

Decentralization and Democratization in Bolivia

by

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Bolivia's decentralization under the 1994 *Ley de Participación Popular* (LPP) cannot be characterized as federalism or administrative decentralization. The Bolivian model demonstrates the importance of ideological discourse and the role of decentralization in democratization. The ideological and historical roots of Bolivia's state decentralization explain its divergence from other decentralization strategies. Bolivia's LPP includes citizen-initiated *Organizaciones Territoriales de Base* (OTB) which provide communal democratic control over municipal governments. This unique strategy makes Bolivia a possible case for emulation among other decentralizing (and democratizing) regimes.

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Introduction

Like many other Latin American countries recently, Bolivia began a process of decentralization in 1994 when the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada—of the historic *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR, National Revolutionary Movement)—passed the *Ley de Participación Popular* (LPP, Law of Popular Participation). The law subdivided the Bolivian territory into 311 municipalities, each given an equitable share of resources. Known as the *coparticipación*, twenty percent of national state expenditures are now distributed among the municipalities on a per capita basis. Municipalities now receive a fixed fund and are responsible for its administration. Citizens elect their own *alcalde* (mayor) and *consejeros* (councilmen) who sit on the municipal council and run the day-to-day operations of the municipality. While state agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) still maintain some local projects, the responsibility for coordinating most local needs (such as sanitation, education, infrastructure, and other public works) is now shifted to local municipalities and their citizens. Bolivia's democratization, however, was not simply a change in state administrative structure; it was not decentralization for decentralization's sake.

The conventional wisdom often remarks on Latin America's "centralist tradition" (Véliz 1980). Bolivia has been no exception. Still, democracy's third wave brought a trend towards decentralization. Most often, decentralization have been discussed according to whether they are enacted from "above" or from "below." In many circumstances these discussions can also best described as either "political" or "economic" in nature. One recent article portrays the process of decentralization as dependent on institutional factors, especially the party system (Willis, Garman, and Haggard 1999). Another emphasize the positive value decentralization has for state actors in terms of fiscal management (Stein 1998). Restricting oneself to such views of decentralization, however, may have serious drawbacks.

The LPP was more than a result of playing out of "political" forces or the search for "economic" solutions to problems of administrative efficiency. Rather, the law was part of a larger package of reforms aimed at fundamentally restructuring the Bolivian state in ways that are nothing less than revolutionary (Barbery Anaya 1997; R. Mayorga 1997). This reform package included the *Ley de Reforma Educativa* (Law of Educational Reform), *Ley de Capitalización* (Law of Capitalization), *Ley de Pensiones* (Law of Pensions), *Ley de Reforma Administrativa* (Law of Administrative Reform), *Ley del Servicio Nacional de Reforma Agraria* (INRA, Law of National Agrarian Reform), and new changes to the constitution. Each of these dramatically reshaped the political, economic, and social reality of the country.

Any discussion of Bolivia's decentralization along purely political or economic dimensions will miss understanding the real causes for and objectives of the LPP. The reliance on institutional factors rests on the *a priori* assumption that political actors accept the existing institutional norms as acceptable, just, or even binding. We need to open up to other possibilities: Are there other factors that influence the move towards decen-

tralization? Do these different influences offer different goals that decentralizations might hope to achieve? Is it possible that decentralization aims at something other than merely making the state more manageable? Is it possible that decentralization aims to alter the underlying basis for institutional politics? I agree with Roberto Barbery Anaya:

“Con la excepción de la bien denominada ‘Revolución del 52’ ... difícilmente se pueden distinguir en Bolivia otros trazos políticos que merezcan calificativos tan pretensiosos” (Barbery 1997, 45).¹

Barbery argues that Bolivia’s decentralization fundamentally altered the democratic development of the state through a process of “structural change.” I similarly argue that the LPP cannot be understood merely as a decentralization reform; it is something more. The LPP was, according to Barbery, a change as dramatic in scope as the 1952 National Revolution.

A better approach to understanding Bolivia’s decentralization is to focus on the role it played within the broader context of democratization. The authors of the LPP described their effort as aimed at improving the quality of democracy in Bolivia. The goals of political or fiscal administrative efficiency were only secondary (and often sacrificed to the goal of democratic deepening). To understand Bolivia’s decentralization process better, we first need to understand the democratic transition itself. Thus, the first section of this paper gives a brief history of Bolivia’s transition to democracy. Bolivia’s transitional path helped shape the later path taken by the architects of the LPP. The democratic transition changed the political landscape of Bolivia; it opened up possibilities and challenges to those who wished to decentralize.

The remainder of the paper aims to understand the development of the LPP itself using critical narrative. I am not intending to test any hypotheses or provide an analysis of the LPP’s successes and shortcomings. Several Bolivian social scientists are conducting much of this work in institutes such as the *Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales* (ILDIS, Latin American Institute of Social Studies). Some of these include Gonzalo Rojas Ortuste, Ruben Ardaya, Henry Oporto Castro, María Teresa Zegada, Luis Verdesoto, Gloria Ardaya, Moira Zuazo Oblitas, Fernando Cajías de la Vega, Mauricio Lea Plaza, José Aud Lema, María Inés Pérez de Castaños, José Baldivia Urdininea, Ricardo Calla Ortega, and Hernando Calla Ortega. At the end of this paper, I return to some of their findings. The main focus of this paper, however, is to relate the story of why the Sánchez de Lozada government adopted this particular form of decentralization. My approach breaks from the conventions of studying decentralization with more quantitative approaches. I wish to emphasize that this paper does not aim to reject such methods; rather it merely attempts to reexamine assumptions about the origins and objectives of decentralization reforms.

