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Populism, hegemony and the politics of natural resource extraction in Evo Morales's Bolivia

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Abstract

Is populism necessary to the articulation of counter-hegemonic projects, as Laclau has long argued? Or is it, as Žižek maintains, a dangerous strategy, which inevitably degenerates into ideological mystification and reactionary postures? In this paper, I address this question through exploring the politics of discourse in Evo Morales's Bolivia. While, in the years leading to the election of Morales, a populist ideological strategy was key to challenging neoliberal forces, once the hegemony of the new power bloc was stabilised, indigenous demands for emancipatory socio-environmental change began to be perceived as a threat to resource-based accumulation. In this context, the populist 'signifiers' originated in popular-indigenous struggles were used by the Morales government to legitimise repression of the indigenous movement. I argue, therefore, that ideological degeneration signals a problem not with populism *per se*, but rather with the class projects and shifting correlations of forces that underpin it in changing conjunctures.

1 Introduction

The political cycle of progressive governments in Latin America has arguably come to an end (Modonesi, 2015). In a conjuncture characterised by the return of the right throughout the region, a critical evaluation of the achievements and shortcomings of progressive governments is both timely and necessary. In this paper, I contribute to this task through appraising the role played by official discourse in the context of the construction, maintenance and crisis of the left's hegemony. Specifically, I aim to shed light on the tension-fraught relationship between the radical discursive strategy of the left and its ambiguous policy orientations, particularly as regards resource-based development.

Bolivia under Evo Morales (2006-) is perhaps the best case to explore this tension. On the one hand, the Morales administration's adoption of anti-imperialist, indigenous-inspired and radical-environmentalist discourse was one of the most innovative and politically promising features of the 'post-neoliberal' turn (Zimmerer, 2015). On the other, however, emphasis on indigenous and 'red-green' language is clearly in contradiction with the growing dependency on natural resource extraction and the repression of social forces that oppose it (Bebbington and Humphreys Bebbington, 2011). We should neither ignore this contradiction nor dismiss it as mere hypocrisy or political betrayal; rather, we should carefully analyse and unpack the ways that discourse has been mobilised in an effort to maintain political legitimacy around resource-based development.

To this end, I draw on a critical approach to resource governance, informed by regulation theory (Bridge and Perreault, 2009). This approach focuses on the institutional (re)configurations that work to stabilise (or 'regularise') accumulation in the face of contradictions and conflicts (Himley, 2013). 'Institutions' is meant here in a broad sense, including not just legal frameworks but also social relations and cultural norms in which the economy is embedded—a meaning close to what regulationists call the 'mode of regulation' (Bridge, 2000). Discourse is a central and perhaps underemphasised aspect of such institutional configurations (Bridge and McManus, 2000). There is, of course, a broad geographical literature dealing with the discursive 'moment' in environmental governance (e.g., Feindt and Oels, 2005). However, the role of discourse in regularising resource extraction—or more precisely, 'resource-based accumulation'¹—has been less emphasised. The 'return of the state' associated with 'post-neoliberalism' (Yates and Bakker, 2014),

moreover, pushes us to move beyond the focus on corporate initiatives which has characterised the literature on environmental neoliberalisation and consider more explicitly the role and significance of official narratives and discursive strategies.

Dealing with official discourse in the context of the Latin American left makes it almost inevitable to confront the issue of ‘populism’ (Madrid, 2008; Svampa, 2015b). The term ‘populism’ is often deployed with a pejorative connotation; detractors of progressive governments in the region, for instance, have typically used it to denounce the ostensibly irrational and anti-democratic postures of left-nationalist leaders such as Chávez and Morales (Panizza and Miorelli, 2009, pp. 39–40). Against this tendency, I draw here on the work of the late Ernesto Laclau.

Besides being the most influential (and perhaps controversial) theorist on the topic, Laclau (1977, 2005a) has the merit to have ‘redeemed’ populism, both politically and theoretically, from its negative associations. He brought the concept in close dialogue with a Gramscian understanding of hegemonic strategy, and consequently emphasised populism’s potential as a radically transformative political strategy. Some commentators have deployed Laclau’s ideas in analyses of the political projects of the Latin American left (Errejón and Guijarro, 2016; Svampa, 2015b). However, there have not been attempts to bring a Laclauian understanding of populism in dialogue with literatures on resource governance, in order to tease out the discursive moment in the regularisation of resource-based development.

