

INDIAN MOVEMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA:

A HISTORICAL REVERSAL

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Introduction: The Import and Significance of Indian Movements

Modern Indian movements are numerous and diverse, exhibiting a wide variety of features and orientations, ranging from the social to the political, from the economic to the cultural. Their history is rich, filled with many important events and distinct “moments”. Among these movements, some occupy a central position in their respective societies, others are animated by large minorities, some concern only small numbers. Yet, Indian movements are not just interesting as objects-in-themselves. Several features of Indian movements, taken together, make them a useful case for comparative study.

Among these characteristics:

- a) In a diachronic perspective, the Indian movement is cumulative. There have now been four decades of mobilization. Over this period, varied leadership has emerged in different national contexts and at different historical moments, the movement has had a growing presence within several nations, especially Ecuador, Bolivia and Mexico, and some Indian movements have attained high international visibility.
- b) The movement is multidimensional, intersecting with contemporary processes and issues, like economic modernization, social and national integration, and ethnic, cultural and religious identities, as well as with contemporary movement problematics, like the relationship of movements to violent struggle and the formal political process. Indian movements have also played an important role in the reinvention of politics in the broadest sense.
- c) But the main interest of these movements lies in their orientations and meanings, for the actors themselves, for Indians as communities, and for Latin American societies. Indeed, the movements' impact goes far beyond the communities immediately concerned, or even Latin American societies. Modern Indian movements have much to teach us about the construction of cultural actors in societies on the periphery, about processes of subjectivation in general and about communitarian withdrawals.

Main significance:

In a world marked by the domination of markets forces as well as the rise of sometimes-powerful and violent neo-communitarian movements, the struggles of Latin American Indians are among the rare movements that combine the elements of social conflict, the question of culture, and democratic aims. Today, in several Latin American societies, they constitute the principal, if not the only, social movement and they have brought about a historic reversal of the Indian question: from surrender to emancipation; from passive resistance and short-lived insurrection to long-term, organised, collective action; from the duplication of tradition to the creation of new social forms and imaginaries; from collective and individual shame to feelings of individual and communal self-worth; from internalised racism to the assertion of equality in difference.

The Movements: Key Moments and Phases

In general terms, and subject to various nuances and gaps in any given empirical case, we can distinguish four or five phases in the evolution of Latin American Indian movements. These phases overlap and play out according to different rhythms, across different national contexts.

The Social Dimension

The 1960s and 70s marked the gestation, birth and emergence of modern Indian movements. At this time, indigenous struggles were essentially peasant struggles. Like other peasants, Indian demands were mainly economic and social, centred on questions of land access, credit, market reform and the demand for various (state) services. The central stakes were thus agrarian reform, the conditions of production and trade, and integration into national society and the «modern» way of life. Claims to cultural specificity did appear but tended to be marginal and closely linked to more «generic» economic and social demands. Mobilization took place mainly under the auspices of classical labour unions or political parties, sometimes in cooperation with state (government) or ecclesiastical organizations.

These Indian movements were organized first at the local and regional level, and then, in some cases, at the national level. A few even began to acquire international visibility.

The Shuar Federation, often described as the first organization of a modern Indian movement, was created in 1964 in Ecuadorian Amazonia and was closely linked to Catholic missionary structures. A few years later, in the Andean mountains, the Ecuarrunari's discourse and mobilization logic were framed in the classical terms of class struggle.

In the 1980s, the movement founded a national organization for indigenous peoples, the Indigenous Nationalities Confederation of Ecuador (Conaie). It became the main social movement in Ecuador and instigated important several uprisings and marches on the capital. The Inti Raymi uprising in 1990 with the Indian march to Quito consecrated the movement as central to national politics; yet, the movement remained primarily a social one.

In Bolivia, the katarist movement - named after Tupac Katari, the leader of an 18th century anti-colonial revolt - emerged as part of the formal, well-developed, highly organized peasant trade union movement. It eventually became one of the most active components of the Bolivian Workers' Union (Central Obrera Boliviana).

In Colombia, the Regional Council of the Indigenous of Cauca (Cric) gradually asserted its distinctiveness within the powerful peasant movement, the Anuc (Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos), beginning in the 1970s.