To analyze the reformers’ goals and intentions, I focus on their own writings before, during, and after the LPP was drafted and passed as Law 1551 on 20 April 1994. Many of the texts cited in this paper, though originally published before April 1994, were later included in a volume produced by the *Secretaría Nacional de Participación Popular* (SNPP, National Secretariat of Popular Participation), the administrative organ created to oversee the LPP’s implementation. That volume, *El pulso de la democracia* (“The heartbeat of democracy”), published by Nueva Sociedad publisher in 1997, includes works by

most of the actors involved. The volume also includes preliminary analyses from the first two years after the law's implementation. I also cite opponents of the LPP who presented a different strategy—decentralization at the departmental level—that was also discussed. As this paper argues, it is no small matter that the Sánchez de Lozada government chose a more radical alternative than simply giving more autonomy to the nine departments.

Understanding Bolivia's decentralization reform in this context—as a process of democratization—is important for all students of Latin America and democracy. Studies of decentralization should more closely be tied to the historical and ideological roots of the reformers involved. Decentralization should also be more closely examined for its effect on democracy through greater engagement with the democratic theory literature. Assuming decentralization is (or can only be) part of the neoliberal agenda of many countries may be sorely mistaken. More importantly, studying cases of decentralization as if they were merely the outgrowth economic or political forces may reify *a priori* assumptions about the economic and administrative causes for decentralization. As more countries seek to decentralize or reform their decentralization strategies, more careful understanding of what decentralization can and cannot do for democracy is necessary. Decentralization programs that only aim at greater administrative efficiency may lead merely to new forms of bureaucratism, not democratic deepening. Throughout, I argue that the primary goal of the LPP architects was to build institutions for the deepening of democracy in Bolivia.

Bolivia's Democratic Transition

Bolivia's difficult transition to democracy began in 1978 when General Hugo Bánzer Suárez called for elections. The *Unidad Democrática Popular* (UDP, Popular Democratic Union) led by Hernán Siles Zuazo won the July 1978 elections but was prevented from holding power when Bánzer's chosen successor, General Pereda Asbun, launched a coup and declared the elections invalid. In November, General David Padilla led another military revolt overthrowing the brief Pereda regime and promised new elections. Bolivian politics now entered a frantic time period as a vast array of political parties, splinter groups, student factions, workers' organizations, and civic committees emerged and reemerged to challenge the authoritarian regime and each other. Most importantly, Bolivia's peasants (its largest social group) no longer voted as a bloc and most no longer supported the military regime or its candidates (Klein 1992, 263).

July 1979 saw another democratic election; again Bolivians went to the polls in an election with no official military candidate, although Bánzer's newly formed *Acción Democrática Nacionalista* (ADN, Democratic Nationalist Action) did campaign. Once again, the UDP won a plurality, though not a majority, of the electoral vote. Although the constitution called for Congress to elect the president when no candidate won a majority, Congress was unable to make a decision. Instead, they chose the President of the Senate, Walter Guevara Arce of the MNR, as interim president until elections could be held the following year. That November, Guevara Arce was overthrown by a military junta led by Colonel Alberto Natusch Busch. Now, however, social resistance to authoritarian rule was intense and nation-wide general strikes and violence forced the military out of power after only fifteen days. Another compromise civilian—the President of the Chamber of

Deputies, Lydia Gueiler Tejada, also of the MNR—was selected to hold the presidential power until elections could be organized in 1980.

The June 1980 elections once more gave a plurality (though not a majority) to Siles Zuazo and the UDP. Military hard-liners led by General Luis García Meza launched a bloody coup in July to prevent the UDP leader from holding office. The García Meza regime, although extremely brutal, faced continuous civil opposition led predominantly by students' and workers' groups. The last military junta finally resigned in September 1982. The Congress that had been elected in 1980 reconvened and subsequently voted for Siles Zuazo as President of the Republic.

Siles Zuazo came to power at the beginning of a debt crisis he was unable to control. Leading a minority government, Siles Zuazo's government was unable to effectively deal with the spiraling hyperinflation that soon followed without alienating its only significant source of support—Bolivia's still-powerful worker's union, the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (COB, Bolivian Worker Central). Plagued by the growing economic crisis, Siles Zuazo held elections in 1985—one year ahead of schedule. The early 1985 elections were the first significant test to Bolivia's new democracy. The UDP virtually disintegrated as the economic disaster discredited most of the political alternatives presented by the left.

The 1985 election was a turning point in Bolivia's political history. Bánzer's ADN won a plurality of votes in the popular ballot but did not gain a majority of the seats in Congress. Most political actors were uneasy about allowing the former dictator to hold presidential power so soon after the return to democracy. The potential stalemate was ended peacefully, however, with an old constitutional provision: Article 90. This provision has since become a staple of Bolivian politics and serves as the bedrock of a political system René Antonio Mayorga (1997) terms "presidentialized parliamentarism" and Eduardo Gamarra (1997) calls "hybrid presidentialism." Article 90 provides for the election of the president by a special joint session of the National Congress when no presidential candidate wins an electoral majority. Beyond institutionalizing Article 90 as a central part of Bolivia's new democratic system, the 1985 general election was also important because Bánzer conceded the presidency to the MNR's Víctor Paz Estenssoro, marking the first peaceful transfer of power by ballot since 1964.

An important element in the consolidation of democracy in Bolivia is the role political parties have played. During the democratic transition, civil society both emerged and reemerged as new groups pressed for greater liberalization while traditional organization such as the COB and the still-powerful *Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia* (FSTMB, Federation Union of Mine Workers of Bolivia) became more active in their demand for democratic rule. Within only a few years, however, organized labor and mass social movements no longer dominated political discourse as they had in the 1978-82 period. Bolivia was beginning to move from a culture of confrontation to one of "dialogue, concertation, and consensus" (Manz 1995, 8). Bolivia's political system now greatly depends on the vitality of its party system. This process focused citizen participation away from civil society (especially with the reduction of the once-powerful labor unions) and into political society (i.e. political parties). Political confrontations now are more likely to take place on the floor of Congress than across barricade lines.