In this paper, I undertake an analysis of the ideological positioning of Evo Morales’s MAS (Movement towards Socialism) party *vis-à-vis* resource-based development in Bolivia, against the background of changing political economic conditions and shifting correlations of forces. I address two specific objectives: 1) to explore how the discursive strategy of the Bolivian government has related to the stabilisation of resource-based accumulation in the face of antagonistic social forces; and 2) to understand how such a strategy changed in relation to different ‘threats’ to the Morales government’s hegemony, including opposition to extraction coming from the country’s indigenous movement. From this empirical exploration, I will derive conceptual insights into our understanding of populism and its relevance for the critical analysis of resource governance.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I briefly discuss Laclau’s theory of populism and some of the critiques of it by radical scholars. I argue that Laclau’s conceptualisation offers a promising tool for the analysis of hegemonic strategy, provided

that the class relations and projects that underpin populism are brought to the fore. In Sections 3 and 4, I present the empirical arguments of the paper. First, I argue that populism—as a way of constructing a popular identity, through articulating social demands in opposition to a common ‘enemy’—was effective in challenging the hegemony of neoliberal forces in Bolivia and favouring their replacement with a new, ‘indigenous-popular’ power bloc. Second, I show that, nevertheless, when indigenous demands that were central to this counter-hegemonic articulation—notably, ambitions to mobilise resource wealth for the promotion of ‘plurinationality’—became impossible to meet, the same discursive strategy was used by the government to legitimise its control over and repression of the indigenous movement. In Section 5, before concluding, I discuss the relevance of these arguments for our understanding of populism and for critical research on resource governance.

This paper is part of a broader research project on the governance of natural resource extraction in Bolivia, for which I have conducted 12 months of fieldwork in the country between 2013 and 2014. The arguments presented in this paper are based primarily on the analysis of official discourse—particularly the writings of Bolivian vice president (2006-) and well-known Marxist intellectual, Álvaro García-Linera (Baker, 2015). García-Linera is arguably the main ideologist of the MAS (Movement towards Socialism) party. Over the last 15 years, he has produced a number of essays, editorials and pamphlets that have sought to provide both theoretical grounding and justification for the policy choices of the Morales administration. This analysis is complemented by reliance on secondary literature on hegemonic struggles and the political economy of natural resources in contemporary Bolivia, as well as on 51 semi-structured interviews with Bolivian-based policy analysts, extractive sector representatives, former and current government members and social movements’ spokespersons, on the relationship between the state and social forces *vis-à-vis* resource politics.

2 Populism, discourse and social struggle

Over the last four decades, Ernesto Laclau has made the greatest effort to recover the notion of populism from its marginal position in social theory. Such a marginalisation is due to both widespread ethical condemnation of populism and to its analytical ambiguity. The former, for Laclau (2005b, p. 19) is a symptom of the liberal association of politics with techno-managerial rationalism; the denigration of populism, in this sense, mirrors the

liberal denigration of ‘the people’ itself. The latter problem—the conceptual ambiguity of populism—is due to the fact that scholars have looked for a defining feature of populism in specific ideologies, political practices or historical circumstances (Laclau, 1977; Panizza, 2005). Populism, however, for Laclau, is neither a political programme nor an ideology, but a *strategy* that is equally available to social forces of all political colours. Therefore, it should not be defined on the basis of specific empirical features; but rather, as he puts it, in a “strictly formal” way, as a *logic of articulation* of political contents (Laclau, 2005b, p. 44).

In Laclau’s analysis, the starting point of populism is the presence of social demands that an existing institutional system is unable to meet. If demands are satisfied, they remain unrelated and social discontent is easily absorbed by the administrative apparatus (Laclau, 2005a, p. 78). When the demands of multiple social groups go unmet, however, solidarity can arise among them: demands cease to be circumscribed to their ‘differential’ nature and begin to share a common source of frustration, a ‘negative’ dimension. Such a common source of frustration is the basis for the formation of a *chain of equivalence* among diverse demands.

A central feature of populism is the creation, through equivalential chains among frustrated demands, of a collective identity—‘the people’—defined in opposition to a common enemy, as the common source of ‘negativity’. As Laclau puts it, therefore, “there is no populism without discursive construction of an enemy” (Laclau, 2005b, p. 39). The enemy, in other words, functions as *constitutive outside*—“a threatening heterogeneity against which the identity is formed” (Panizza, 2005, p. 17).

‘The people’ is constructed through the extension of the chain of equivalence among ever more diverse demands; as the chain of equivalence extends, some demands cease to represent their specific contents, and become symbols for the totality of revendications in the chain. These signifiers, for Laclau, tend therefore to be *empty*: in order to be able to represent the totality of equivalences, they lose their relationship with the contents of specific demands (Laclau, 2005b, p. 40). Through this operation, a populist articulation is constituted which allows social groups to transcend the particularistic character of demands, and to create a counter-hegemonic bloc that identifies around shared signifiers and in an antagonistic relation to a common source of frustration.

