Plurinationality and self-determination in Latin America:
reimagining the nation, reinventing the State

The International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) published “Plurinationality and indigenous self-determination in Latin America: reimagining the nation, reinventing the State”. The book collects the experiences of the indigenous autonomies of Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, their limits and their potential. As part of an international trend, indigenous self-government consolidates plurinationality, self-determination and Good Living as fundamental principles for political action of indigenous movements in the region.

By Roger Merino - December 1st 2022

This book finds its origin in the intention of understanding the meaning and scope of the indigenous mobilization in the Peruvian Amazon around the tragic events of the social conflict known as "The Baguazo": during June 2009, the Awajún and Wampís indigenous people protested for months in opposition to the policies promoted by the government of Alan García to facilitate transnational investments in their territories. Although the authorities and analysts understood these protests as a demand for social inclusion, a manifestation of underdevelopment, and an indicator of lack of political participation, the background of the mobilization expressed the struggle for self-determination and the construction of a new form of State.

At that time, the plurinationality in the Constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009) were considered exceptional in South America and the world. However, they were signs of a trend that was consolidating in the region. Over time, self-determination has remained at
the center of indigenous demands, generating profound changes in social and political relationships and structures. In the case of Peru, the Autonomous Territorial Governments emerged: first, the Wampís people, then the Awajún people, and now others are following the same path.

**Plurinationalism as the overcoming of liberal multiculturalism**

While the multicultural constitutions that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s incorporated indigenous collective rights (land rights, customary law, and language rights) and recognized some degree of autonomy (limited territorial control and indigenous justice systems), this multiculturalism is limited to institutionalizing social inclusion and tolerance towards indigenous populations.

When multicultural constitutions mention self-determination or autonomy, what they protect is the right of each community to govern itself within very limited territorial units and under collective property rights schemes. However, they do not recognize the self-determination of an entire indigenous nation or their political and economic rights under the concept of ancestral territory. For this reason, indigenous movements use multicultural institutions and, at the same time, try to transcend them since they do not reflect their political aspirations or their vision of development.

In this context, the general argument of the book is that the indigenous politics of self-determination shapes state structures in its attempt to forge a new plurinational citizenship, redefines the terms of distribution of power, and seeks to reinvent current institutions and territories. Far from proposing a deterministic relationship between indigenous politics and the transformation of the State, this argument seeks to highlight the complex interrelationship between politics and public policies.

Certainly, Latin American state policies and institutions have sought to impose other identities on indigenous peoples and have institutionalized a particular version of indigenous autonomy. However, state autonomic policies did not arise from government
decisions that created new opportunities for indigenous activism. Rather they responded to large indigenous mobilizations throughout the region. These mobilizations are constant processes of contestation, appropriation and overflow of formal laws and institutions.

Indigenous peoples have historically been forced to accommodate, adapt and use transplanted legal and political institutions. However, with the recognition of self-determination and multinational arrangements, the indigenous movement is questioning racism as the constitutive pillar of the post-colonial society. In this way, indigenous nations challenge the premise that their legal and political system must be located at the bottom of the hierarchies of the State and society.

**Plurinationalism and the inclusion/exclusion paradox**

By reimagining the nation, these struggles seek to transform the State and nineteenth-century visions of sovereignty and territory. In this process, indigenous peoples try to overcome the inclusion/exclusion paradox. This paradox means that indigenous peoples are obliged to either accept some reforms aimed at legitimizing dominant development agendas (inclusion), or are marginalized, dispossessed, displaced, or repressed when they oppose extractive or infrastructure projects implemented in the name of the “national interest” (exclusion).

By reimagining the nation, indigenous movements advance in an agenda of self-determination that proposes a new distribution of power over the territory, with a new legality and institutional framework. Through this path, they reinvent the national political imaginary imposed since the beginning of the post-colonial era. At the same time, they transform the fiction of a State as representative of a single nation towards a plurinational State.

Plurinationality is not a utopian or mystical project (as seen in Peru) or the result of post-neoliberal processes (as in Bolivia and Ecuador). Plurinationality is a state model under construction, in other words, is a political process that emerges from below throughout
Latin America. This process is difficult to concretize because extractivism continues to be the economic basis of the State; at the same time, many authorities maintain racialized imaginaries about indigenous peoples, and governments appeal to the “national interest” as an expression of sovereignty over indigenous territories.

Extractivism, racism, and the appeal to national sovereignty are founding factors of the nation-state as they reinforce its classical structures. However, the tensions and conflicts around them show that the struggle for the state form and the idea of the nation is more relevant today than ever.

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