“The desencuentros of history: Indianismo and Marxism in Bolivia”
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In “Indianismo y marxismo: El desencuentro entre dos razones revolucionarias,” Alvaro García Linera takes up the theme of a repeated desencuentro in Bolivian history, a pattern of missed encounters or failures of understanding between projects vying for the social and/or political emancipation. While the essay title identifies these competing trends under two unifying headings—Marxism and indianismo—one can also construct a slightly different formulation of the problem: as a series of disagreements and missed opportunities for dialogue and collaboration between indigenous struggles for autonomy and/or full citizenship and decolonization on the one hand, and urban-centered modernizing and developmentalist projects of the Left including late 19th and early 20th century anarcho-syndicalism, a Marxist tradition that began to make serious inroads in Bolivia in the 1940s following the disastrous Chaco war (1932-35), and the national-popular revolution of 1952. Their ideological differences notwithstanding, all of the latter political tendencies viewed industrialization and proletariat struggle as the one and only path toward meaningful social transformation, while indigenous groups were seen as historically “delayed” forms whose “backwardness” was an obstacle to emancipation through modernization. The desencuentro emerges repeatedly through historical encounters between theories of political radicalism that are borrowed from European social and intellectual histories on the one hand, and social movements that claim to receive their conceptual orientation from Aymara and Quechua traditions on the other. The pattern of missed encounter comprises a fault line that runs alongside the social categories of class and ethnicity, and it poses significant challenges for Andean-based efforts either to articulate popular social categories as part of a larger chain of equivalencies or to separate them once and
for all as simply distinct categories that have nothing in common. *Desencuentro* names an unthought at the heart of historical attempts to conceptualize social struggle in Bolivia.

In the first part of this paper I propose to show, in modest fashion, how the tracing of this history of *desencuentros* might be extended back to the threshold of independence and the formation of the Bolivian republic. Such an exercise promotes a deeper understanding of what it means to say that the republican state form in Bolivia has always been a *colonial* state, regardless of how the authority of its specific forms is consolidated—i.e., through brute force, coercion, hegemony or a mixture thereof. At the same time, Bolivian history provides terrain for exploring in greater depth what appears to be an uncanny logical identity between hegemony and coloniality. In the second part of the essay, meanwhile, I look at several important points of contention within the Bolivian and Latin American Left in the wake of what the Mexican historian Adolfo Gilly has called “the first revolution of the 21st century”—that is, the popular uprisings of 2000 and 2003 against the neoliberal privatization of natural resources (water and gas) that first precipitated the forced resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada in 2003 and eventually led to the election of Evo Morales and the MAS (Movimiento al socialism) Party in 2006.

“Indianismo y marxismo” presents a sustained critique of the reception of Marx’s thought in Bolivia, which García Linera situates beginning with the aftermath of the Chaco War through the imposition of neoliberal reform in the 1980s. As is the case in many other Latin American contexts, the dominant reception of Marxism in 20th century Bolivia relied on an overly literal understanding of the analyses of English, French and German histories in Marx’s writings, which tended dogmatically to covert what Marx had to say about those particular
historical processes and experiences into rigid ontogenetic templates of “stages” and causal relations that were to be followed in all other regional histories. This restricted and self-limiting reading of Marx was based in part, García Linera suggests, on problems of translation, circulation and limited archival accessibility. In Marx’s correspondence with the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich from the 1880s and in his ethnographic studies of non-European contexts in texts such as the Kovalevsky notebook (1879)—which until recently remained inaccessible and more or less unknown in Latin America—one finds unmistakable refutations of the tendency to reduce Marx’s thought to stagist and deterministic laws. It was on the basis of partial readings of Marx’s thought, then, that race and ethnicity were systematically recoded in terms of social class in the conceptual vocabulary of Marxist and national popular movements in Bolivia. Indio has thereby historically replaced by campesino, which in turn is understood as a relatively backward and unconscious social form in comparison with the social consciousness of the working class or proletariat.