2.1 *Is populism post-political?*

Laclau's politico-theoretical defence of populism has encountered strong criticisms from many on the radical left. Slavoj Žižek has perhaps been its most vocal opponent. In an intervention in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, Žižek (2006) argued *contra* Laclau that, while the left today is clearly failing to inspire transformative popular mobilisation, it should nonetheless avoid the temptation to emulate right-wing movements in their 'populist' postures. For Žižek (2006, p. 567), as a political strategy, populism is inadequate for achieving radical transformation: it is not an *active* construction of a genuine alternative, but a *passive* reaction to the threat of an enemy or 'intruder' (such as immigrants or bureaucrats). In this sense, he argues, populism contains an element of "ideological mystification" and thus "harbors in the last instance a long-term protofascist tendency" (Žižek, 2006, p. 557).

Moreover, while appearing as a critique of 'post-politics'—as in the case of right-wing rejection of European Union technocratic rule—populism is, for Žižek, its necessary complement: it reinforces the post-political consensus by presenting an irrational, purely reactive alternative to it (cf. Žižek, 2009, p. 61). Populist political projects are *themselves*, ultimately, post-political, for two reasons. First, because, by attributing social ills to an external enemy, populists renounce replacing the system itself: "for a populist, the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such but the intruder who corrupted it" (Žižek, 2006, p. 555). Second, because the elementary unit of populist articulation is that of a social demand, and because every demand addresses an Other—an institutional system which is supposedly able to meet it—populist politics ends up reinforcing the inevitability of an elite. By contrast, "the revolutionary subject no longer operates at the level of demanding something from those in power; he wants to destroy them" (Žižek, 2006, p. 558).

I argue that these critiques, more recently taken up by Swyngedouw (2010), are partly misplaced. First, Laclau (2005a, p. 45) defines populism as the opposite of the post-political (or what he calls 'institutionalist discourse'). It is true that demands are the basic unit of analysis of populism, and that these demands are addressed to an institutional system that acts as an Other (the elite, those in power). Populism, however, has the potential to *subvert* this order, through an accumulation of unmet demands that gives rise to the creation of an internal frontier whereby 'the establishment' itself is depicted as an enemy. Second, regarding populism's supposed proto-fascist tendency, again this may be ungenerous. It is

inevitable that a hegemonic articulation be based on an ideological strategy, but the level of ‘mystification’ in this strategy depends, once again, on historically specific material and political circumstances.

2.2 *Populism or class struggle? Yes, please!*

A second line of criticism, advanced primarily by Gramscian scholars, focuses precisely on the reduction of hegemony to a purely discursive-rhetorical struggle (Loftus, 2014). Laclau’s positions on populism briefly exposed above are the culmination of a long trajectory of work, begun in the 1980s, in which the theorist (partly in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe), sought to rethink the ontological bases of politics along ‘post-Marxist’ lines. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) famously presented this as an attempt to do away with the “last redoubt of economism” and class reductionism in Marxist theory. They redefine a theory of hegemony as an articulatory practice based on discourse, whereby social relations are formed within the articulation process itself and do not precede it (2001, pp. 105–114). In his recent work on populism, Laclau (2005b, p. 39) adopts this discursive approach, defining *hegemony* as the process of the elevation of particular demands to symbols (or signifiers) of the totality of social claims. The result is the displacement of class from the centre of both social analysis and radical politics (Žižek, 2000). For Jessop (2014), in an effort to liquidate economism, Laclau and Mouffe fall back into idealism, by excluding any reference to the play of material forces.

Against the ‘postmodern’ Laclau, therefore, I suggest to draw insights from his early work, in which the discursive moment of populism is still clearly theorised in relation to class struggle (Hart, 2013, p. 304). In the essay ‘Towards a theory of populism’ (1977), Laclau starts from the consideration that, in order to transcend economic-corporate demands and begin to struggle for hegemony, a dominated class needs to engage in the political-ideological sphere. In doing so, however, it cannot simply rely on class-based discourse; it needs to interpellate members of other classes and fractions through engaging on the class-neutral terrain of ‘popular-democratic’ struggles (what Gramsci calls the ‘national-popular’) and through mobilising non-class referents such as ‘the people’ or ‘national interest’ (Laclau, 1977, p. 161). A hegemonic struggle is understood here as a struggle for articulation that takes place between antagonistic class projects, through mobilising non-class interpellations. It is in this non-class discourse that a ‘strictly populist’ element should be located: “populism starts at the point where popular-democratic elements are presented

as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc” (Laclau, 1977, p. 173). Populism is defined therefore as a popular articulation that places ‘the people’ at the centre of discourse, pitted in opposition to a dominant ideology.

