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BOLIVIA: SUBALTERN POLITICS IN THE AGE  
OF THE NEW LATIN AMERICAN LEFT  
PARTICIPATION & REPRESENTATION

**Annika Gunderson, Augsburg College**

## Introduction

The majority of Bolivian women have been serving and creating as organizers dating before the mark of colonialism, in the home working to sustain the physical and emotional needs of the family in ways strong enough to amplify the Bolivian GDP<sup>59</sup> [if only their informal labor wouldn't be left monetarily unpaid]<sup>60</sup>; in the marketplace taking on a second, third or even fourth job in order to earn enough to provide for their [and their family's, *moreso*] basic needs; and in their communities, persisting for respect in the formal labor realm so that they, as women, are legally recognized to receive at least the minimum wage, so that they, as women, can be acknowledged as legitimate landowners, and so that they, as women, can have the right to form unions in order to establish a public space where the *personal* can be confronted as the *political*. Bolivian women have been gathering in action for as long as their validity as humans has been questioned. How is this known? Through the voices of Bolivian women's organizations, *testimonios* [testimonials] deliver the message of many: the many who struggle against hierarchy and the status quo in order to organize, the many who seek to form a more representative, inclusive and deliberative State, and the many who, even centuries after the Spanish conquest, continue experiencing both external and internal colonization. A collective Bolivian action, encompassing both distinct and mutual identities, is manifested through these *testimonios* that serve to amplify the voices of the people. Using the land as a metaphor, the plights of many Bolivian women are explored. [Note that the use of land here is not meant to be equated with indigeneity or the feminine.]

*Hay un jardín que está bien seco. Desde la tierra crecen raíces pequeños.*

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<sup>59</sup> GDP: Gross Domestic Product

<sup>60</sup> *Informal labor* in this sense refers to personal domestic labor roles.

*La tierra está seca porque muchos de mundos extranjeros la han pisado, con indiferencia por sus recursos, con intolerancia por su gente. Este jardín aún continúa mantenerse, aunque esté débil.*

*Pronto, las raíces pequeñas se forman ser un sistema de apoyo, una colectiva de acción, organizando como la tela enredada de una manta. Encima los poderosos rondan como árboles distinguidos. Sus ramas afiladas amenazan y sus hojas permeables agobian el aire que sostiene a los nativos del subsuelo, sin dejar que caiga ni una gotita de hidratación.*

*El jardín está bien seco, pero todavía sale la cosecha, una cosecha madura y fértil que se revela en las redes de la gente. La gente – los nativos – persisten continuamente, uniéndose juntos y representándose por la unidad del grupo. El individuo no se pierde en esta identidad colectiva, sino que se transforma para ser aún más claro. Hay fuerza en esta identidad. [Gunderson, 2009]*

*There is a garden that is quite dry. From the earth grow small roots.*

*The land is exhausted because many foreign worlds have stepped upon it, with indifference for its resources, with intolerance for its people. The garden still continues to maintain itself, although it is weak. Soon the small roots form themselves to be a system of support, a collective of action, organizing like the intertwined threads of a blanket. Above, the powerful hover, as if they were distinguished trees. Their sharp branches threaten and their permeable leaves suffocate the air that sustains the natives of the subsoil, without allowing even one drop of hydrating water fall.*

*The garden is rather dry, but still the harvest is reaped, a ripe and fertile harvest that reveals itself through the networks of the people. The people – the natives – continually persist, uniting themselves together and representing themselves through the unity of the group. The individual does not lose oneself in this collective identity, but rather transforms the self to be even clearer. There is a force in this identity. (Gunderson 2009)*

This story depicts a scene of dry land, land that has had its depths punctured and clawed through for centuries. Despite its lack of moisture, this land holds a secret. It remains incredibly fertile and abundant in resources. This plentitude runs from a deep historical solidarity with the people. Those of the land – the indigenous, the *people* – embody the historical significance of this secret. [The emphasis of the *people* – in Spanish, *la gente* – signifies *el pueblo*, the village, which is used in Testimonial Literature, *testimonio*, to represent those who are indigenous to the land, those who gather communally at the grassroots level. The multi-dimensional meaning of *la gente* is an important theme throughout this writing.] The meaning here is rooted in a collective identity based in organization and action, one that is reinforced by the reflection of each member's inherent background, each authentic identity. The connection of the land to *the people's* way of relating to self, relating to others, and relating to society at large - has strong implications for the concept and action of revolution. It is through this land, on the local street level, where the subaltern are most politically active and therefore most politically personified. This claim is supported by subaltern participation in the informal market and furthermore subaltern collectivity in women's organizations such as *Mujeres creando*, *Coordinadora de la mujer*, *Articulación de mujeres por la equidad y la igualdad [AMUPEI]*, *Foro*

*político de mujeres*, and *Asociación de concejales de Bolivia [ACOBOL]*<sup>61</sup>. By recognizing both informal and formal forms of political participation, and by addressing four issues – land, political discourse, violence, and individual political rights capacitation – directly related to subaltern political participation, Bolivia's government will embody Latin America's *new Left* that better includes, represents, and, ultimately, respects subaltern [women's] political participation.

