

Exhaustion of signifiers: the current political crisis in Bolivia

November 3, 2020



“‘Pititas’, the wrong generation? They call the real vote *fraud*, they call democracy a *dictatorship*, they call dictatorship a *democracy*, they call the paramilitaries *heroes*, they call the patriots *terrorists*. They know nothing at all, but they believe they are superior.”

The above text, by an anonymous author, appears as a meme in some political discussions about the current Bolivian situation on social networks. “Pitita” is the name given to the political actors who took the streets of Bolivian cities to protest the supposed electoral fraud that the MAS would have forged in the October elections last year. They are called “pititas” (“pitita” means “thin cordon”) because days before his resignation, Evo Morales referred in that way to the cordons that were used in those protests to block vehicle passages. Obviously the term is derogatory. Morales was making fun of the fact that the blockers, mostly from the urban middle classes, didn’t even know how to make good barriers as a form of protest.

While the meme seems clear about its intention to show how wrong the “pititas” are, it shows, deep down, something more complex. It shows the struggle that is taking place in Bolivia in the field of political languages. Although the meme states that the “pititas” call things wrongly because “they know nothing at all”, it can be said that in reality what is at stake is the pertinence of calling things by a name when they have stopped being what they were. Moreover, the resounding nature of the meme lies in the fact that it sounds true. The State of MAS, which since its appearance has been considered by academics and politicians as one of the most democratic States in the history of the country, is, for the “pititas”, an example of an undemocratic State. The same happens with the mention of the “patriots”: for some, Evo Morales and various leaders of the MAS are considered incarnations of a project of national renewal without precedent, while for others they are simple

bloodthirsty leftists who should be treated as drug traffickers and terrorists.

This debate about how things are named, however, is not just important because it shows us two such opposing visions of the political spectrum, but, on the contrary, because signifiers such as “democracy” or “nationhood” to use the two named examples, are employed by both sides for similar purposes. It seems to me that this exhaustion of signifiers is one of the characteristics of the political moment Bolivia is living, in which, apparently, everyone wants the same things, but conceives them in opposite ways.

Some leftists in Bolivia deny that MAS is a leftist party. The anarchist activist and artist María Galindo has gone so far as to say that in these last elections only different versions of the right were competing: a populist right (MAS), a liberal right (Comunidad Ciudadana) and the ultra-right (CREEMOS). While it seems to me that claiming that MAS is a right-wing party is exaggerated, it can be said that in terms of its economic policies, its cultural chauvinism or in terms of its policies on issues such as the environment and machismo, MAS is far from being a progressive party. But what seems undeniable to me is that in the spectrum of Bolivian political and social thought tradition, MAS still embodies the historical position of the left, which makes many left-wingers identify not necessarily with the party today, but with what it meant historically, at least in its beginnings.

The fact that MAS still represents the “popular” in the national political tradition of the left should not be taken lightly. When we read in the meme that the “pititas ... know nothing at all,” we should not assume that this “not knowing” means only ignorance. It is also referring to the fact that the “pititas” do not know concretely about Bolivian history. As a historian, I assume that all historical narratives are fictional in the sense that their construction has a particular purpose. However, the complexity of contemporary Bolivian historical narratives, as in most Latin American cases, is that they have often been made from a left-populist vision that centers historical facts on concepts such as nation, people (“pueblo”), and more recently, the indigenous as a “subaltern” subject. In that sense, it is logical that the “pititas” are claimed to be ignorant of national history, given that that history based on the popular and indigenous subject is alien to the thousands of middle class people who took the streets to overthrow Evo Morales in October and November of last year. In other words, “national history,” as told by academia, intellectuals, and collective representations, is more likely to favor MAS and what it represents historically than its liberal opponents, who “know nothing at all” about that history.

What I have just said can be seen, for example, in the trend of current right-wing liberalism in Bolivia that claims that MAS has divided Bolivians in terms of class and race, a claim that denies the profound racism that persists in the Bolivian society. But while that discourse is spreading through the global right-wing liberalism and is typically conservative (don't forget that the slogan of the dictatorship of Hugo Banzer was “peace, unity and work”), I don't think this claim can be attributed solely to the right-wing tendencies of certain sectors. In fact, it seems to me that one of the mistakes of MAS and all the leftist-populist rhetoric with which it wrapped its chauvinism during its long time in government was to depoliticize the ethnic and class issues, turning both into just government slogans. That is why the new generations are incapable of rethinking those issues politically since they became “common sense” as Gramsci understood it. That is why many young people who grew up under the MAS government assume the claim of the liberal right as their own.