This strategy—the appeal to the people against a dominant ideology—is of course available to dominant classes or fractions as much as to dominated ones. This is why, for Laclau, the label ‘populist’ has been applied to projects as politically diverse as Nazism, Peronism or Maoism. The important analytical point here is the following: populism is neither above class, nor stems directly from it; it consists of popular-democratic interpellations and antagonism towards dominant ideology, both articulated with specific political and class projects (Laclau, 1977, p. 175). This is not substantially different from Laclau’s most recent definition of populism as a logic of articulation through equivalential chains. But it is clearly more explicit about its class contents and, as such, much closer to a Gramscian understanding of hegemony. Considering the politico-ideological moment in the articulation of hegemonic projects in the context of changing correlations of forces is the starting point for analysing the relationship between populism and resource regularisation in Bolivia, to which I now turn.

3 Constructing indigenous-popular hegemony

3.1 Indigeneity and ‘gas for the people’

In Bolivia, the years between 2000 and 2005 were characterised by multiple popular struggles against neoliberalism, which precipitated a government crisis and led to the rise of Evo Morales and the MAS (Movement towards Socialism) party—culminating in the electoral success of December 2005. In this conjuncture, distinct popular sectors put forward political demands for change; not just established unions such as miners and campesinos,² but also indigenous organisations, coca-growers and urban migrants (Postero, 2010). The MAS party, created in the mid-1990s as a ‘political instrument’ of the campesino and coca-grower unions, began to function as a representative for indigenous-campesino and leftist sectors and quickly extended its support at the national level.

A populist strategy was central to the MAS’s articulating function (Errejón, 2014; Madrid, 2008). Due to the nature of demands and the social groups that advanced them in this conjuncture, the constitution of a collective identity assumed two defining features. First, a

centrality of *indigeneity* as a marker of shared subalternity and oppression—due to the colonial history of Bolivia and the continued reproduction of unequal race relations until neoliberal times. The identification of a multiplicity of social sectors as ‘indigenous’ gave a clear anti-colonial twist to the discursive articulation of ‘the people’ and created an ‘indigenous-popular’ collective identity as the base of the MAS-led counter-hegemonic strategy (Errejón, 2014; Postero, 2010). This resulted from a process of reclaiming and politicising indigeneity as an emancipatory category, begun in the 1970s with radical *indianismo* (García-Linera et al., 2010). Evo Morales, the figure of a leader who was both a subaltern and an indigenous—the leader of the coca-grower union movement of humble Aymara origin—came to personify this left-indigenous confluence, consciously emphasised in the MAS’s strategy.

Second, the slogan ‘gas for the people’ came to condense all *material* demands around the perceived dispossession of the Bolivian poor. Here gas is both the main strategic commodity (Spronk and Webber, 2007) and a symbol of natural resource dispossession (Perreault, 2006). The October Agenda, emerging out of the ‘Gas War’ against the presidency of Sánchez de Lozada in 2003—the most intense point of anti-neoliberal struggle—rendered explicit this by demanding gas nationalisation alongside the president’s resignation and a new constitution.

Multiple and partly conflicting desires and imaginaries were projected into the slogan ‘gas for the people’. For most of Bolivia’s popular sector it signified primarily greater national sovereignty and wealth redistribution (Kohl and Farthing, 2012); for the indigenous organisations in gas extraction areas, nationalisation was seen as an intermediate step towards the promotion of local territorial autonomy with co-government of natural resources (Radhuber, 2012). What mattered at this stage, however, were not so much the differences between these demands as the *equivalences* among them, which formed the basis for the indigenous-popular counter-hegemonic articulation.

3.2 *Imperialism as the ‘constitutive outside’*

The construction of ‘the people’ is inseparable from the discursive production of an enemy, functioning as the ‘constitutive outside’ of the populist articulation (Laclau, 2005a). Indigenous-popular identity and its project based primarily on the reassertion of natural resource sovereignty ‘for the people’ was defined in opposition to an external enemy—

neoliberal elites—which had two main features. First, the conservative forces then in power were as much ‘colonial’ as they were neoliberal. Particularly in the case of the white and *mestizo* land-holding and business elites based in the *Oriente*—the lowland eastern regions—they explicitly mobilised racist imaginaries to sustain their vested interest in keeping the indigenous majority out of power and in poverty (Perreault and Green, 2013). Second, to the extent that neoliberals facilitated the privatisation and foreign control of hydrocarbons and other key natural resource industries, they were perceived as traitors, *vendepatria*—those who sell out the fatherland.

The common trait between the two is, of course, imperialism: neoliberals were depicted as complicit local elites acting as agents of foreign (namely US) economic and political interests. For instance, a detonating factor of the 2003 Gas War—a cycle of protests demanding gas nationalisation, violently repressed by the government and ending in the resignation of then president Sánchez de Lozada—was a plan to export natural gas to the US via a Chilean port.³ Anti-imperialist sentiments and discourse were also central to the long struggle of the coca-grower unions in the Chapare region against the DEA’s coca eradication policies, led by Evo Morales since the late 1980s, from which the MAS emerged.