This will explore the realms and contexts in which the subaltern are socially and politically personified, critiquing them principally from feminist theory and testimonials [specific Bolivian women's collective discourses] centered upon decolonization and solidarity – a solidarity that recognizes and empowers [rather than assimilates] individual identities. Two central themes will be focused upon: In the Bolivian context, can current party politics of the *new Left* holistically represent the subaltern? What do subaltern community members call for as prerequisites to Bolivian democratization and progressivity? These issues will be addressed through the utilization of current newspaper/journal articles and book excerpts, interpreting and evaluating them from a testimonial-feminist lens. Words serving as a vessel, the idea and implications of Bolivia's *identity politics* – specifically regarding subaltern women and indigeneity – will reign as the theme which currently poses great influence upon the multi-dimensional meanings and potential behind Latin America's *new Left*.

### Literature Review: Theories on Political Development & the Subaltern

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<sup>61</sup> Women Creating, Women Coordinators, Women's Articulation for Equity and Equality, Political Forum of Women, Association of Bolivian Women Town Councillors

The prevalence of ideas centering upon citizenship and the nation-state cannot be surpassed when addressing subalternity and the transformations of party politics. Questioning the nation-state – what it has historically represented and what it currently stands for – allows a populous basis to be formed by the subaltern that serves to extend and redefine democratic principles. Many authors have recognized a general trend across Latin America’s new Left: alongside previous demands for equal inclusion and ethnic rights, action by the subaltern has been increasingly aimed towards the recognition of group interests and ethnic self-determination. A wider debate is growing that questions what exactly citizenship entails. Scholars such as Deborah Yashar (2005), Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing (2006), Richard Stahler-Sholk (2008), and Sonia Alvarez (1998) - utilize multicultural and normative frameworks to analyze such movements, while others like Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), Jim Schultz and Melissa Crane Draper (2008) - utilize feminist frameworks to examine the current setting of Bolivian politics. Despite the works by acclaimed academic scholars, it is imperative that the majority of theory used in this essay comes from the region of study – both Bolivia and Latin America at large; therefore it is important that the empirical “data” is derived from the *testimonios* of those who are directly involved, specifically Bolivian subaltern collectives/organizations. [*But would the individuals of these establishments necessarily identify themselves as “subaltern?”*] It is necessary that these voices are honored as an alternative form of evidence that attests to the historical and current grounds of Bolivian politics.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, although not writing from a direct Bolivian point of view, provides alternative perceptions of categories such as “Third World women,” “women of color,” and “globalization.” Her transnational feminist perspective questions who the producers of

knowledge about colonized peoples are and the location from which they come, ultimately confronting history, consciousness, and agency. Mohanty (2003, 46) marks the discussion of subaltern women and the politics of feminism together through the idea of “imagined communities<sup>62</sup>,” a concept critical to regard when addressing the cooperation between subaltern women and their involvement/representation in Bolivian politics. The word “imagined” suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive borders, while “community” implies a deep commitment to the idea of nation. Although hierarchical differences between women in Bolivian society exist [based upon indigenous ethnicity, social class, region, etc.], Mohanty claims that women with these divergent histories and present realities can be woven together by the political threads of opposition in reaction to forms of domination, such as those imposed by overwhelmingly patriarchal societies and transnational/neoliberal politics. Essentially a vital historical link between colonialism and imperialism is drawn, which serves as a fundamental starting point for contributors to communal and political action. The “unity of action” therefore grounds the subalterns’ engagement with feminist politics (Mohanty 2003, 50).