The collapse of the left after the Siles Zuazo regime created new opportunities for

democratization of civil society. Since the April 1952 National Revolution, labor unions, through the COB, had played a hegemonic role in political discourse. Labor groups had played a critical role both in the 1952 National Revolution and in the return to democracy in 1978-82. Still, the socioeconomic realities of Bolivia as it emerged from the economic crisis politically shattered labor, which “suffered almost complete erosion of power” (Morales 1994, 133). In its place, the new democratic regime centered on the party system. A strong and politically active civil society—independent of the political parties—had yet to emerge. This became the goal of the LPP architects: create a vehicle for building a politically active and democratic civil society.

The Option of Regional Decentralization

After the return of civilian rule in 1982, Bolivian civil society began mobilizing in support of political decentralization. The most organized and vocal proponents of decentralization during this decade were the *movimientos cívicos* (civic societies), which called for decentralization at the departmental level. These organizations, spearheaded by the *Comité Cívico pro Santa Cruz* (a vanguard of regionalism for much of the modern period), called for the nine departments to hold direct election of their prefects and a departmental legislature. In essence, this proposal called for *de facto* (if not also *de jure*) federalization of Bolivia. Such demands were presented at the December 1992 Tarija conference, “*Actores sociales y descentralización.*” The Tarija conference, which was sponsored by EMSO-Regional (an organ of the Ministry of Planning), the *Comité Cívico de Tarija*, and ILDIS, discussed various means for decentralization.

Mario Cossío, president of the *Comité Cívico de Tarija*, presented the argument for federalization. His address to the forum’s participants decried the “centralist State” and “decadent bureaucracy” (Cossío 1993, 10) of the Bolivian state. Later, he stated:

“[E]l movimiento cívico boliviano ha definido abiertamente su posición en el sentido de que ambas instancias de decisión departamental sean constituidas de manera democrática” (Cossío 1993, 16).²

The model Cossío outlined rested on two main points: the election of prefects (still appointed by the president) and creation of departmental assemblies. This preference for a type of federalization is evident in Cossío’s argument for decentralization—throughout which he uses the words “region” and “regional.” Although Cossío uses the language of rights for all Bolivians, he explicitly refers to “regional interests” and “regional problems” (Cossío 1993, 15, 18).

One of the participants of the conference, Carlos Toranzo Roca, responded to Cossío’s presentation. Part of his criticism of the regional decentralization model was its strong reliance on “electoral” democracy:

“Hay que aprobar que la democracia representativa es un gran valor en sí, pero ella debe estar acompañada por un fuerte proceso de participación social. La creación del ciudadano vía el voto atomiza a la sociedad, debido a eso se precisa generar una doble lógica: la lógica del ciudadano que vota y la generación de

esferas públicas en las que se decida colectivamente y se tenga acceso a la fiscalización” (Toranzo 1993, 26).³

Similarly, Toranzo criticized the emphasis on regionalism and departmentalism as avoiding some of the fundamental problems of Bolivian society:

“[D]ecentralización per se, no elimina la pobreza, para atacar a la pobreza se precisa descentralización y algo más, se requiere incorporar la descentralización dentro de una visión sistemática en la cual el propio gobierno departamental piense políticas económicas para sus sectores postergados. [...] La descentralización per se no soluciona este problema, ella más bien debe incorporar ese desafío dentro de su agenda, porque la descentralización no debería moverse únicamente dentro de la lógica de la democracia representativa, sin reparar en lo nativo, en lo comunal, en lo rural, en el cual está el cincuenta por ciento de la población del país, de la población más pobre. Por eso debemos plantear que la ruptura de la exclusión es tan importante como la superación de la exclusión regional. La exclusión de lo campesino, de lo indígena, de pueblos originarios, es algo que amerita superarse.” (Toranzo 1993, 27-9).⁴

It is the *algo más* (“something more”) that Toranzo refers to that separates the *comités cívicos* from the authors of the LPP. Toranzo criticized Cossío and the *comités cívicos* for failing to address the greatest problem within their model for decentralization: simple federalization does not prevent a political decentralization favoring regional interest groups and elites. The “centralist” tradition of the Bolivian state went much deeper than merely preventing regional governments from pursuing their own interests; therefore, it could not be dissolved merely by recreating nine similarly “centralist” and under-representative departmental governments. Sánchez de Lozada, Bolivia’s president during the 1993-97 period, later remarked at a meeting of the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD):

“Bolivia has nine departments, and I always asked the Bolivian people why they would want to have nine bad governments when there was already a government in La Paz that left something to be desired. The capitals of these departments are as disliked by rural local councils as is the central government, because small local urban elites have been trying to get more power since colonial times. We have learned from the experience of some other Latin American countries that a federal system is costly, inefficient and beyond our means.” (Sánchez de Lozada 1998, 201).

The Unidad de Participación Popular

It was the MNR-led government of Sánchez de Lozada which began working on the decentralization reform. Very early in his administration, Sánchez de Lozada gathered a diverse group of young academics to join the newly formed *Unidad de Participación Popular* (UPP, Popular Participation Unit)—this group would later evolve into the SNPP.

It was this group that began working on actual drafts of the decentralization reform package. This group of academics, as pointed out by Fernando Molina Monasterios (1997), was influenced by another strand of thought that quietly emerged from within Bolivia alongside the *comité cívico* movement. They were heavily influenced by the work (or were members themselves) of a new, academically oriented political party, the *Movimiento Bolivia Libre* (MBL, Free Bolivia Movement). The MBL formed in 1986 when the intellectual wing of the *Movimiento Revolucionario de Izquierda* (MIR, Movement of the Revolutionary Left) abandoned the latter party over ideological differences. Most especially, members of the MBL rejected the alliance MIR had made with Bánzer's ADN when the two parties formed the *Acuerdo Patriótico* (AP, Patriotic Accord) government in 1985. A central platform of the new MBL was its elaboration of representative and participatory democracy beyond the traditional corporatist and syndicalist structures. During the 1993 election, Sánchez de Lozada's MNR allied with the small MBL, bringing many of the latter's political ideas to the forefront of national political discourse.