Recovering control of natural resources, therefore, in popular struggles and imaginaries, overlapped with reasserting national sovereignty *vis-a-vis* foreign interests and transnational capital. At the same time, this implied rethinking the nation-state to enable the inclusion of traditionally marginalised subaltern classes of indigenous origin (in a ‘plurinational’ configuration). Both these axes of ‘enmity’—political-economic and socio-cultural—coalesced against the imperialist right.

The right, in this conjuncture, was not simply a ‘spectre’ evoked by a manipulative leader to win mass support. Throughout Morales’s first term (2006-2009), the administration faced aggressive opposition on the part of national conservative elites just displaced from power, which brought the country on the brink of civil war. Opposition was spearheaded by the land-holding elites based in the region (*departamento*) of Santa Cruz, in the eastern lowlands—the country’s main agribusiness and cattle-ranching region. The right created a populist articulation of its own, combining reactionary politics with imaginaries of racial and class superiority (Peña-Claros, 2010). Despite widespread popular support for the Morales government, this resulted in a tense political conflict between the MAS and the

conservative bloc—a ‘catastrophic deadlock’ (García-Linera, 2010) which reached its most intense point in 2008.

3.3 *Point of bifurcation’ and ‘creative tensions’*

The conflict with the conservative bloc was recomposed in 2008-’09. In August 2008, the MAS won a referendum demanded by the right to revoke Morales’s presidency. The conservatives in the east shifted then to a more violent approach, staging a failed ‘civic coup’ attempt and mobilising paramilitary violence, which caused strong popular reaction and widespread international condemnation. Electoral and political victory was, however, insufficient. During the process which led to the approval of a new constitution in early 2009, political negotiations between the MAS and the opposition were decisive in overcoming the conservatives’ resistance (Schavelzon, 2012). These negotiations implied limiting the transformative reach of the Constitution in key aspects—especially land reform—but guaranteed that the right went along with MAS’s Process of Change.

The end of the antagonism of the conservative bloc consolidated the political position of the Morales government, sanctioned by a landslide victory in the 2009 elections. For García-Linera (2010), this was the moment in which the MAS consolidated its ‘hegemonic’ position: even if a few recalcitrant elements remained, the MAS—with the support of popular and progressive sectors in the streets and ballots—had won the decisive political battle.

In the vice president’s own analysis (García-Linera, 2010, pp. 40–46), control of the state on the part of the new ‘power bloc’ was obtained through securing support along three main axes: a monopoly on the coercive apparatus; control over the economic-productive sphere (enabled by the partial nationalisation of hydrocarbons); and the imposition of a new discourse, centred on issues such as decolonisation, pluralism and the ‘productive state’. This led, after 2008, to a ‘point of bifurcation’—or moment of stabilization after the crisis—in which the authority of the Morales government was fully re-established (García-Linera, 2010).

At this point, for García-Linera, the only tensions that remained were *within* the popular base of the government. These were necessary, ‘creative’ tensions, which did not question the model of society or the political economic horizon of the Process of Change (García-Linera, 2011a). None of these tensions, therefore—regarding state-society relations, class

antagonisms and the contradiction between resource extractivism and *'vivir bien'* ('living well')—represented a threat to the hegemony of the MAS (Webber, 2015a). Rather, according to García-Linera (2011a, p. 72 original emphasis), “they are vivifying and dialectical contradictions of our Process of Change, *productive forces* of the revolution whose existence and democratic treatment will allow us to advance”.⁴

Other accounts from Evo Morales’s first years in power share—perhaps understandably in this conjuncture—an optimistic view of necessary but productive tensions (Postero, 2010). Yet, the ‘end-of-history’ tale told by Bolivia’s vice president is not fully convincing. I argue, on the contrary, that it was precisely in the moment that neoliberal elites were incorporated in the MAS’s project that the indigenous-popular articulation began irreversibly to crack (Webber, 2015b).

4 Legitimising repression

As a renowned Bolivian intellectual, close to the MAS government, explained: “it remains to be seen to what extent we can still read Álvaro [García-Linera] as a theorist. He is—and he would say this himself—a propagandist. That is his task” (author interview, La Paz, 3 March 2014).

That García-Linera’s account is not innocent is clear from his curious inversion of priorities in discussing Bolivia’s tensions. While dismissing arguably fundamental class and ecological contradictions as unimportant, he identifies as the only potentially dangerous tension what he calls a resurgence of ‘corporatism’—the presence of sectorial demands on the part of popular sectors that pit them against the government (2011a, pp. 47–48):

If the corporatist and unionist particularism triumphs in the acting of the people, this will mark the beginning of a degenerative process of the revolution, which will be the starting point for the conservative restoration led by the entrepreneurial bloc.