The problems identified in the “Indianismo y marxismo” essay are interrelated and seem to presuppose one another. The first is the equation of Marxian historicism—in Bolivia and Latin America to be sure, but not only in this region—with a stagist and deterministic philosophy of history. The second problem is that industrialization and the proletariat are misconceived as the only viable road to emancipatory social transformation. As a result, Bolivian Marxism tended to internalize the technical rationality (specialization, the real subsumption of labor) and the forces of abstraction (the abstraction of time, the abstraction that is valuation) proper to industrial capitalism and lose sight of the historicity of these phenomena. The third problem is that Bolivian Marxism displayed a fundamental
incomprehension toward the realities of campesinos and indios, which together appeared to it as what García Linera terms “un bloqueo cognitivo y una imposibilidad epistemológica” (482).

La comunidad [indigena] y sus relaciones productivas sencillamente no existirían en el horizonte interpretativo de este marxismo [primitivo] y mucho menos cualquier otra identidad social que no sea la estrictamente económica; en este caso, campesina. Los repertorios culturales de las clases sociales, la diversidad identitaria de la sociedad o la existencia de naciones y pueblos indígenas serán un no-lugar en la literatura y en la estrategia izquierdista. (La potencia plebeya, 377)

With very few exceptions, Bolivian Marxism of the republican epoch regarded the “traditional” or “non-liberal” social practices of indigenous communities as backward relics of an archaic past that would need to be modernized and homogenized—as something resembling disciplined proletariat culture—before the indigenous could be considered a social and political subject capable of making its own history. By the same token, in the aftermath of the post-1952 breakup of the large latifundios and redistribution of land to peasants, Bolivian Marxism reactively defined this new land-owning class as “pequeños burgúeses,” and thereby missed an opportunity to bring light to the technical rationale at work in Bolivia’s agrarian economy, for instance the distinction between formal and real subsumption of labor in the countryside. In place of indio and campesino, then, Bolivian Marxism could only see a nascent obrero waiting to be brought forth. The Marxian tradition remained constitutively incapable of perceiving any revolutionary potential in indigenous movements: “Para este marxismo no había ni indios ni comunidad,” García Linera concludes, “con lo que una de las más ricas vetas del pensamiento marxista clásico queda bloqueada y rechazada como herramienta interpretativa de la realidad
boliviana” (483). This theoretical missed encounter would in turn prompt Bolivian indigenous movements to conceive of their own projects as opposed to Marxism, or at least to the dominant understanding of that tradition of thought.

While Linera highlights the theoretical deficiencies and ethical failures on the part of Marx’s readers in Bolivia, the pattern of desencuentro extends beyond personal and epistemological shortcomings. In a certain sense one would have to say that Bolivian history is the history of these desencuentros, of misunderstandings and failures to form alliances, which qua missed opportunity is enacted in different ways over time. To recount this repeated desencuentro would be to tell the history of what is not properly historicizable, to narrativize what cannot be narrated because it can only take place as a non-relation. Let me offer an analogy to try to clarify the point. The Bolivian thinker René Zavaleta, whose later thought undoubtedly qualifies as one of the few exceptions to which I just alluded, developed a notion of sociedad abigarrada and formación abigarrada to describe and theorize the socially and culturally heterogeneous tapestry that is Bolivian social reality.¹

Luis Antezana understands the distinction between “sociedad abigarrada” and “formación abigarrada” as the difference between an empirical description of Bolivian society and a conceptual category that would add explanatory power to phenomenal description. The fact that Zavaleta’s thought requires two terms where one would appear to do the trick is an indicator of a shift in Bolivian Marxist thought whereby categories of ethnicity are no longer dismissed as ideological illusions or relegated to the secondary status of “superstructure,” and begin instead to take on political import of their own. Whereas abigarrada would ordinarily