Mohanty, Shultz, and Crane Draper all write of the opportunity for solidarity amongst subaltern women. The term “solidarity” is controversial, though, because in many cases it implies the assimilation of identities and, more specifically, the oppression of one’s own self-identification. Yet, alternatively, these three authors advocate solidarity as a powerful response to the alienating forces of globalization. The expression of solidarity across subaltern communities, then, has the ability to promote humanistic realms for dialogue and sharing that embrace and respectfully challenge each individual’s identity, while at the same time

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<sup>62</sup> Benedict Anderson



actively confronting the existence of postcolonialism that lies within those identities. This manner of relations forges potential for a critical inclusion of the subaltern into both local and national politics.

Within their theoretical stances, each of the aforementioned authors recognizes the role that identity politics play in subaltern organizing. Yashar (2005, 5) states that institutions matter, and, furthermore, that they have a particular significance in the era of the nation-state, claiming that “it is the state that fundamentally defines the public terms of national political identity formation, expression, and mobilization.” As long as states are universally predominant political units and as long as they amplify/hinder political citizenship and define national projects, states ultimately institutionalize and privilege specific national political identities (Yashar 2005, 6). The Bolivian state in the past two decades, then, when speaking of the subaltern, has been one of masculine descent – an arena that has been continuously revived by both the formal and informal organization of the subaltern but yet still does not wholly acknowledge the power and influence of those individuals in its daily political realm. This is a key point that the majority of these authors emphasize. However, despite this scholarly focus upon the indigenous, not one of the multicultural/normative framework authors intentionally distinguishes *women* from Bolivia’s vast ethnic identities in a manner that calls detailed attention to the substantial roles that women have had, and continue having, in the realms of communal organizing which has there in turn led women to be leaders on both local and national scenes.

The aforementioned authors, specifically Stahler-Sholk (2008, 49), do however recognize other important characteristics of Bolivia’s social movements, such as the ways in which politics are no longer limited to the presidential and congressional halls but have expanded to the villages, neighborhoods, popular councils, and the streets

and rural highways. Bolivia's politics, thus, have developed into an environment of national popular protest, mobilizing massive political power on a national scale and doing so *from below*, at the grassroots level (Stahler-Sholk 2008, 49). Cross-regionally, the subaltern have sparked a version of participatory governance that now serves to radically alter decision-making processes and the ways in which the Bolivian people are served. The calls of these voices arise from personal experience, the personal that is innately interpersonal at the same time, all of which come alive through *testimonio*.

Embedded in Bolivia's passages to revolution are a series of schools of thought that contribute to the theoretical outlining of Bolivia's historical processes leading up to the *new* Left: Marxist, Neoliberalist, Feminist, and Post-colonialist. From the 1950s until the mid-1980s, an explicitly class-based labor movement, centered primarily upon unions, drove the traditional opposition to Bolivian government (Kohl and Farthing 2006, 153). Unfortunately, this labor movement was unable to create effective coalitions across the diverse range of Bolivian society due to the rigidity of its internal structure and the Marxist orthodoxy of its almost entirely male leadership. Historically led by the miners, "long considered the vanguard of the working class by the Bolivian Left," this male-dominated conglomerate lacked the flexibility required to enhance new leadership and to ultimately work across the increasingly heterogeneous, informal and female workforce (Kohl and Farthing 2008, 153). The "working class" pedagogy of Marxism essentially failed to fully incorporate subaltern formal labor workers, and furthermore it surpassed subaltern individuals who did not identify with class-based ideologies and who were not recognized by the formal labor realm. As Bolivia transitioned in the 1990s, this formal labor realm ushered in an era of economic liberalization that led

to increased societal opposition which manifested itself principally through large-scale protests.

Between the end of 1999 and October 2003, Bolivia experienced a series of economic and political crises as a neoliberal hegemony unfolded that focused upon transnational corporative interests and privatization. The generation of jobs was strictly limited, and therefore economic growth was miniscule; a harsh coca eradication program dismantled the regional economy of one of Bolivia's largest cities, Cochabamba; Bolivia's principal labor market, Argentina, was in economic collapse and hence erased workers' remittances; government revenue diminished due to the privatization of Bolivia's state oil company (Kohl and Farthing 2006, 149). As growing unrest accompanied each crisis, social and political activity burgeoned across not only the working class but also across the subaltern organizations, sharing a common rejection of neoliberal policies.

Encompassing a broad spectrum of political perspectives, organizational platforms and strategies, and ability to transcend differences in order to form national coalitions, Bolivia has thus had a remarkable capacity to draw on 500 years of post-colonial struggle. Kohl and Farthing (2006, 150), however, argue that Bolivia's continual [social and political] focus around a lone strong male leader has led to increased competition, intergroup conflict, and fragmented opposition amongst subaltern groups which has essentially hindered subaltern individuals from attaining decisive political control of and respected influence upon the country. This argument forms an important element of feminist critique which, in this essay, focuses much upon the intersection of identities, the multi-dimensional meaning behind words such as "subaltern" [and the privilege of those who place such labels upon people], and the roles of gender and patriarchy. Interdisciplinary with these themes is the school of postcolonial thought that explores colonial

legacies such as societal [including political] structures and, within that, the oppression of the subaltern.