What this concern disguises, however, is the discursive targeting of indigenous groups critical of the government, accused of putting their ‘corporatist’ interests before the universality of the Process of Change (Webber, 2015a). The main example of corporatism cited by García-Linera is that of lowland indigenous organisations’ demands for territorial autonomy. This first, somewhat veiled, attack on the indigenous movement signalled, I claim, the beginning of the end of the MAS-led indigenous-popular hegemony.

4.1 *Cracks in the MAS's hegemony*

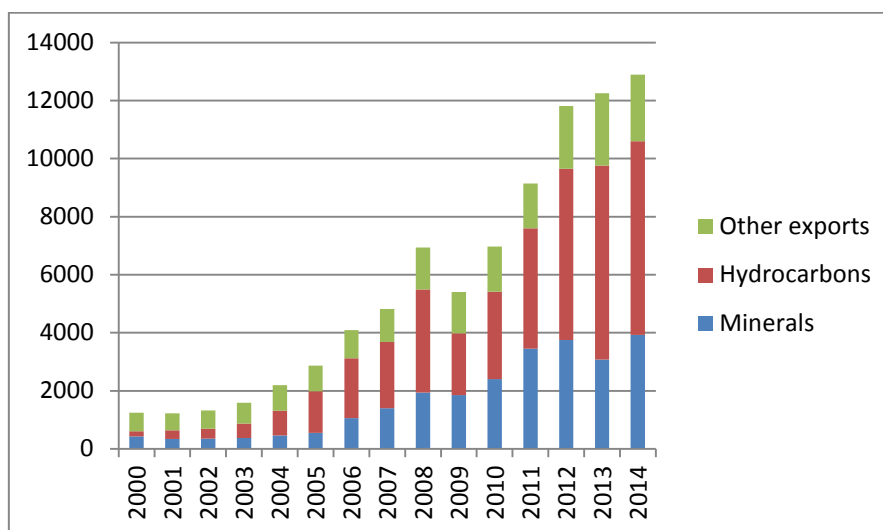
García-Linera, as well as sympathetic commentators (Errejón and Guijarro, 2016), argued that the MAS's ability to win the support of popular classes and 'patriotic' capitalists alike was key to its hegemonic consolidation. The vice president recognised the risk of weakening in this way 'hegemony' through overextending its reach—that is, by including capitalist interests that cannot be kept under indigenous-popular leadership (such as those of landed oligarchies and transnational extractive firms)—but considered this an inevitable aspect of constructing hegemony (García-Linera, 2011a, pp. 40–41):

Only debate, tensions and continuous rectifications between the firm leadership of the revolutionary social nucleus and the amplitude of the [hegemonic articulation] can unfold this necessary contradiction and canalise it as a driving force of the revolutionary dynamic.

Securing political stability through adjusting to dominant interests, however, is far from a Gramscian understanding of 'expansive' hegemony—and much closer to what the Sardinian called 'passive revolution' (Jessop, 1990, p. 212). A passive revolution need not be politically conservative in character—and in the case of the Morales government, in many respects it was not (for instance, it resulted in increased levels of wealth redistribution and greater access to political representation for traditionally marginalised groups). Nevertheless, it ultimately resulted in moderate reform and, importantly, a deepened dependence on conservative interests (Hesketh and Morton, 2014; Webber, 2015b).

First, as the MAS government renounced broader changes, it deepened its dependency on resource exports (Andreucci, 2017). The production and export of minerals and hydrocarbons had begun to increase already before the election of Evo Morales, incentivised by high commodity prices (figure 1). Particularly from Morales's second term, however, the new administration actively promoted such an increase and aligned itself with extractive firms' demands to sidestep or revert indigenous and environmental rights that could potentially threaten it (Andreucci and Radhuber, 2015). This relates to another 'creative tension' underplayed by García-Linera: the contradiction between extractivism and '*vivir bien*'—defined by the vice president as "the satisfaction of material human needs through a vivifying dialogue with nature" (2011a, p. 71). García-Linera sees this as a temporary tension that the government is in the process of recomposing in its path towards constructing "communitarian socialism". Unfortunately, however, there is no evidence that such a path exists.

Figure 1. Total value of exports by sector, in million US\$. Source: Own elaboration based on data from the National Institute of Statistics, Bolivia, 2015.



Second, relatedly, by renouncing more comprehensive reform, the MAS effectively excluded demands that were key to the indigenous-popular articulation described above—especially indigenous projects in the direction of territorial sovereignty and ‘plurinationality’. Overcoming the conflict with the conservative bloc, in this sense, implied the creation of another antagonism, perhaps more dangerous to the extent that it created a caesura within ‘the people’ itself.