Shortly after its birth as a political party, the MBL members (known as *emebelistas*) organized a conference in Chuquisaca that included many Bolivian intellectuals who were not members of the party. The result of the conference was the publication of a book, *Repensando el país* ("Rethinking the country" 1987), which underscored the reality of post-transition Bolivia: the proletariat and popular movements had been defeated by forces of modernity. The goal of the MBL was to find a means of discourse that could rescue popular participation from the forces of modernization. One of the members of the conference, Fernando Mayorga, pointed to the need of fully engaging the new forces of civil society:

"En esta época corremos un riesgo muy grande y es que lo político se reduzca a su ámbito más estrecho (electoral-parlamentario) y que sobre lo político no tenga ningún efecto, ninguna posibilidad de acción a la sociedad civil ... ¿Qué hacer? Para mi, no hay que creer que lo político se va a reducir a lo electoral. Frente a la situación de despolitización de la sociedad civil, frente a su desarticulación y desorganización, habría que pensar en una politización de la sociedad civil, ¿a través de qué? De la autoorganización de los nuevos sujetos o actores que han aparecido en el escenario político." (in Molina Monasterios 1997, 109).⁵

It is important to keep in mind that the *comités cívicos* were highly critical of the UPP and the direction in which its decentralization proposal was moving. One of the most vocal opponents was Wilmar Stelzer, the president of the *Comité Cívico pro Santa Cruz*. In an interview with the newspaper *La Razón* on 8 February 1994, Stelzer demonstrated his emphasis on parliamentary politics when he argued that one of the fundamental necessities was a more equitable distribution of seats in the national legislature in favor of the second-most populous department. One of his strongest criticisms of the UPP project, however, was that much of the work was carried out in secret, without input from the *comités cívicos*. In another newspaper interview, Stelzer argued:

"El que se está queriendo aprobar en forma rápida y a espaldas del pueblo un proyecto de participación popular, muestre que el mismo no responde a las expectativas de la ciudadanía en su conjunto. Es por ello que insistimos en que antes

de ser aprobada, sea analizada por las diversas instituciones de la sociedad [...] Es por estas razones que seguiremos luchando por la creación de gobiernos departamentales fiscalizadas por asambleas elegidas democráticamente y con la participación de las provincias. Eso será verdaderamente participación popular.” (El Diario 21 February 1994).⁶

This criticism of the secrecy of the UPP’s work is not easily dismissed. Other social and political actors shared this criticism as well. Much of the UPP’s work—often conducted under the careful and direct direction of Sánchez de Lozada himself—did not involve consulting either the *comités cívicos*, the labor sector, or political parties (including many members of the governing MNR itself).

A great reason for the lack of inclusion in the debate was the mistrust most of the UPP’s social scientists and Sánchez de Lozada himself had of each of the other three sectors (*comités cívicos*, labor, and political parties). The *comités cívicos* were seen as representing exclusively elite urban interests. The labor sector (most especially the COB) still clung to a traditional corporate, hierarchical, and Marxist paradigm of political organization. This solution had proved unmanageable during the 1982-85 economic crisis. Finally, the political parties were seen as a separate class in itself. This class was strengthened by the electoral system (which requires that all political office-holders be members of political parties) and a familial system of state-patronage sharing.

Those who supported the work of the UPP viewed each of these three traditional forces as inevitably defending various modes of centralization. The *comités cívicos* pushed for devolution of power from the national government to nine equally centralized political units. The labor unions were similarly unable to move towards “true” decentralization. The COB had been created during the 1952 National Revolution when the state expropriated and centralized nearly all the nation’s industries. Its historic position prevented the COB (which even now coordinates the activities of all national labor unions) from decentralizing in a deeper sense. For the COB, decentralization meant allowing workers’ “cells” to operate independently from the state and manage their own affairs. There was no way to guarantee, however, that these cells would operate independently of the upper hierarchy of the COB directorship. Lastly, the COB represented only labor unions and could not speak on behalf of the nation’s rural population. Similarly, the various political parties had proven incapable of decentralizing the state due to the centrifugal forces inherent in their own organization. The goal of the LPP project was to allow territorial decentralization at a level that would also allow local, grass-roots social actors to function independently within a sphere of “political participation.” In short, the LPP meant to bypass the traditional political actors in order to strengthen the weakest sections of Bolivian civil society—individual citizens, especially those from rural areas.

This problem was paradoxically solved by the “internalization” of the UPP. Although a more “democratic” approach might suggest the need for greater inclusion in the decentralization project, Sanchez de Lozada and the UPP decided that some degree of “imposition” was necessary. The previous AP government (1989-93) headed by Víctor Paz Zamora of MIR, had discussed decentralization. The joint MIR-ADN government proved unable to push a law forward due to its need to balance the demands of the labor sector (from which MIR drew its support) and the *comités cívicos* (from which ADN drew much of its support, especially in the Santa Cruz). The official position articulated

by Paz Zamora was that decentralization, if it were to come, should come only gradually once the necessary preconditions were realized. One of the UPP members criticized this “gradualist” position:

“Resultaba muy difícil para quienes eran oficialistas entre 1989 y 1993 oponerse directamente a la descentralización política, y también aceptarla, así que se refugiaron en una concepción que llamaremos ‘gradualista.’ [...] En esto el gobierno se apoyaba en un hecho real: efectivamente, toda transformación social debe entenderse como un proceso. Comete un error quien salta los pasos intermedios: pero también quien los multiplica hasta el infinito, de manera que nunca comienza a marchar. Un documento del gobierno ‘gradualista’ señala: ‘La descentralización sólo es posible si involucra, compromete y es demandada por todos los actores sociales que tienen que ver con el desarrollo nacional.’ En conclusión: la descentralización es imposible. [...] Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, recurriendo a Maquiavelo, ha dicho que mientras los enemigos de los cambios son los primeros en enterarse de la forma en que éstos afectan y siempre están bien organizados para impedirlos, sus beneficiarios por lo general se encuentran dispersos y desinformados. De este razonamiento, Maquiavelo concluyó que no había que hacer cambios. Paz Zamora se propuso, primero, convencer a sus enemigos. Sánchez de Lozada los venció” (Molina Monasterios 1997, 121-22).⁷

The UPP position was based on the paradoxical reality that a more “democratic” or “participatory” discussion about decentralization could only lead to impasse or to a solution that did not alter the fundamental tendencies in Bolivian history. Both of these possibilities were considered status quo. Those who needed the fruits of decentralization the most—the rural *campesinos* (peasants)—were prevented from organizing themselves in the same capacity as the traditional political actors. The opinion shared among various members of the UPP was that, for Bolivia to become a more democratic and inclusive society, some degree of imposition was required. In this way, the Sánchez de Lozada government came to be viewed by some as a “silent revolution” (R. Mayorga 1997) led by a vanguard of Bolivia’s intellectuals.

The Indigenous Influence

An “indigenous” frame of reference of political thought also gained strength after the 1952 National Revolution. The MNR-led National Revolution reshaped the country in fundamental ways, awakening Bolivians to the political power of both the proletariat (especially the miners) and the *campesinos*. Besides granting the illiterate—including the non-Spanish-speaking masses—the right to vote, the 1952 National Revolution also cloaked itself in the language of trying to find a “new” path to development that reflected Bolivia’s unique historical legacy. Some moves in this direction, for example, included the redistribution of land to *campesinos* and the official recognition of the two largest indigenous languages, Aymara and Quechua. Still, the MNR governments of the immediate post-Revolution period faced strong tension between the powerful and organized miners (who dominated the COB) and the dispersed *campesinos*. Eventually, however, the MNR

government concentrated on the nationalist pillar of its platform and adopted a “homogenizing” national policy—which included renaming *indios* as *campesinos*. The “new” Bolivia of this vision was populated with *mestizo* (or *cholo*), proletariat, and “revolutionary” men.

Many of the rights the *campesinos* (now self-named *indigenistas*) had won in the 1952 National Revolution—both “liberal” (such as the right to vote) and “Marxist” (such as the organization of rural “cells”)—still remain intact. The military regimes that took control after the Revolutionary MNR governments unraveled into rival factions, relied heavily on *campesinos* for support. So long as the mass of Bolivia’s *campesinos* remained loyal, the military regimes had the political strength to crush leftist pro-democracy forces. It was only after the peasants began voting in large numbers against the military regimes in 1978, 1979, and 1980 elections that the pro-democracy forces were finally able to take control. Even then, the “awakening” of the *campesino* voter was seen in the dramatic ability of Bánzer’s ADN to gain votes in many of the Aymara and Quechua provinces. Even more significantly, the rise of populist parties—such as *Conciencia de Patria* (CONDEPA, Conscience of the Fatherland) and *Unidad Cívica Solidaridad* (UCS, Solidarity Civic Union)—and *indigenista* parties—such as the *Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Katari de Liberación* (MRTKL, Tupac Katari Revolutionary Movement of Liberation) and *Eje-Pachakuti*—signaled the growing importance and vitality of Bolivia’s rural *campesinos* and urban indigenous population. The *campesino* vote was split among the various parties as party bosses attempted to capture the *campesino* vote—often through patron-client relationships and not through true representation.

One of the strongest voices for the new *indigenista* movement was Victor Hugo Cárdenas. Cárdenas was head of MRTKL and served as vice president in the Sánchez de Lozada government. His basic argument was that Bolivia’s political system—at its roots—ignored an invaluable section of the nation’s population, culture, and history. He also helped coordinate the UPP’s work, and wrote:

“[L]a democracia que vivimos es una democracia colonial, colonialista, excluyente, y el Estado que surge de esta realidad es un Estado colonialista y excluyente [...] no se podía hablar de una verdadera democracia [...] era pasar de esa democracia reducida al voto, a lo electoral, a lo político, hacia una democracia más amplia, a una democracia social, étnica, cultural y económica” (Cárdenas 1997, 21).⁸

It is no insignificant matter that Cárdenas and his MRTKL joined the MNR in a pre-election coalition in 1993. The election of the Sánchez de Lozada-Cárdenas ticket made Cárdenas Bolivia’s first indigenous vice president. The MNR-MRTKL coalition’s “*Plan de Todos*” (“Plan for Everyone”) also promised local *organizaciones de base* (base organizations)—including indigenous and *campesino* communities and *juntas vecinales* (neighborhood councils)—official recognition and political powers. This proposal became one of the central elements of the final LPP. The law passed on 20 April 1994 officially recognizes these various self-created organizations as *Organizaciones Territoriales de Base* (OTBs, Territorial Base Organizations) and grants them the status of public organs.