Through the legacy of colonialism, many Bolivian societal structures have been shaped to subordinate women, specifically the subaltern, through production and reproduction relations, the sexual division of labor and organizing, profits and exploitation, and ideological institutions and frameworks, for example (Mohanty 2003, 30-31). These systems result in a colonization of the dynamics of daily existence and the complexities of social and political interests that women of different social standings, cultures, and moreover identities, represent and mobilize. Therefore a postcolonial effect of internal colonization has infiltrated the present conditions of Bolivia both structurally and ideologically, in local and national government, and throughout grassroots collectives. Amidst this postcolonialism, however, exists a unique realm of women's collectives that propose alternative forms of understanding development, social and economic dynamics, and individual-communal rights. Their voices will be heard in this essay through the written representation of their organizations, which serve as versions of *testimonio*. Finding roots in feminism and postcolonialism, *testimonio* can be viewed within the context of Bolivian subaltern organization and resistance: actively creative voices that spark social and political consciousness of cross-contextual conditions pertaining specifically to those on the margins of society – the subaltern. In this sense, *testimonio* ultimately promotes an understanding of the personal as the political.

Latin American revolution must not ignore the role of *testimonio*. *Testimonio* is essentially the transcribed oral word of the subaltern – those whose voices go overwhelmingly unacknowledged. A contested form of literature, it describes individual and communal experiences, and, in the process, speaks out against social, political and economical injustices, - in order to portray a sense of urgency and to

serve as a call to action to the readers, both locally and globally. Subaltern, in this case, is used in reference to people, communities, and regions that have lived through conquests and continue healing from the legacy of those conquests and colonialism (Beverly 2004, xii). In this writing, *subaltern* refers principally to indigenous peoples, primarily yet not uniquely indigenous *women*. The term is not intentionally utilized to constrict the ascribed persons' profound identities or to diminish their special importance as human beings, but rather to call attention to the history and present of a people that have been largely shaped by the blood from which they were born. Furthermore, the usage of *subaltern* in this context does *not* promote a victimization of indigenous women, that which would therefore constitute as a form of oppression. Ultimately this essay recognizes that there is much privilege in the ability to place a label upon an individual and groups of people, and it therefore attempts to be as conscious as possible of that fact. Analyzing the subaltern in such a regard, the relationship between the subaltern and *testimonio* is clearly revealed. In its essence, *testimonio* has much to do with the rise of subaltern politics and hence the ascent of the Latin American Left.

Bolivian women's organizations<sup>63</sup> thus use *testimonio* in an attempt to portray the people, *la gente*, in their collective and yet individually authentic identities as those who transform the nation to be one with and of the people. However, it should be acknowledged that these specific groups cannot and *do not* represent all subaltern individuals and their unique voices, especially because, in all likelihood, not all women participating in the aforementioned collectives identify as indigenous. Finally it is critical to realize that, despite much subaltern organization, there con-

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<sup>63</sup> Mujeres creando, Coordinador de la mujer, AMUPEI, Foro político, ACOBOL

tinues to be great exclusion amongst women, – both subaltern and non-subaltern. Serving as social and political sources of criticism, these distinct testimonies implement, promote, and challenge culturally/regionally contextual definitions of terms such as democracy, freedom, and equality. This is principally done through the women's practice of socially- and politically-direct language that is representative of diverse realities, their confrontation of land discrimination and violence against women, and their calls to increase women's knowledge of personal political rights and practices. As these voices are heard, the creation of a new Latin American Left manifests itself as a revamped form of progressiveness.