In Mexico, in the 1970s and 80s, even after the Indigenous Congress of 1974 in Chiapas, the dimension of Indian identity in the peasant movement remained repressed or implicit. Indeed, the Indigenous Congress itself characteristically emphasized social and economic demands - land, trade, wealth, education – rather than cultural ones.

The Cultural Dimension

Gradually, assertions of difference, claims for cultural rights, and a rejection of the stigma associated with «Indian-ness» have come to occupy a more central place in Indian movements. At the same time, and relatively, the demand for (positive) recognition and the quest for autonomy, has assumed increasing importance. Thus, if early mobilizations by Indians contained a cultural component, this cultural dimension of Indian struggles only became visible and was only made explicit in later movements.

It was around 1992, during the mobilizations against the celebrations of the fifth centenary of the « Discovery » of America by Columbus, that Indian movements began to strongly assert an identitarian, communitarian or ethnic orientation. This new emphasis often existed in tension with the more traditional class-based ways of framing indigenous claims. However, adepts of class struggle, spoke of «500 years of indigenous, black and popular resistance», so suggesting that class-based struggle is in some cases rooted in ethnic categories. In practice, demonstrations throughout the continent had an essentially Indian character. The Conaie were the main driving force of that particular transnational mobilization, adding a cultural dimension to the social mobilization that the organization led in Ecuador.

The symbolic power of the anti-1992 movement may be measured by the international response it generated, even beyond the frontiers of Latin America. The decision to grant the Peace Nobel Prize that same year to a Guatemalan Indian woman, Rigoberta Menchú, was widely seen as recognition of the historical debt of the Western world towards a population decimated during the Conquest and dominated during five centuries since then.

Identity and Democracy: the Emergence of the Political Dimension

In the early phases of Indian movements, political power was not a central concern. Most of the time, indigenous organizations and movements sought to distance themselves from overtly political claims or limited themselves to questions of local power.

In the 1970s and 80s, when Indian movements were dragged into political and military conflict, they were usually destroyed by such involvement (as in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru). However, most Indian movements sought to distance themselves from guerrillas and pursue their objectives non-violently.

Since the 1990s, Indian struggles have increasingly emphasized self-government and granted more centrality to political questions. In the last decade or so, they have burst onto the local, regional and national political scene, sometimes in the form of protest movements, sometimes through participation in government, and sometimes through more radical attempts to «reinvent» the nature of politics.

a) In several countries, Indians exercised, for the first time, executive or legislative responsibilities at different levels, as Indians. Indian representatives were nominated and elected as local, regional or national authorities.

Bolivia saw the election of an Indian, the Aymara Victor Hugo Cárdenas, as vice president of the Republic in 1993 – an event without precedent in Latin America.

In Colombia, in the favourable context established by the peace negotiations and the 1991 Constitution, parliamentarians, mayors and a departmental governor were elected on Indian lists, or on common lists that explicitly recognized the candidate's Indian heritage.

In Guatemala, in the context of the peace agreements and the guerrillas' disarmament, civic committees were created that enabled Indian personalities to participate successfully in local elections and as mayors in the highlands.

In the same period, Indian political parties were created in Ecuador (Pachakutik-Nuevo País, 1996) and in Bolivia (Mip). Members of these parties were elected, in significant numbers, in their respective Congresses.

b) Moreover, Indian mobilizations played a leading role in the fall of two governments in Ecuador (Abdala Bucaram in 1997, Jamil Mahuad in 2000), and one government in Bolivia (Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in 2003).

In Ecuador, during the January 2000 uprising, an Indian group, allied to a sector of the armed forces, tried to take power. In 2002-2003, several Indian personalities, of a different current in the movement, occupied important ministerial positions in the Gutierrez government. (They resigned from their posts in August 2003). A Quichua woman, Nina Pakari, was minister of foreign affairs during that period.

