

# Ayllu: Decolonial Critical Thinking and An(Other) Autonomy

Author(s): Marcelo Fernández Osco, Duke University

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Protests and mobilizations by Indigenous peoples against unequal treatment are a constant feature in the Andean region. After all, indigenous populations have five hundred years of experience resisting the destructive forces of modernity, imposed first during colonialism and now by neo-liberal globalization, which emphasizes (among other things) economic growth through free trade, the privatization of social services and most aspects of life, and the primacy of individual rights. Lately, indigenous social movements in Bolivia and Ecuador have been actively opposing state policies that are not seen to be in their best interests, including the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). In this context, the Bolivian political party *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement to Socialism, often referred to as MAS) succeeded in 2005 in having its leader, the Aymara Evo Morales Ayma, elected as leader of the country.

However, indigenous protests and mobilizations are not merely about opposition or resistance to specific policies or political leaders. Rather, they express an indigenous episteme, a system of understanding the world that has a completely different basis for thinking about socio-political relations and practices, based on a model of horizontal solidarity that extends not only to all humans but also to non-humans in the natural and cosmological world. In contrast, mainstream knowledge, rooted in European colonial understandings of the world, is structured along vertical, hierarchical lines. That is, certain groups of people and certain ways of acting and thinking are deemed to be superior to others. This difference is the key to understanding Andean politics, because it is in the indigenous episteme that the concept of (an)other autonomy is located. The versions of autonomy currently understood in mainstream politics (and promoted by nation-states) provide indigenous groups limited opportunities for decision making but only within the same body of laws that existed before. This notion of autonomy for Indigenous peoples places them under the same subjugation that they have been experiencing since colonization.

The indigenous episteme and world view is expressed in the *ayllu*, a concept usually translated in narrow terms as "extended family" but which actually implies knowledge that celebrates the sacred character and interconnectedness of all beings. It emphasizes the collective over the individual; in fact, the individual as such does not exist but is always viewed as an incomplete part of a larger whole. There is no foreign "other" person, because every person (and in fact every being) is a social being that exists only in relation to others. Every entity is sacred, including the earth, which is seen as mother of all beings and has the same needs for respect and care that all other beings have. This kind of knowledge represents a profound critique of the way that European colonizers, and now Western powers, continue to destroy the earth in the name of profit and to subjugate peoples they deem to be "other" and inferior to them.

The *ayllu* is central to Andean peoples' social movements because their struggles are not just about recovering land and political rights but also about keeping and living their knowledge. Waman Puma Ayala, one of the very first indigenous intellectuals, who wrote in the sixteenth century, shows that to practice this knowledge — to live according to its philosophy — is in itself the most fundamental form of critique and resistance to domination because mainstream knowledge cannot allow for any

alternatives outside of itself. Western rationality starts from an understanding of the individual (the man, the subject) and his reasoning as central to the world, and as one moves to the outside to consider other things and beings (the objects), the world is viewed as simply existing to be manipulated and subjected to the will of "man." Thus, other forms of knowledge are simply another object to be rationalized and controlled through such tools as science and politics. Knowledge can be broken down and understood in categories and pieces. In contrast, through the *ayllu* an analysis of anything comes first from the most remote events that can be recalled and moves from there to the present and the immediate. In this way, understanding does not involve fragmenting but adding and creating. Things are not deemed to be "true" or "false" but only true within a certain context. Also, all knowledge is subject not only to reason but also to moral and ethical consideration.

Not only does living the *ayllu* delegitimize Western domination by asserting a horizontal and relational world view, but it also contextualizes it in a way that immediately creates the possibility of change. That is, Andean peoples understand this period of colonial/imperial domination as simply part of a larger cycle, a time of hardship and injustice which will pass much like the changing of seasons which bring hard times and then the return of abundance. This logic takes away the idea of this period as some sort of end, some insurmountable course of history, and simply places it in the context of a cycle that will be endured and surpassed. The method for surpassing it, for producing changes in the dominant system, is through a *pachakuti* ("total transformation") which involves the reconstitution of an intercultural political collectivity with an emphasis on difference and plurality. This kind of decolonial thought is often expressed through stories and rituals that emphasize the joining of animal, vegetable, and mineral forces and celebrate the exchange of knowledge and experiences.

The Indigenous leader and intellectual Nina Qhispi, involved in the indigenous political movement in Bolivia in the first three decades of the twentieth century, insisted on the concept of "brotherhood" between different groups which, in contrast to the mainstream idea of the foreign "other," imagines everyone to be part of the same community. When *pachakuti* is understood in this light, it means removing exclusionist racism from Andean societies and replacing it with the spirit of coexistence between different ways of living and knowing. Fausto Reinaga, active in the Bolivian indigenous movement between the 1950s and 1980s, envisioned creating a *pachakuti* through the remaking of indigenous identity as a standpoint from which to create an intercultural and plural society. Inspired by this tradition of intellectuals, the Andean Oral History Workshop (of which I am a member) has produced critical thinkers who are returning to the roots of indigenous knowledge in oral histories and the words of elders. Indigenous and peasant movements throughout the Andean region have been strengthened by such efforts and they now demand that governments respect political and social diversity as well as protest against efforts by transnational corporations to privatize all aspects of life. At the roots of these movements is the *ayllu*, which has allowed a critical and decolonial consciousness to be generated among Indigenous peoples which rejects the destructive, fragmenting, and dominating mainstream political project. It is this emergent way of thinking that creates alternative possibilities for the future of the Andean region and of the world.