4.2 *The demise of plurinationality*

The conflict in 2011-2012 over a highway cutting through the Isiboro-Sécure Natural Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS) inaugurated a conjuncture of open tension between the government and the Bolivian indigenous movement (McNeish, 2013). The conflict resulted in a crisis of the indigenous-popular articulation on which the MAS based its hegemonic strategy (Postero, 2015). Most notably, it led to the break-up of the *Pacto de Unidad*—the indigenous-campesino ‘Unity Pact’—and its reconstitution as a government-controlled umbrella organisation.

This formal alliance between the two main rural movements—the campesino unions and indigenous-*originario* organisations—was established in 2004 and represented the main channel through which indigenous-campesino political proposals were formulated. The main contribution of the Unity Pact was the ‘plurinational state’ proposal (Garcés, 2010)—an attempt to articulate principles of indigenous territorial autonomy and economic and cultural plurality within the structure of the national state (Postero, 2015). These principles

were included in the 2009 Constitution, which redefined Bolivia as a plurinational state founded on anti-colonial struggles.

The consolidation of the MAS's 'hegemony' through its political compromise with the conservative bloc created increasing tensions within the Unity Pact. Internal divergences had long existed, of course. For instance, campesino unions' demands placed emphasis on access to individually owned land for market-oriented production, while indigenous organisations stressed territorial self-government and had a more ambivalent relationship with market forces and 'development' (McNeish, 2013). The process of indigenous-popular articulation against neoliberalism and of resistance against a conservative comeback had allowed these groups to place emphasis on their commonalities (or 'equivalences') rather than differences.

In this conjuncture, however, such differences resurfaced, for two main reasons. First, although the MAS had made it its official goal to use revenues from gas 'nationalisation' to promote communitarian forms of political and economic organisation (Gobierno de Bolivia, 2007), it became clear that its policies were promoting economic 'primarisation' rather than plurality. Second, in the process that led to the approval of a new constitution in 2009, ambitions of creating a plurinational state were significantly 'domesticated' (Garcés, 2011; Postero, 2015). An important moment in this sense was the parliamentary negotiations between the MAS and the opposition over several aspects of the constitutional text approved in 2007 by the Constituent Assembly (in turn based on the Unity Pact's proposal). Such negotiations altered the original text substantially, reducing legal mechanisms for indigenous representation and self-government (Garcés, 2010, pp. 28–29). Most importantly, perhaps, ceding to the demands of the right, the MAS renounced its plans for reducing land concentration and promoting its redistribution.

According to Fernando Garcés, who oversaw the formulation of the Unity Pact's proposal, this marked a moment of rupture in the relationship between the MAS and the indigenous movement:

In the October 2008 parliamentary negotiations, the [relationship] broke. This was for me the first major setback of the Process. And in the worst old style, no? Locked behind closed doors ... the MAS with the other three [opposition parties] negotiated one hundred articles while we danced celebrating the Constitution, which was being manipulated in the congress in the worst of ways (author interview, Cochabamba, 20 October 2014).

The indigenous movement grew increasingly discontented, and found itself directly opposed to campesino unions, which remained loyal to the government.

During the TIPNIS conflict, such tensions exploded and the indigenous-campesino alliance broke down. Though these tensions were partly related to identitarian hostilities (Fontana, 2014), they were also and primarily caused by divergent and increasingly incompatible political projects. An important consequence of such tensions is that they rendered it problematic for all rural movements to share the label of ‘indigenous’. Indigeneity, in other words, ceased to function as a *signifier* around which a collective identity coalesced. For instance, in the 2012 Census, indigenous self-identification—which had reached 62% of the Bolivian population over 15 years of age in 2001—dropped to 41%. While the results are partially attributed to a change in the survey question—now asking to indicate a specific ethnic affiliation—the drop can also be interpreted as a reversal of what had been a *politicisation* of indigeneity as a marker of subalternity (Schavelzon, 2014). The repression suffered by the indigenous movement and its supporters during and after the TIPNIS dispute marked an end to the ‘indigenous’ character of the popular articulation.

4.3 *Spectres of imperialism*

The way that the MAS’s policies and postures exacerbated the tension between the campesino and indigenous blocs shows that what García-Linera called a ‘resurgence of corporatism’ was arguably a legitimate response to the exclusion of indigenous political demands from the strategy of the power bloc, in turn a consequence of the conservative turn of the MAS. Not only was the indigenous movement’s opposition to extractivist expansion perceived by the government as a threat to its accumulation strategy; indigenous repression also clearly contradicted the overall discursive strategy of the MAS as an indigenous-popular government promoting *vivir bien*.