The *katarista* movement emerged near the end of the military regimes, partially in response to the new syndicalist movements emerging in the urban and mining communities. Bolivia's *campesinos*—mostly indigenous—had moved away from their Revolutionary alliance with the urban and mining proletariat during the military government of General René Barrientos Ortuño (1964-1969). Different military regimes had courted the support of the rural *campesinos* in efforts to balance their support against the organized resistance from the miners and urban proletariat and student groups. Such tactics seem to have awakened a sense of urgency and importance in the *campesino* and indigenous communities. The great efforts by every political force to co-opt them *en masse* or claim to represent them ideologically only served to drive home the point that this still-unintegrated class was pivotal for the future of Bolivia's political development. Under such conditions, the continued exclusion of *campesino* and indigenous participation in political life could no longer be maintained.

Iván Arias Durán and Sergio Molina summarized the predominantly Eurocentric political development of Bolivia since the time of the Spanish *conquista* into modern times:

“[E]ncontramos prototipos estatales que las elites dominantes (económicos o políticos, de derecha o de izquierda), buscaron construir: un Alto Perú inglés, una Bolivia francesa; una Bolivia american way of life y, claro, como novedades revolucionarias, un país de los soviets, de “La Gran Marcha” o de la “Sierra Maestra” [...] De ahí que para resumir la historia de Bolivia desde la visión campesina o indígena, se pueden utilizar tres palabras: eliminación, integración y participación” (Arias and Molina Monasterios 1997, 60).⁹

The *campesino* and indigenous majority of the Bolivian population was becoming more and more conscious of its own role and worth as a political force. The pre-Revolution “liberal” states had failed to secure them the rights and freedoms it espoused. At best, these “liberal” states hoped to integrate them into national politics through a process of “homogenization”—essentially requiring the Europeanization of Westernization of the entire population. The era of the Revolution and the various left-wing movements that came in its wake did not seem to offer much better alternatives. As with most revolutionary movements, the peasant class had served as the cannon fodder for both the nation's modernization and liberation (Skocpol 1979).

“New” Political Theories

Although most UPP members came from the “traditional” ideological left, many embraced the new *indigenista* position. Several had participated in and studied the new emerging indigenous social movements. Others saw the *indigenista* movement as reflecting the modernism-postmodernism philosophical debate in contemporary social science. Regardless, their views concerning decentralization involved a fundamental change in the substructure of Bolivian politics. Indigenous leaders were now seen as articulating politically relevant arguments. More significantly, these arguments were consciously being made independently of political society as they openly rejected “European” ideas in

favor of indigenous culture.

By 1989, a deep split had developed between the urban and mining proletariat and the *campesino* and indigenous population. That year, during the VIII Congress of the COB, several *campesino* leaders openly challenged the direction in which the COB political machine was moving:

“Los indios aymaras, quechuas y guaraníes saldaran cuentas con los obreros y criticaran duramente su incapacidad para reconocer el fracaso de las propuestas marxistas e izquierdistas que defendieron durante muchos años. Los campesinos pusieron en duda el carácter de vanguardia de los obreros y cuestionaron el simplismo clasista que había para analizar la realidad” (Arias and Molina Monasterios 1997, 70).¹⁰

During this same debate one of the *campesino* representatives articulated what later became the banner cry of many of the UPP members:

“La teoría viene de afuera, de Europa. ¿Por qué nosotros no teorizamos aquí? Estas teorías [...] nos hacen emborrachar [...] y estamos repitiendo como los borrachos los que hemos aprendido. Parece que no tenemos capacidad de teorizar nuestra propia realidad” (in Arias and Molina Monasterios 1997, 70).¹¹

Many UPP members began formulating their project with the assumption that not only should *campesino* and indigenous movements should be allowed greater political participation, but that these groups had valuable wisdom to be learned by the *mestizo* and *blanco* political class. Many of the UPP members concluded that Bolivia no longer needed to import political theories; they came to believe that within Bolivia—most especially in its indigenous roots—there existed a reservoir of political ideas yet to be explored.

Unlike in neighboring Peru, this new *indigenista* movement rejected the path of armed insurrection (Arias and Molina Monasterios 1997). To some extent, the Aymara and Quechua *campesinos* distrusted the armed insurrectionists who, quite often did not speak their language or even understand their culture. Armed insurrection was just as much a rejection of traditional Andean culture in favor of modernity. Instead, *indigenista* leaders moved to a stance of cultural resistance and towards a valorization of traditional Andean culture. In short, they rejected the Marxist “class struggle” paradigm. This rejected of ideology even attracted die-hard Marxists. One wrote:

“[S]ociedades ya no pueden ser leídas a partir del cristal de la lucha de clases y sus correspondientes visiones teóricas [...] cuando ya no se habla demasiado de dictadura proletaria ni de socialismo, es posible escuchar, oír y ver otros actores y otros problemas [...] Ya no hay ... la credibilidad del one way de la ciencia social” (in Toranzo 1997, 197).¹²

Another drew from such diverse sources as social-Darwinists, postmodernists, and the biologist R. Sheldrake’s concept of “collective memory”:

*“[R]esulta que Bolivia es premoderna y posmoderna a la vez, y esta es nuestra más profunda verdad como sociedad y nuestra gran ventaja comparativa; desde esa doble atalaya, hemos de hacer el esfuerzo de leerla, si queremos comprenderla y, por siguiente, transformarla [...] esta ley da cauce y recoge una peculiaridad muy especial del pueblo boliviano: la de participar, interactuar, dar y recibir ... apela, por así decir, a las virtualidades de su capacidad de ‘sinergia;’ no sólo de ‘interpelación,’ como en las sociedades occidentales” (Medina 1997, 78-79).*¹³

Various sectors of Bolivia’s intelligentsia and political class embraced the *indigenista* point of view—though often draping it in a “postmodernism” veneer. The bottom line, however, was that many UPP members accepted the assumption that Bolivia’s advancement required coming to terms with and embracing its Andean heritage. Political, social, and even economic development could be just as easily learned (perhaps even learned better) from the Andean models as it could from European ones.