In short, in many governments in Latin America, there has been a growing number of Indian representatives, including a vice-president and several ministers. In Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and also in Nicaragua, Panama and Mexico, Indian representatives have been elected to the Congress on Indian lists or on common lists that identified them as Indian candidates representing Indian interests. However, it is at the local and regional levels that the political advances of indigenous movements have been most significant and lasting.

c) The Reinvention of political culture

The Zapatist movement, which appeared in Chiapas in 1994, has shown the most strength and creativity in formulating the demands for social justice, «equality with difference» and democracy, that are at the core of all Indian movements. The Zapatists have always refused to participate in political party structures and in elections. Nevertheless, they have had the biggest impact of any Indian movement on the national and on the international scene. Initially, they were a project of revolutionary guerrilla or national liberation movement. Subsequently, the Zapatists transformed themselves into an Indian insurrection and finally, they became a movement seeking to mobilize civil society with the purpose of changing the political culture.

By choosing the 1st of January 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, to begin their uprising and, later, by exploiting the new information and communication technologies, the Zapatistas deliberately injected Indian struggles into the new context of globalization. Various, they have sought to articulate social demands and fight against the power of the Party-State, mobilize against neoliberalism and assert Indian identity, without retreating into an ethnicist position. At different moments, they have emphasized one or another of these orientations.

The Zapatist movement helped to shake and ultimately bring down a regime that was of unequalled stability and longevity in Latin America, and, arguably, in the contemporary world. The movement was vital to Mexico's democratization. Nevertheless, it became neither a central social actor nor a decisive political actor on the national scene, in the long term. Nor has the movement succeeded in maintaining itself as a factor at the international level, despite the visibility that it gained by initiating one of the first global protests against neoliberalism, after the collapse of communism and a few years before the « counter-summit » at Seattle (1999) and the first Global Social Forum at Porto Alegre (2001), etc.

Its aura and its impact have mainly been derived from its ability to change the political imaginary, to express and dramatically illustrate contemporary struggles by linking them to historic symbols like Emiliano Zapata, and to do so simultaneously locally, nationally and internationally, by mobilizing global networks via new information and communication technologies. On the march to Mexico in 2001, the Zapatistas gave a brilliant demonstration of their ability to combine questions of identity and democracy, collective action and subjective experiences. Since 2001, however, the movement has appeared relatively blunted.

Current Situation: Democratization and Anti-democratic Temptations

Modern Indian movements developed in a context of disintegration of the traditional communities and decline of the politics of integration by assimilation. These movements imply a double rejection: 1) that of closed communities and homogeneous cultures, on the one hand, and on the other, 2) that of generalised and uniformizing hybridizing or métissage. They have contributed to the expansion of democracy, to the recognition of the equality of Indians without having to sacrifice their identity

Indian movements have reached a crucial moment in their evolution. They are in danger of stagnating, disintegrating or retreating into themselves. They are confronted with the absence of an alternative economic model, but as well with the traps and dangers of ethnicity, the ambiguities and difficulties of the politics of identity and difference, as for example in Colombia, Ecuador, the Mexican state of Oaxaca... These movements will escape the threats of dissolution in the market, institutionalisation and bureaucratisation, or populist and communitarian temptations, but only if they manage to maintain and deepen the orientation that made them their distinctive character and assured them an impact far beyond the Indian sectors, beyond Latin America frontiers : the capacity (ability) to link demands of social rights, civic and political rights, cultural rights, without confusing the distinction between them.

Their historic task is far from being exhausted, but they will be able to pursue and extend it only if they manage to associate other democratic forces to their efforts. However, so far, in all Latin America, we observe a disillusion following a period of hope in the democracy.

Possible Trends

Movements oriented to issues of identity are never entirely safe from communitarian temptations, and Indian movements in Latin America are no exception. In a context marked, at the international level, by the logics of war, and at the national level, by strong polarizations of various kinds, it is not impossible that strategic decisions by Indian movements to retreat from broader social struggles will take on neo-communitarian forms. A radical Indianism in Bolivia in the elections of 2001 and in the uprising that led to the fall of the government in October 2003 are just two examples of this potential trend. Up to the present time, however, in Latin America, communitarianism has taken on an essentially religious form, particularly following the decline of liberation theology and the growing expansion of evangelical churches and sects. At times, such religious radicalization has led to violent confrontations, as in some areas of Mexico. Still, the Haitian case shows that these phenomena are not the exclusive prerogative of Indian communities.

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