¹ See in particular Lo nacional-popular en Bolivia.
imply a negative aesthetic or epistemological judgment—for example, colors that clash, or a jumbled and disjointed mixture of elements that does not add up to a coherent unity—Zavaleta’s idiosyncratic use of the term established a site for thinking heterogeneity as something more than a mere residual deficiency that could be corrected through the proper application of developmental formulas. *Formación social abigarrada* thus emerges as part of a self-critical reevaluation of Bolivian Marxism from within. While *sociedad abigarrada* describes the phenomenal coexistence of a diversity of social forms that cannot easily be mapped onto a single historical temporality, *formación abigarrada* would attempt to provide a conceptual alternative to traditional Marxian efforts to understand social relations in terms of a philosophy of history based on the supposition that every historical temporality is defined by its own mode(s) of production. It seeks to accomplish what the Trotskyite concept of “uneven and combined development” sought and failed to bring about: a break with, or the very least a hiatus within, the Hegelian narrative of development. The limitation of “uneven and combined” development is exposed through its inability to avoid reproducing the very teleological structure of evenness that it purports to call into question. If *abigarrar* is a spatial metaphor that seeks to think heterogeneity and internal contradiction apart from any normative, unidirectional developmental scheme, *desencuentro* might provide a temporal metaphor that attempts to think the disjunctive simultaneity of what are ordinarily assumed to be distinct historical temporalities in Bolivia.

As Sinclair Thomson has noted, Bolivian historiography has tended to organize republican history around three central revolutionary nodes or moments.² The first instance,

² See *Revolutionary Horizons: Past and Present in Bolivian Politics*. 
which in fact belongs to the prehistory of the republic, is found in a series of Andean indigenous uprisings of 1780-81 that began in Cuzco under Tupac Amaru II, a descendant of Incan royalty, and then spread to the area around El Alto, in what is present-day Bolivia, where an indigenous commoner named Tupaj Katari led an Aymara and Quechua insurrection that temporarily liberated the surrounding countryside from colonial control. Katari’s indigenous armies soon arrived at the walls of La Paz, and although they laid siege to the colonial city for five months they were unable to muster significant support from urban creole and mestizo populations, and were finally defeated by Spanish reinforcements sent from Buenos Aires in late 1781. As Thomson points out, more recent Aymara-led protests that have culminated in popular marches on La Paz and its civic and political institutions—in September 2000 to protest the privatization of water, in October 2003 and June 2005 to protest the privatization of natural gas—were in turn interpreted, on the part of both popular participants and anti-insurgency elites, as “returns” or “repetitions” of the promise or specter of the 1780-81 indianist uprising. By the same token, one could surmise that the non-response in 1781 from the urban mestizo and criollo sectors—who, several decades later, would organize their own “independence” movement against Spanish colonial forces—finds its resonance approximately two centuries later in the attitudes of 20th and early 21st century Bolivian elites, whether in the form of racialized denigrations of indios or in the theoretical tendency to disregard ethnicity as an epiphenomenon of class.³

³ For examples of the racial denigration of indigenous-led popular social movements see Webber, especially chapter 5. García Linera discusses the conceptual limitations of the Bolivian Left in dealing with questions of race, ethnicity and indianismo in La potencia plebeya.
The second nodal point is the national-popular revolution of 1952. Sparked by militant factory workers and miners under the leadership of the Movimiento Revolucionario Nacionalista Party, the 1952 popular revolt overthrew a long-standing seigniorial oligarchic regime and prompted the institution of a range of social reforms that included universal suffrage, universal free education, land reform facilitated by the breakup of latifundios in the altiplano, nationalization of tin mines and the formation of the Centro Obrero Boliviano (COB), which quickly established itself as one of the most militant labor organizations in all of Latin America. As García Linera notes, the 1952 revolution illustrates an important distinction between the reception of Marx in mid-20th century Bolivia and Bolivian nationalism. While the two political tendencies shared the same view of industrialization as the sole legitimate path to progress, nationalism possessed the practical advantage of a political will to power whereas mid-20th century Marxism was by and large satisfied with reproducing textbook accounts of what had to take place first in order to generate the conditions of possibility for the overcoming of capitalism.⁴