The LPP was formulated, to a great extent, on the premise that Bolivia’s problems could best be solved within itself—especially its own cultural history—in order to develop a theory capable of solving the modernist-postmodernist dilemma. Gonzalo Rojas Ortuste, who places the new Bolivian system of popular participation within Arend Lijphart’s consociational vs. majoritarian model (Lijphart 1984), articulated this position. Rojas presented the metaphysical foundations of the LPP in the following terms:

*“Se trata de perspectivas de dualismo complementario. Donde los pares son elementos (mitades) de la totalidad, no por la vía de la negociación-síntesis a la manera hegeliana, sino por la complementariedad que integra ‘esto y aquello’ [...] Lo que se puede llamar la lógica del antídilema. En términos políticos esto implica la búsqueda de equilibrio” (Rojas 1996, 214).*¹⁴

The need to reconfigure Bolivian politics using an “antídilemma” paradigm was also emphasized in the criticism of the still confrontational (i.e. “dialectical”) nature of Bolivia’s political structure:

*“[E]n Bolivia existe una ruptura entre la sociedad política y la sociedad civil, entendiéndose la sociedad política como expresión del aparato coercitivo que se imponía por medio de la fuerza y la violencia. Esa estructura política, integrada también por los partidos políticos, no había dado respuestas efectivas a la sociedad que decía servir” (Molina Saucedo 1997, 33).*¹⁵

Several UPP member were highly critical of the “Western” tradition of politics which reduced the “political” to problems of “either-or”—of opposition. Thus the (neo)liberal tradition was presented as electoral competition between elites. The Marxist response had criticized liberalism, but merely presented another form of “either-or” dichotomy—this time between classes—in which the self-conscious proletariat served as the vanguard of the people’s revolution.

Adopting Marxist terminology, we can conceive of constitutional, electoral, and party systems as the “superstructure” of political life. This superstructure is based on a

“substructure” of political, social, and economic values. Political institutions can be substantially changed (through “constitutional engineering”) without altering society’s underlying values. A careful analysis of Bolivia’s decentralization finds that architects of the LPP did not draft their reform projects within the parameters of the Bolivian political substructure (the “colonialist” reality denounced by the *indigenista* movement). UPP members were not merely fine tuning the superstructure. Rather, these reformers were directly challenging Bolivia’s (colonialist) substructure in hopes that their reforms would not only change the rules of the game, but allow the bulk of Bolivia’s people to play a new more inclusive and participatory game altogether.

Conclusion

The application of the LPP was intended to go beyond merely a change in the metaphysical orientation of Bolivian politics. It was also designed to solve pressing political, social, and economic problems. Three of these “central” objectives were: (1) to reduce the rural migration to the urban centers; (2) to eliminate the social and regional exclusion; and (3) to promote citizen participation across social and ethnic lines (Pérez and Baldivia 1997). Another goal was the redistribution of economic resources in a more egalitarian manner. There is every indication that the “*un boliviano por un boliviano*” (one *boliviano* [currency] for each Bolivian) slogan was successful (Medina C. and Galindo 1997). Official figures show that, per capita, the *coparticipaciones* are equally distributed across the 311 municipalities. This is a dramatic change from the highly unequal pre-LPP reality in which nearly 92 percent of national spending went to only three cities—La Paz, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, and Cochabamba—with most of the remainder flowing to the remaining six departmental capitals (Rojas 1996). It is still much too early to measure the reduction in rural-to-urban migration, since no new census has yet to be taken after LPP went into effect in April 1994 (the last census was in 1992).

There have been several studies conducted by various agencies, most especially ILDIS, to determine the level of success that the LPP and accompanying reforms had. Most of these point to dramatic improvements in basic social conditions as well as representation and participation and are optimistic of future developments. There was (and still is) some concern with the possibility of a change in direction with the new Bánzer government that came to power after the 1997 general election. Although the new government has not given the LPP the same level of support (including rhetorical support) as did the Sánchez de Lozada government, there is no explicit indication that the LPP will be reversed. Many Bolivian social scientists believe that the LPP could not be changed regardless, because it would require more political support than even the Bánzer government can hope to muster—due mainly to the ever-increasing popular support for the new municipal governments.

The literature reviewed in the previous sections reflects a philosophical engagement with the concepts of “decentralization” and “democratization” of the state. This is especially true of the view that the Bolivian model is a rejection of both simple federalism and also a movement away from “European” models and towards “Andean” models of political participation. Much of the recent literature has focused on analysis of the effects of decentralization. Many of the members of the UPP are now actively engaged in

this analysis of the law they helped create. At first, many of them staffed the SNPP, which maintained its own *Unidad de Investigación y Análisis* (UIA-SNPP, Analysis and Investigation Union). With the change in government, of course, most of them returned to “private” life. Many returned to the various universities and NGOs working on social science research, such as ILDIS, USAID’s Democracy, Development and Citizen Participation (DDCP) project, the *Centro Boliviano de Estudios Multidisciplinarios* (CEBEM, Bolivian Center for Multidisciplinary studies), and others. Still, I agree with Pedro Medellín Torres, who argued that the LPP was most important in its reformulation of the relationship between the state and civil society:

“[D]escentralización y participación están favoreciendo la restauración de los campos de relación entre la sociedad y el Estado. Más que el logro de eficiencia y eficacia pública, descentralización y participación están forzando el rediseño de las formas de gobernar en la región [...] Una nueva noción de poder local se va entretejiendo en América Latina” (Medellín 1997, 381).¹⁶

The LPP hoped to synthesize a highly representative political system with a strongly participatory model at the local level. More significantly, the LPP was a dramatic philosophical departure from previous Latin American models of reform. The members of the UPP consciously moved away from both liberal and Marxist models and made an extraordinary effort to know and understand Bolivia’s Andean roots. The fact that the political class (at least members of the UPP) asked and listened to the most excluded social group—its indigenous people—makes the development of this model of decentralization quite remarkable.