Local-level governance provides an environment for the subaltern to organize collectively. Shultz, Crane Draper, and Van Cott emphasize the importance and affectivity of building locally. According to Van Cott (2008, 3), "promising local experiments in institutional design have the potential to inspire and provide useful models for democratic reforms with geographically broader impact." Local government reform is crucial for Bolivia's Left because it is more readily accessible to subaltern community members who neither have the connections nor the privilege to be directly heeded to on a national level. Amongst Latin America's local spheres, United Nations International Research and Training Institute for Advancement of Women [UN-INSTRAW] in 2007 reported the existence of a worrisome paradox: the municipality is the space where women participate most in economic, social, and cultural life, but it is also the realm where few hold political positions (Lucas). Developing collaborations amongst women and between women and men must therefore occur on a grassroots base in order to promote a greater number of subaltern community members into leadership roles, both formal and informal. This is crucial in order to further a Bolivian Left that is deliberative, participatory, and inclu-

sive; for in the context of weak and emerging democratic institutions [such as those recovering from neoliberal politics], local leaders can compensate for institutional weaknesses by activating feelings of personal loyalty and trust. Van Cott (2008, 7) argues that indigenous people's parties, such as Evo Morales and MAS, are "organic" – electoral vehicles that local societal organizations created in order to further their interests from within the political system.

The cultural institutions and social-movement organizations in which indigenous parties are rooted provide institutional cohesion during the reform process, embody normative content that inspires constituents to participate in time-consuming activities and patiently await substantive results, and infuse public institutions with meaningful cultural symbols that convey legitimacy and authority on government while fledgling institutions earn public trust.

(Van Cott 2008, 7)

### Collective Testimonies

*Mujeres creando* identifies as an autonomous social movement, separate from NGO-sponsored feminist entities, unions, and political parties – all of which *Mujeres creando* claims are derived from the patriarchy. The group's practice is based in the usage of the streets as a place to raise the voice of a "poetic way" against this patriarchy (Gaitero 2006). *Mujeres creando* practices collective graffiti that displays statements such as "Mujer, ni sumisa, ni bonita, libre, linda y loca" [*Woman, neither submissive, nor cute, free, pretty and crazy*]; "Desobediencia. Por tu culpa voy a ser feliz" [*Disobedience. By your fault I will be happy*]; "Nuestro feminismo ni recicla ni rellena, remueve, mueve y conmueve" [*Our feminism neither recycles nor refills, removes, moves and disturbs*]. Demonstrative art

speaks political volumes as it is conducted by the group through the production of small plays, such as *Mujeres creando*'s "Obelisco," one of many that serve to expose the alternative realities of themes such as prostitution: those who feed off the body market and those who are obligated to enter it. Based in civil disobedience, *Mujeres creando* believes in motivating all women to understand the power of creativity – principally dealing with art, activism, and clandestine practices and strategies. Representatives seek a unity amongst manual, intellectual, and creative work, which spans from the miner in the north to the southern indigenous woman working as a "peddling vendor" – *a forger of the underground market that exhibits an artisanal sabotage serving as an international procession of brands without patents* (Gaitero 2006). The development of open space for these diverse citizens to unite is ultimately formed to be that of rebellion specifically for women where, according to *Mujeres creando*, dialogue and exchange is prioritized and furthermore where each woman constructs her individual language and speaks for herself.

Although *Mujeres creando* emphasizes the empowerment of women, the movement still invites men to participate as well as young boys; for in order to be effective on the large societal level, all actors of society must have the opportunity for inclusion. *Mujeres creando*'s identification as a social movement calls attention to the historical Bolivian affiliation of social movements and the derivation of political parties. As *Mujeres creando* denounces political parties, it prevents an evolution that essentially breaks historical connection with the arguable assimilation of entering into the formal political realm. This defiance is seen even as *Mujeres creando* feels societal pressure to unite with MAS. Maria Galindo, participant in the movement, reiterates the importance of maintaining the movement outside of the Morales party in order to generate discussions and collective references of dignity for women



that are not hindered by the intrinsic patriarchy upon which political parties are based (Gaitero 2006).

Autonomy, such as that which *Mujeres creando* illustrates, challenges the idea of what “legitimate politics” really are and furthermore what they can be. The practice of autonomy therefore forces national and international systems to extend political dialogues and forums outside of pre-established political domains and to implement them at the grassroots level – onto the streets. Galindo, however, is critical even of the language used by state politics, arguing that many political groups speak amongst themselves in a language which many community members do not understand and moreover with which they cannot relate. Therefore when speaking about the arrival of politics to the street, *Mujeres creando* calls for state and civilian interactions to be direct, tangible, and relatable to all who constitute the diverse forms of society. What must be questioned from this is the involvement that *Mujeres creando* has with other groups that are led by subaltern community members. The connecting points amongst these collectives headed by women are vital in order to see the ways in which women are interacting with one another on a [both formal and informal] political scale that ultimately forms Bolivia’s local, national, and international agendas and furthermore creates this action according to the voices of the subaltern. Therefore it is important to recognize what constitutes the dialogues led by the subaltern, for the base of this content will reveal what the subaltern perceive as prerequisites to Bolivia’s democratic reform and furthermore what needs to change if the country’s Left will truly be one *of the people*.

