-oriented types who are indirectly ridiculed in the joke.

More than simply a humorous jab at those of an opposing political philosophy, this joke is a rhetorical gambit in the promotion of a supposedly superior cultural strategy (the joke itself

leaves little doubt as to which strategy has greater survival value). It serves as a metaphorical device in the service of a particular nationalist ideology. Further uses of popular humor to strengthen or subvert various nationalist discourses are explored below; but first, let us explore the origins of these discourses and the obstacles faced by those who pronounce them.

Obstacles to the Construction of a Unified and Unifying Bolivian Nationalism

Since the 1952 revolution, a major government concern has been how to forge a unified nation from a diverse melange of frequently antagonistic social groups. Bolivia is not well consolidated as a nation, and many see this as a primary cause of its underdevelopment. Some of its most characteristic features are also its most formidable obstacles to "national unity": linguistic diversity, a conflictive past, the persistence of indigenous cultures, a strong working-class consciousness, sharp social inequities, and marked regional differences. These features define *lo boliviano* for many, but also tend to pull any notion of a unifed "Bolivian society" away from a common center.

The notion of "Bolivian society" is itself problematic, given the formidable social barriers separating different sectors. Certainly, all societies display internal contradictions and antagonisms. But even defining "society" broadly—as a self-reproducing, socially bounded sphere whose members see themselves as parts of an entity which far exceeds the lifespan of any individual, yet provides an underpinning of continuity connecting them all—it is doubtful whether Bolivia can be considered a single society. For many rural dwellers, the idea of the nation is still a very marginal reality. Even those living in the geographic and semiotic heart of urban life do not all "think" the nation in the same way. They may share a belief in its existence and yet have very distinct conceptions of its history, its goals, its social cleavages, its achievements and frustrations. In other words, while the idea of "the nation" is generally accepted, even taken for granted, its specific ideological content varies widely. The notion of "Bolivian society" should be critically viewed as a fantasy that is collective but not unanimous, a discursive and ideological fabrication whose purpose is to

make itself "real" in the private and shared imaginations of those whom it aspires to embrace.

In a sense, ideologically constructing Bolivian society is less complex than constructing "the Bolivian nation." Defining the precise contents of a society is not as crucial to its conceptual reality as is merely promoting the assertion that it exists (ideally, to the degree that this assertion becomes automatic); the more the notion of "Bolivian society" circulates unquestioned through the orbit of public discourse, the more "real" it becomes. But in the construction of nationhood, ideological and political differences are critical. The nationalist project is one of articulating the ways different groups "think" the nation, of creating and circulating a unified and unifying nationalist discourse around that conception of the nation promoted by the dominant social sector(s).[20] A look at the discourses and practices that express dominant as well as oppositional interests will reveal how the current vision of the nation has evolved, the major schisms that divide it, and the ways in which alternative and oppositional discourses are suppressed or incorporated (though never completely).

The forging of a nation in the popular consciousness of those who comprise it is a hegemonic project whose vulnerability to contestation varies according to specific social and historical factors. In Bolivia, three major fault lines cut across attempts to establish the nation as the most salient entity with claims on subjects' loyalty and identity. These are region, ethnicity, and class.

Bolivia's nine departments are intersected by deep cultural, economic, and political divisions, expressed in individuals' strong identification with their own department and frequent rivalry toward others. While this rivalry is often good-natured, it can also be overtly hostile; personal defects or social conflicts are often ascribed to one's opponents' place of origin. Given the different regions' geographic and cultural diversity, the difficulty of travel between them, and the incipient state of the national media, the scarcity of cultural symbols to represent them all or evoke feelings of identification as "Bolivians" (rather than as *paceños*, *cruceños*, etc.) is not surprising.

In addition, there are few public rituals that effectively reinforce a sense of nationwide belonging.[21] National holidays contribute to the fortification of patriotic feeling; yet the nationalist emphasis of Bolivian Independence Day is offset by the

fact that each department has its own patriotic anniversary, celebrated with nearly equal fervor. Such ceremonies highlight regional divisions at the same time that they intensify nationalist feeling. Other major holidays either lack any specifically nationalist content (like Christmas or Mothers' Day), or trigger sentiments that run counter to an ideology of national unity (such as Día de la Raza or Día de los Trabajadores).[22]

Even more salient than departmental boundaries is the distinction between *cambas*—the fair-skinned, Spanish-speaking inhabitants of the eastern lowlands—and *kollas*, the indigenous and *mestizo* inhabitants of the western *altiplano* and intermontaine valleys. These categories perhaps come closest to Weber's notion of a generalized "communal relationship," based on "a subjective feeling of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together" (Weber 1978:40). One might say that members of each group share a "primordial attachment," stemming from the "givens" of social existence, such as kin, religion, and cultural practices (Geertz 1973b:259).[23] Though the *camba/kolla* distinction is primarily regional, it refers to ethnicity as well, as is clear from the discrimination suffered by *kolla* migrants to the eastern city of Santa Cruz.

A complete study of ethnicity in Bolivia would also include the many lowland tribes that still retain distinct cultural identities, the Afro-Bolivians of the Yungas region, and more recent immigrant populations such as German Mennonite, Japanese, and Korean. Nevertheless, Bolivia's most fundamental ethnic division is the tripartite one between *indios/campesinos, mestizos*, and *blancos/criollos*.[24] These categories are more permeable than one might expect; individuals may be assigned to one or the other as much on the basis of speech, dress, and other elements of personal style as by actual descent or phenotype (see Luykx 1989a). Although "ethnicity" is often quite fluid and situational (Eriksen 1993:20), the perception of ethnic categories as clear-cut and easily definable is important in an ideological sense (Tambiah 1989:335). In popular discourse, ethnic labels tend to be reified as static categories, usually in opposition to the speaker's identity.

The social distance between *blancos* and *indios* may be the most formidable obstacle to fostering a communal sentiment inclusive of all Bolivians. Racism is manifest in many public and private contexts, from personal interactions to macro-level