The “indigenous issue” in MAS is paradigmatic of what I have just noted. Although Evo Morales and a large number of MAS state officials are from popular and indigenous sectors, indigenous movements have been repressed throughout his administration. The most notorious case, which led many on the critical left to distance themselves from MAS, was the repression of indigenous and environmental leaders in Chaparina in 2011. This occurred when those leaders and activists were leading a march to protest the highway project in the protected territory of TIPNIS (Indigenous

Territory and Isiboro Secure National Park). But the internal contradictions within MAS regarding the ethnic issue do not only refer to the facts. It seems to me that one of the levels where these contradictions have had the greatest impact is the symbolic level. The MAS's State and its rhetoric regarding ethnicity has shown the limits of ethnicity as a political category. That is, it has been seen that political actions carried out on the basis of indigenous ethnic identity do not ensure cohesion of political views with respect to a "popular" or leftist horizon thought in terms of class, or in terms of environmental and gender demands. In other words, the years of MAS government have shown that there can be indigenous self-assumed political subjects who are, at the same time, conservative with respect to the agenda of the global left or, conversely, that many of the points of the global left's agenda are incompatible with the self-assumed indigenous political subjectivity.

On the other hand, two recent acts that I consider much miscalculated on the part of MAS are sharpening a very marked polarization in the country. First, a judge annulled the arrest warrant against Evo Morales in order to let him return to the country to participate in the act of possession of Luis Arce. Second, some regulations of the legislative chambers were modified taking advantage of the fact that the MAS still had 2/3 of the senators and parliamentarians before the change of government. These changes were made in order to modify the requirement the 2/3 of the votes for certain chamber procedures. This is because in the next chamber composition, the MAS won't have the 2/3 of the legislators, but it will have a simple majority. Although it is true that the order of apprehension of Morales was very arbitrary, given that he was blamed for terrorism (we return to the meme from the beginning), and although it is true that the chamber rules that MAS modified are more technical than legislative, both acts function as eloquent political gestures. Both gestures show that the MAS is returning to an exercise of power without concessions, which, in the face of the political crisis that the country recently experienced, gives the right-wing an opportunity to gain support among the undecided voters from the last election and among those who had hoped that the MAS had modified its authoritarian political inclinations.

But the most important thing about this new polarization, accentuated by the first acts of power of MAS, is that it shows once again the deep regional divergence of the country. Currently, the most reactionary right-wing has begun to make public calls in the different cities of the country to take the streets again and demand a military government, because, according to them, the recent elections were also fraudulent. These calls have had almost no echo in the Andean cities, but the city of Santa Cruz, in a more torrid zone, is currently in a general strike that shows the forcefulness of certain right-wing discourses among its population. This polarization is historical and is related, it seems to me, to this "not knowing at all" of national history. It is eloquent, for example, that in Santa Cruz, a city with more than two million inhabitants, there is not a single history undergraduate department and almost none in the field of the social sciences. In other words, the historical narrative on which the emergence of a party like MAS is based has little influence in this region. In addition, it is clear that this national historical narrative is profoundly Andean and centralist, which determines its little influence in Santa Cruz, even though a large part of the population that inhabits the region is of Andean migrant origin.

The MAS State has probably been the largest State in Bolivian history in terms of both its material structure and its influence on society. As I pointed out earlier, its emergence historically responds to a national narrative based on the popular and the "indigenous" that makes it being considered a leftist state until now. In this sense, it seems to me that the challenge for the Bolivian left today is to succeed in disassociating itself from MAS in order to offer a parallel version that takes into account both the emptying of political signifiers to which I referred and the limits to which certain identity policies have reached, especially those centered on ethnicity. I am not saying that ethnic political identity should be banished from the categorical repertoire of the left, but it seems to me that it should be repoliticized in new and creative ways. In this sense, a leftist political project in Bolivia

cannot be understood without its links to the MAS State and the mark it is leaving on national history. I do not believe, as a certain culturalist left believes, that it is a matter of taking up the MAS project again from its origins back in 2005. To think that this is possible is to ignore the historical logic and is to not take into account that the mark left by the MAS State during its 15 years of government is today indelible. What is at stake, it seems to me, is to overcome MAS through the renewal of the social fabric on which it is based. And that will only be possible if the left begins to work now in view of future electoral processes, those of five years from now or even those of ten years from now.