*Mujeres creando* addresses one of its main societal concerns to be the Bolivian microcredit system that is promoted by transnational influences such as foreign Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs] (Gaitero 2006). The movement labels microcredit practice as a debt trap for women, especially indigenous women – the subaltern –

who head the usury of high interest rates. According to *Mujeres creando*, the costs of microcredit interest are elevated three to four percent monthly and thirty-six to forty-eight percent annually. As a practice that is supposed to integrate women into a country's competitive economic market, microcredit in Bolivia is adding to the pre-existing economic burden that the roughly female half of Bolivia greatly bears. Another focal point of *Mujeres creando* is placed upon the "gender equality" package that was created by international organisms and is continued by the current MAS government.

The aforementioned plan essentially evades the analysis of violence as a part of power and domination relations that directly and indirectly affect women. *Mujeres creando* calls for a detailed analysis of violence as part of a cultural apparatus, which in Bolivia is claimed by Galindo to exist within a series of indigenous cultural orders. These orders, Galindo states, are the mandates of impermeable subjugation to the question of violence against women (Gaitero 2006). As a solution, state-judicial-police intervention is used without governmentally regarding any relation between systemic brutality, such as police violence, and violence against women. *Mujeres creando* calls for violence against women to be in the national gender agenda, and moreover for public debates surrounding the word "violence" that call attention to the forms which violence can take. There is urgency for violence to be recognized as a reality pending not only on the streets but in politics, economics, and religion, to name a few. A proposed starting point for this process is the dissection of the technocratic term "gender violence" into three words that directly depict an ongoing reality in Bolivia: violence against women. By using blanket terms such as "gender violence," the word "women" is masked - women being the subjects of whom the majority of violence is against. In order to more effectively address societies' vast contexts, words that

shield authentic human experiences must be taken out of political addresses.

*Mujeres creando* advances a reconstruction and conscious usage of language in order to break the verbal structures that block necessary conversations from being had and critical changes from being formed in both public and private realms of society. The movement poses a response to this in the form of a direct action that is collective, public, affects the will of women, intervenes in the private world and converts it into a political scene, and ultimately unites cooperative relations. *Mujeres creando* forms a movement which it calls "subversive." The women arguably constitute, then, a subversive sect of Bolivia's Latin American Left. Acting outside of but still intrinsically within Bolivia's *new Left*, *Mujeres creando* challenges supposed progressive politics to confront their patriarchal make-up and schism from the bureaucracy that hinders genuine and inclusive dialogues. In the dialogue initiated and disseminated by *Mujeres creando*, the *new* Latin American Left of Bolivia should be a creative force that uses art, imagination, and gender-and-historically conscious vocabulary to bring an active light to Bolivia's contextual realities which therefore socially and politically personify the subaltern. Bolivia's AMUPEI, part of the country's *Foro Político de Mujeres*, also serves as a realm where the subaltern are at the public's forefront.

Similar to *Mujeres creando*, a key factor of AMUPEI's organizational strategies is to maintain its social and political autonomy. AMUPEI's female urban-rural movement seeks political, economic, social, and cultural empowerment for women through the exercise of economic, social and cultural rights, and the transformation of Bolivia's patriarchal culture (AMUPEI 2009). Its principles are based upon: autonomy from political parties, financial institutions, and the Church; gender and social equity and equality; solidarity amongst women; respect and

tolerance towards diversity and plurality [ethnic-cultural, of expression, sexual orientation, and religion]; transparency and responsibility in actions; democracy based in horizontal participation. Since early 2009, AMUPEI has focused its attention upon Bolivia's *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Bolivia Digna, Soberana, Productiva y Democrática Para Vivir Bien*<sup>64</sup>, that's principle objective is to dismount colonialism and neoliberalism from Bolivia's environment (AMUPEI 2009). Outlining and critiquing the plan's foci, the women of AMUPEI detail what must be transformed in the Bolivian government and society in order for the country's Left to personify truly progressive politics.

The *Plan Nacional* [National Plan] implies, under its section of Social Development and Communal Well Being, a plurinational, diversified, and integral democratization that is conceived through encounters between people and their communities and respects diversity and the unique culturally identified asymmetries of power (AMUPEI 2009). The issue with this, though, is that depending on regional contexts, culturally identified characteristics of power – especially in Bolivia's rural areas – are based upon bilateral ideas of gender in society where there is just male and female, and along with those categories come a set of culturally-identified roles that make women's open participation in publically political positions undermined and even dangerous. One further aspect of the plan's developmental standards that AMUPEI calls attention to is that of international relations being based in strategic alliances amongst States that share fair trade in the benefit of the villages, the people.