Although the official discourse of the national-popular revolution showed little interest in exploring questions of indigeneity above and beyond the aforementioned reform measures, the fact that it offered the promise of full citizenship and social mobility while eliminating or mediating many of the country’s historical structures of domination and exploitation meant that the national-popular imaginary soon became fixed as a new epochal horizon for the entirety of Bolivian society, including indigenous communities and actors, up until the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and regardless of the fact that the democratic revolution’s

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⁴ La potencia plebeya, 478-79
fragile political durability was truncated by a series of military interventions in the 1960s and 70s. To make matters even more complicated, as García Linera notes, by the 1960s indigenous campesino sectors had become increasingly aligned ideologically with Bolivia’s authoritarian military regimes in opposition to radical labor.

Although Bolivian political democracy was repeatedly plagued by dictatorships and electoral corruption during this later period, García Linera maintains that the national-popular revolution retains its ideological hegemony until 1986 when the Paz Estenssoro administration, under the economic tutelage of Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs and Bolivian Minister of Economy Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada, implemented neoliberal reforms that included privatizing the nation’s most productive tin mines and laying off or “relocating” thousands of miners. In his essay on “La muerte de la condición obrera del siglo XX: La marcha minera por la vida,” García Linera describes the ensuing confrontation between displaced miners and the Bolivian state as another kind of desencuentro. This time it is not a missed encounter between emancipatory struggles but a scene structured by two radically dissymmetrical powers of perception and signification. True to their working class tradition, the soon-to-be unemployed miners met in Oruro and Potosí to organize a massive protest march that dubbed itself “La marcha de la vida.” The workers planned to converge on La Paz, where they fully expected the state to meet them and negotiate a new social pact, as it always had in the past. If the COB was widely regarded as the most militant labor movement in Latin America, it had nonetheless tied itself to a structure of negotiated accords which inevitably served to reconfirm the sovereign authority of the national state over relations between capital and labor. What actually happens in 1986, however, was something for which the working class history of the COB offered no precedent
or model. Paz Estenssoro responded to the miner’s *Marcha de la vida* not with the expected initiation of official negotiations but rather with a declaration of state of siege (once again, an echo of 1781?), an act of war that was accompanied by low-flying fighter jets passing over the long lines of marching miners. Faced with this unexpected threat of annihilation, the miners felt they had no choice but to return to Oruro with their demands unmet. Their ignominious retreat, meanwhile, left no space for working class heroism or martyrdom, and announced instead what García Linera calls the end of the proletariat as a conceptual category and political signifier in 20th century Bolivia.

The third revolutionary node is found in the popular uprisings that began as protests against neoliberal privatization of water (2000) and natural gas (2003 and 2005) and then quickly escalated into a widespread movement against the neoliberal state, culminating in the resignation of Sánchez de Losada (2003) and the election of Evo Morales and García Linera in 2006. The anti-neoliberal movement drew on rural-based cocalero protests against Bolivia’s participation in the US-led eradication of coca under Plan Colombia as well as a broader Aymara-led movement seeking fuller participation of indigenous communities in national affairs, and for whom popular opposition to privatizing natural resources in the early 2000s easily resonated with *indianista* notions of the ecological ethos of *buen vivir*. But while the events in Cochabamba and La Paz appear to have provided the sparks that precipitated the rapid collapse of the neoliberal state in 2005, in the “*Indianismo y marxismo*” essay García Linera belies the idea that the events of the early 2000s came out of the blue, documenting instead a longer trajectory of intellectual and activist work associated with Fausto Reinaga and the Katarista movement, which over the course of several decades had laid groundwork for the
revitalization of contestatory politics and challenges to the sovereignty of the republican state in the early 2000s following nearly two decades of neoliberal consensus. García Linera credits Katarismo with the reinvention of *indianitud* as a category divested of its former stigma and transformed into a signifier of social and political subjectivation. Katarismo brings about an indianista renaissance, a reclaiming and reinvention of Indian histories and pasts, of cultural practices, of travails and virtues, all of which generates a symbolic archive from which new forms of political awareness and collective organization can draw their material.⁵