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Translations

- 1 “With the exception of the well-named ‘Revolution of ‘52’ ... it will be very difficult to distinguish other political events in Bolivia that deserve such pretentious classification.”
- 2 “The Bolivian civic movement has openly defined its position in the sense that both instances of departmental decision should be constituted in a democratic manner.”
- 3 “We have to agree that representative democracy is a great value by itself, but it must be accompanied by a strong process of social participation. The creation of the citizen via the vote atomizes society, due to this it is necessary to generate a double logic: the logic of the citizen who votes and the generation of public spheres in which decisions are made collectively and there is access to control.”
- 4 “Decentralization per se, does not eliminate poverty, to attack poverty decentralization and something more is necessary, it is necessary incorporate decentralization within a systematic vision in which the government itself considers economic politics for its ignored sectors. [...] Decentralization per se does not solve this problem, instead it incorporates this challenge within its agenda, because decentralization should not move only within the logic of representative democracy, without returning to the native, the communal, the rural, in which is found fifty percent of the country’s population, the poorest population. That is why we must state that the breaking of exclusion is as important as the overcoming of regional exclusion. The exclusion of the *campesino*, of the indigenous, of the aboriginal people, is something that deserves overcoming.”
- 5 “In this epoch we run a very large risk that the political is reduced to its broadest compass (the electoral-parliamentary) and that that has no effect over the political, no possibility of action to civil society. ... What is to be done? In my opinion, we must not reduce the political to the electoral. Before the depolitization of civil society, before its disarticulation, we must think about the politization of civil society, by what means? Through the auto-organization of new subjects or actors that have appeared on the political scene.”
- 6 “What they are trying to approve quickly, and behind the back of the people, is a project of popular participation, demonstrates that the very same does not respond to the expectations of the citizenry as a whole. That is why we insist that before it is approved, it should be analyzed by the diverse institutions of society [...] It is for these reasons that we will continue fighting for the creation of autonomous departmental governments with democratically elected assemblies and with the participation of the provinces. That will be true popular participation.”
- 7 “It became very difficult for those who were [government] officials between 1989 and 1993 to directly oppose political decentralization, and also to accept it, so they found refuge in a conception we might call ‘gradualist.’ [...] In this the government supported itself upon a real fact: effectively, all social transformation must be understood as a process. Anyone who skips intermediate steps commits an error: but also those who multiply them to infinity, in such a way that it never gets under way. One document of the ‘gradualist’ government demonstrates this: ‘The decentralization is only possible if it involves, ensures, and is demanded by all social actors who have interest in the nation’s development.’ In conclusion: decentralization is impossible. [...] Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, resorting to Machiavelli, has said that while enemies are always well organized to impede them, its beneficiaries generally find themselves dispersed and disinformed. From this reasoning, Machiavelli concluded that one must not make changes. Paz Zamora resolved himself, first, to convince his enemies. Sánchez de Lozada defeated them.”
- 8 “The democracy we live is a colonial, colonialist, and exclusionary democracy, and the state that emerges from this reality is a colonial, colonialist, and exclusionary state [...] one could not speak of a true democracy [...] it had to pass from a democracy reduced to the vote, to the electoral, to the political, to a broader democracy, a social, ethnic, cultural, and economic democracy.”
- 9 “We find state prototypes that the dominant elites (economic or political, of the right or the left), try to construct: an English Alto Peru, a French Bolivia, an ‘American way of life’ Bolivia and, of course, as a revolutionary novelty, a nation of soviets, of “The Long March” or the “Sierra Maestra” [...] It is

from here that in order to summarize the history of Bolivia from a *campesino* or indigenous point of view, we can use three words: elimination, integration and participation.”

- 10 “The Aymara, Quechua, and Guaraní Indians will settle accounts with the workers and will harshly criticize their incapacity to recognize the failure of the Marxist and leftist proposals that they defended for so many years. The *campesinos* placed in doubt the vanguardist character of the workers and questioned the simplification of class analysis that had been used to analyze reality.”
- 11 “Theories come from outside, from Europe. Why do we not theorize here? These theories [...] make us drunk [...] and we are repeating like drunkards those [theories] we have learned. It seems as if we have no capacity to theorize our own reality.”
- 12 “Societies can no longer be read through the crystal of class struggle and its corresponding theoretical visions [...] when we no longer speak of dictatorships of the proletariat or of socialism, it is possible to listen to, hear and see other actors and other problems [...] There is no longer ... the credibility of the ‘one way’ of social reality.”
- 13 “It results that Bolivia is premodern and postmodern at the same time, and this is our deepest truth as a society and our greatest comparative advantage; from this double watchtower, we must make the effort of reading it, if we want to understand it and, subsequently, transform it [...] this law gives way to and picks up on a very special peculiarity of the Bolivian people: that of participating, interacting, give and receive ... it appeals, so to speak, to the virtualities of its capacity for ‘synergy;’ not only of ‘interpolation,’ as in the Western societies.”
- 14 “It has to do with perspectives of complementary dualism. Where the pairs are elements (halves) of the totality, not by means of negotiation-synthesis in the Hegelian sense, but through the complementarity that integrates the ‘this and that’ [...] This can be called the logic of the antidilemma. In political terms this implies the search for equilibrium.”
- 15 “In Bolivia there exists a rupture between political society and civil society, understanding political society as the expression of the coercive apparatus that imposes itself by means of force and violence. This political structure, also integrated by the political parties, had not given effective answers to the society they claimed to serve.”
- 16 “Decentralization and participation favor the restoration of the camps of relation between society and the state. More than the attainment of efficiency and political efficacy, decentralization and participation are forcing the redesign of the means of governing in the region [...] A new notion of local power is being introduced in Latin America.”