AMUPEI is critical about this governmental idea of democratization via its "communal conception." There is a contradiction between collective rights and individual

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<sup>64</sup> National Plan of Development for a Dignified, Sovereign, Productive and Democratic Bolivia in Order to Live Well.

rights, and this is critical to regard – especially when talking about gender. AMUPEI argues that the transversality of gender in four of the plan’s strategies does not ensure its implementation into institutions if the plan does not define with clarity the possibilities for economic resource support. Unfortunately, both Bolivia’s Vice Minister and Generational Vice Minister of Gender have been weak at coordinating intersectional actions to ensure the implementation of more specific gender policies/practices across a wider national realm of Bolivia’s political and social institutions (AMUPEI 2009). According to AMUPEI, in order to do this, affirmative actions must be created specifically for the greatly excluded of Bolivia: young girls and boys, indigenous women, people with different capacities, and working adolescents. Focus must be upon social politics, such as social protection networks that are oriented to better distribute resources, favoring especially the most impoverished amongst women in order to address the feminization of poverty. AMUPEI claims that in order for these policies to effectively impact women’s quality of life, control and vigilance must be upon Bolivia’s Prefect Ministers and municipal governments to ultimately impact public policies. Finally, AMUPEI finds an inconsistency amongst conceptual approaches of the plan’s development standards. For example, some sectoral policies of the plan, especially those that detail macroeconomic stability as a condition for Bolivia’s developmental sustainability, were also integral to the International Monetary Fund’s [IMF] recommendations for the country’s development principally during the decades of economic collapse proceeding Morales’ inauguration as President. This is highly controversial for AMUPEI, especially because the IMF has been one of the leading symbols in Bolivia representing neoliberal politics and subaltern subjugation and exploitation. Conversely, AMUPEI proposes the instilment of a national image that works to construct for the *long term*, finding in-

tersecting grounds in innovation, social equity, cultural and gender equality, and environmental preservation through Bolivia's guarding of national resources.

Essentially AMUPEI's stance, although autonomous such as that of *Mujeres creando*, fails to remove women from the position of victims and furthermore neglects to regard gender as a fluid reality that goes beyond the constructs of woman and man. By continuing to conceptualize women as victims, supposed gender innovations will remain based in colonial thought structures which will ultimately hinder the release of the subaltern into a realm of empowerment and holistic realization and regard on both private and public levels. *Mujeres creando* emphasizes a critical reevaluation and revamping of language in social and especially political spheres. If AMUPEI can better articulate their ideas of gender outside of the patriarchal binary of simply woman and man, they can then form policies that recognize the differences between subaltern community members and Bolivia's population as a whole. This opens the opportunity for a conscious embracing of innate differences that still entails an equity which actively regards and flexibly works with the diverse implications that those differences can create. The idea of "gender equality" cannot be allowed to overshadow historical and present realities that are inherent to body and world structures. These realities must be openly recognized and worked with so as not to promote neither complacency nor ignorance.

Bolivia's *Coordinadora de la mujer* serves as a non-profit network of private national institutions that work from a gendered perspective in distinct locally departmental and national scopes (Coordinadora 2009). Its purpose is to increment women's participation as valid representatives in positions of social and political power. *Coordinadora's* vision promotes a democratic development that requires deconstruction of power structures and relations, and a redistribution of cultural and political materials. This consid-

ers the subjectivity of individual and collective identities which also respects diversity. In *Coordinadora's* democratization, the subaltern are political actors with the capacity of formal questioning, dialogue, and proposition, and where women have real access to spaces of power. To embark on this process of democratizing Bolivia, *Coordinadora* calls for dialogue and encounters amongst diverse women's organizations that are based in strategic alliances and foment pragmatic agreements with the intention of contributing to a movement of plural and diverse subaltern communities. In February 2009, the network received propositions from twenty-six different Bolivian regions that emphasized policies related to the diffusion, visibilization, and promotion of women's rights, which called for the strengthening of women's organizations and new creative, artistic, and cultural initiatives (Coordinadora 2009).