At the risk of producing my own *abigarramiento* of themes and contexts, I now turn to look at how the two ideological tendencies I have been discussing in García Linera’s work—*indianismo* and Marxism—map onto the landscape of post-2006 Bolivia. For the sake of convenience let me one of the influential truth claims that seek to establish an account of what is happening in Bolivia today and of which way the wind might be blowing. The claim is that of decolonial discourse, whose academic advocates include Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel and others. The prospects for decolonial theory would seem to be bolstered today by the evident fact that in post-neoliberal times Bolivia has experienced far more tangible success in decolonizing the state than in moving toward an anti-capitalist form of social organization. But while the forging of a new, more culturally diverse and democratic form of republicanism under the Plurinational state is to be welcomed, I am not certain whether decolonial theory would be capable of thinking beyond the colonial structures of power that constitute the main object of its critiques. My point is not that its explanatory potential tends to be exhausted in the decolonization of the state, but rather the opposite: that decolonial theory

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⁵ *La potencia plebeya*, 486.
can never have done with colonialism because colonialism is itself its very ground. I say this because decolonial theory remains dependent on a culturalism in the last instance that may be constituvely incapable of distancing itself from the logic of coloniality.

In his essay Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin, Jacques Derrida explores the hypothesis that “I have only one language [and yet] it is not mine.” If I have only one language it is because, as is the case with the law, I first come to language as something that has imposed itself unilaterally on me from elsewhere: as proscription, injunction, appeal, hailing, and so on. I come to it, or it comes to me, as a cut in the real, a primordial signifier in relation to which all future symbolizations and articulations—and spacing, silence and forgetting—will be organized. Language and law are ostensibly experienced as the property of an autonomous “I.” As the fluent speaker of this language or as member of that community it must be as if I give the law (or language) to myself. And yet the origin of the law’s authority remains shrouded in an opacity that coincides with the law’s absolute heteronomy vis-à-vis the self-legislating subject. Any and all polylingualism would be predicated on this unary and heteronomic structuring of the law for the speaking subject.

If the mono-language that I speak is not mine, meanwhile, this is in part because I am not the master of language but rather the opposite: even as I tell myself that I use language to do or get what I want, the truth is that it speaks through me. But the language that I speak is also not mine because language can never be One. No language can ever be self-contained or self-identical; and there can be no origin (first sign, unary signifier) without the possibility of repetition. All languages remain dependent on their contiguity with other languages, just as the value of any signifier depends on its proximity and difference vis-à-vis other signifiers, as well as
its capacity to be repeated and grafted into other contexts. By the same token, the resources of a given language are necessarily dependent on material elements—marks, spacings, contiguities, etc.—that are irreducible to the economies of valuation or signification in which they participate.

Language thus embodies the prosthesis of origin, an originary supplement of technics to which the human must turn in order to become what it is. The essence of human culture, if there is one, is essentially split: between that which possess its own principle of change and action within itself and that which is compelled to turn outside of itself even before it is possible to speak of anything like a self. The French archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan developed the concept of exteriorization to describe how the use of technics has the effect of expanding the boundaries of the human body by appropriating what is outside and non-human into the fold of human being and acting. But as Bernard Stiegler notes, the concept of exteriorization contains a paradoxical fold that is analogous to what Derrida formulates as the prosthesis of origin. In Stiegler’s words, “the paradox is to have to speak of an exteriorization without a preceding interior: the interior [PD: what is properly human in phylogenetic terms, or the self in psychological terms] is constituted in exteriorization” (Technics and Time I, 141).