Utilizing women's organizations such as *Coordinadora* as spaces for the subaltern to collect and amplify their testimonies, *Coordinadora* became aware of the need for a broad capacity-training of these collectives. Bertha Acarapi, City Council President in El Alto, reinforces "In the terrain of local politics, lack of experience and ignorance – which is not only a problem among women – helps fuel the sexist and machista bias against women in politics" (Claire 2007). Sociologist Elsa Suárez claims that many women involved in local politics have a background in labor activism. Their action and management styles do not flow well with how processes are carried out at the local government level. "Once these women integrate into town council, they often keep silent and rarely run for reelection, which has to do with the aforementioned argument and furthermore family, political violence, and machismo that is seen in municipal governments which therefore forces many women to resign" (Claire 2007). This brings cultural questions into play.

Sociologist Jesús Flores reported in October 2003<sup>65</sup> that many women in El Alto organized, took to the streets, and became community leaders during the tumultuous days of Bolivian privatization (Claire 2007). But after the major protests came to a close, women generally returned to their homes, leaving the public political scene. A great deal of women's participation in collective actions is therefore limited by the domestic life of their families. This description varies from the relatively prosperous areas of eastern Bolivia such [i.e. Santa Cruz, Pando, Beni] where Pinto claims "women are more empowered" (Claire 2007). But what constitutes empowerment? Is Pinto referring to empowerment legitimized by the State or moreover an empowerment felt individually based upon one's own perspective? Flores reports that politically active women in El Alto can mainly be found in the street markets – "the only public spaces dominated by women." This resonates with the description *Mujeres creando* provides of the "peddling vendor" woman, articulated as a prowess of a powerful underground informal market that keeps the Bolivian economy abreast through her clandestine connections and personal sacrifices (Gaitero 2006). [However, this description arguably romanticizes the roles of the subaltern in Bolivia's informal economy by not addressing some of the vast reasons for women's participation in these labor markets and furthermore by not taking into account their different labor conditions.] If this officially unrecognized power is driven by innumerable women at the street level, then, for the Bolivian Left to continue pursuing progressive politics, it is crucial for the subaltern to be reached on the streets – for politics to be created and personified on a personal realm at

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<sup>65</sup> Throughout October 2003, month-long demonstrations were held in the city of El Alto to protest President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's energy policies and privatizations. This ultimately led to his resignation that same year.



a level where they can be accessed by a diverse range of subaltern individuals. The aforementioned [February 2009] calls to *Coordinadora* from the cross-regional women's collectives emphasize achievements that must be attained throughout this process.

The subaltern cannot be fully embraced in politics without first placing national attention and action upon prominent themes affecting the Bolivian subaltern both historically and presently. *Coordinadora*, in coalition with the above female voices, asserts that the Bolivian society formally and socially take action upon the following principle subjects: violence against women; women's land rights; the diffusion and socialization of women as domestic workers; the promotion of rural women's rights; the empowering of lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual defense and promotion; the advancement of cycles of reflection, investigation, training, critical demand and positioning of subaltern collectives; the active reinforcement of a gender perspective in the workplace (Coordinadora 2009). At hand are objectives from various subaltern Bolivian spheres that have convened to organize their political truths in order to then inspire new political methodologies across Bolivia.

### Conclusion

According to the collective testimonies represented by women's organizations [specifically *Mujeres creando*, AMUPEI, *Coordinadora de la mujer*, ACOBOL, and *Foro político*], Bolivia's Left must contribute to the re-politicization of a gender focus from public and private spaces [familiar, economic, political, social, cultural] through the bolstering of political capacities from the generation of alliances with new social actors [of all genders and non-genders] who establish a new political agenda that stems from the foci of identities, distribution, and recogni-

tion. These tasks must not solely be carried out in the formal political realm, but moreover where the great subaltern majority actively exists – in the marketplace, in local neighborhoods, in the home ... in the personal realms where the political holds a continual presence. These spaces, according to *Mujeres creando*, AMUPEI, *Coordinadora*, ACOBOL, and *Foro político*, are Bolivia's informal social and political contexts where the subaltern are most personified. As Bolivian sociologist Oscar Vega writes, "It [Bolivian political life] is no longer a matter of supporting and defending the [MAS] vision of change, but democratically constructing the change through participation, debate, and consultation" (Dangl 2009). Democracy once again, then, is constituted [in the context of Bolivia] by this writing's subaltern voices as a *direct confrontation of land rights*, the words/vocabulary that constitute social and political dialogues/policies, violence, and the knowledge regarding political/individual rights... all issues that historically affect the subaltern's access to and influence upon Bolivian politics, and today, the *new* Bolivian Left.

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