In contrast to this thought of the prosthesis of the origin or originary exteriorization, Derrida asserts that the concept of culture is essentially colonial in origin. In addition to the common etymology of these two terms [colere: to tend, guard, cultivate and inhabit], modern conceptualizations of culture invariably entail one or another form of naming and policing the distinction between what is proper and what improper to the “culture” in question; indeed, the modern conceptualization of culture becomes incoherent without this policing of the proper.
This is the case whether culture is understood in the anthropological sense as the practices and symbolic forms that are distinct to a specific ethnic or linguistic community, or in the philosophical sense of acquiring and cultivating general values and capabilities that are ostensibly universal in scope. There can be no concept of culture without the presupposition of a community and a language that are One: distinguishable in the last instance from all others and identical to itself. In its self-institution, culture invariably imposes police measures that equate origin with identity and the proper, while also seeking to arbitrate who is authorized to speak about such and such a topic versus who must be content to listen and learn because she or he is not from here or has not lived here long enough. As Derrida puts it, the “monolingualism imposed by the other operates by relying upon...a sovereignty whose essence is always colonial [and] which tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogeneous.”

But as we have seen there is no real belonging, because belonging is the homo-hegemonic fiction that both ensues from and seeks to cover up the impurity of exteriorization.

It seems to me that the decolonial appeal to epistemological and ontological difference would prove unable to think the gap that both separates and joins Bolivian history as the narrativation of what resists narrative or as desencuentro. While the prospects for the decolonial position appear to have brightened with the constituent assembly and the Plurinational state, decolonial discourse depends on the key distinction between Western epistemology and ontology on the one hand, which as it reminds us is grounded in the reductive violence of dualism (culture/nature, us/them, civilization/barbarism), and on the

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other hand those Amerindian traditions that it claims as remaining more open to fluid ways of thinking about and practicing relationality. Whether this distinction as posed by decolonial thought could actually hold up to serious scrutiny or not, and whether or not decolonial thought ends up reproducing the dualist structure at another level (West and non-West), it seems clear that its framing mechanism does not allow it to break fully away from the colonial problem of homo-hegemony just described. Decolonial discourse may serve precisely to avoid the torsions of desencuentro and abigarramiento, together with the contradictions and disagreements these terms imply.

By contrast, I would propose that the possibility and emergence of emancipatory projects in Bolivian history would seem to derive as much if not more from the latter—from mixture, contamination and the risks of tenuous communication—than from the purity and hegemony of the former. In this sense, desencuentro may provide a needed conceptual supplement to Zavaleta’s emphasis on cultural diversity and heterogeneity as vital sites for the generation of a truly emancipatory conceptual vocabulary. Antezana describes Zavaleta’s turn to the motif of abigarramiento as part of an increasing emphasis in his thought on how Bolivia’s past—more so than any image of the future—provides an archive of symbols and signifiers available for forms of revolutionary practice in the present.

La creciente atención zavaletiana hacia la diversidad de la sociedad boliviana y sus múltiples historias hermana, siempre, el conocimiento social objetivo con el dolor de sus caminos y límites: lo que se conoce es sólo lo que se puede conocer. Y, ahí inevitablemente, la búsqueda de la “libertad como costumbre cotidiana”, una de las caras de la autodeterminación social, no puede evitar constituir el poder como pavor.
Todo parece indicar que el dolor es uno de los componentes del conocimiento social y, quizá, de todo verdadero conocimiento. (“Dos conceptos,” 140)

In a similar way it may be that desencuentro, in addition to the negative meanings it possesses—missed encounter, failed opportunity, disappointment—can also help to illuminate how it could be that what does not have a place in history can return to incite and mobilize new aspirations for equality and autonomy.

Works cited