The aggressiveness with which the indigenous movement was treated, with episodes of brutality unusual for the Morales government—as in the case of the violent expulsion of members of the highland indigenous federation CONAMAQ (National Council of *Allyus* and *Markas* of the *Qullasuyu*) from their headquarters in late 2013—may seem unnecessary and paradoxical. Indeed, the necessity to expand export-oriented resource extraction put the MAS in the uneasy position. How could it remove the threat coming from indigenous

organisations, while at the same time maintaining an indigenous-informed discourse, however diluted, as the basis of its ideological strategy?

The solution, I claim, could only be the *disappearance* of anti-government indigenous organisations. This is what the MAS set out to do, since 2011, in two main ways. First, it divided and disarticulated the main indigenous organisations, in order to control them. Commencing in 2012 with the lowland indigenous federation, CIDOB—Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia—the government identified members and cadres aligned with the party, or willing to be co-opted. It created parallel organisations under control of the MAS and isolated and marginalised the remaining—that is, legitimately elected—leadership and members. This formed a split between pro-government (*MASista*) and independent (*organico*) organisations. A similar pattern was followed in late 2013 with the above-mentioned CONAMAQ. This allowed for the formal reconstitution of the Unity Pact, this time fully controlled by the government. The MAS could thus continue claiming that it was, after all, the political expression of indigenous interests.

Second, the government discursively targeted as ‘enemies of the Process of Change’ members and supporters of the independent CIDOB and CONAMAQ. These refused to be corrupted into submission and were attempting to reorganise, attracting the sympathy of leftist intellectuals and activists critical of the MAS (as well as, it must be said, of conservative parties and sectors of society, willing to exploit this tension against Morales). Once again, García-Linera led the charge. In a booklet published in 2012, titled *Geopolítica de la Amazonía*—“Geopolitics of the Amazon”—the vice president argued that the indigenous organisations opposing the expansion of extractive frontiers were manipulated by international NGOs, in turn aligned with national landed capital and imperialist interests, with the goal of weakening the Bolivian state’s presence in the region (Beaulieu and Postero, 2013).

Another booklet, titled *El ONGismo, enfermedad infantil del derechismo* (García-Linera, 2011b)—“NGOism, a right-wingers’ infantile disease”—attacked primarily a number of leftist intellectuals and former government members working in NGOs, critical of the MAS’s trajectory (see Almaraz et al., 2012). They were accused of sabotaging the government and aiding a conservative comeback:

These critics, yesterday friends in the government, today resented and in the opposition, lie, manipulate and cheat regarding what happens with the Process of

Change. And in their endeavour, they adhere to the totality of falsities, lies and attacks of the neoliberal right, restorer of the old regime (García-Linera, 2011b, p. 166)

In a later crackdown on NGOs in 2015, García-Linera drew an interesting historical parallel by referring to these pro-indigenous intellectuals as “green Trotskyists” (Mealla, 2015). Attacking indigenous organisations and their supporters was necessary to ideologically legitimising their repression. Those who could not be co-opted needed to be ‘othered’—through depicting them as internal enemies.

What is interesting to note here is that, even though US-friendly neoliberal elites were then much less of a *real* enemy—being politically disarticulated and in a relatively friendly relationship with government (Webber, 2015b)—they were still invoked as a threat, with the principal purpose of assimilating the indigenous movement to ‘imperialism’. The MAS could thus claim that the indigenous movement was firmly on board with the government’s project, and that only a deviant fraction of the indigenous organisations, misguided by agents of imperialism, kept criticising the Morales administration. Therefore, the overall populist strategy of the MAS—as representing the interests of an indigenous-popular majority, *contra* neoliberal and imperialist enemies—could be maintained. There was, however, a fundamental shift both in ‘the people’—no longer *politically* indigenous—and in the ‘constitutive outside’—the spectre of past enemies now replaced by new (and unlikely) ‘agents of imperialism’.

5 Resource regulation and populism

The empirical arguments of this paper show that there is a link worth exploring between the type of political and ideological strategy that Laclau defines as ‘populism’ and the regularisation of resource-based accumulation. It is important to stress that, generally speaking, the relationship between an institutional reconfiguration and its stabilising effect on accumulation is neither necessary nor intentional (Jessop and Sum, 2006)—it would be absurd to claim that the Bolivian Process of Change was meant to stabilise extractivism all along. Nevertheless, it is evident that, in certain contexts, ideology plays a central role in building legitimacy around controversial accumulation strategies, thus contributing to their ‘regularisation’.

The Bolivian case makes this clear. A popular articulation created a collective indigenous-popular identity that coalesced around the goal of reclaiming gas ‘for the people’. This was

an accumulation of popular struggles and demands—not a top-down strategy—which found in resource nationalisation and plurinationality signifiers around which to build a hegemonic articulation. This discursive articulation, however—based on popular demands and including a strong indigenous element—eventually turned against the indigenous movement itself. As mobilising gas resources was key to the MAS’s project, the indigenous that opposed extractivism were seeing as sabotaging the Process of Change and therefore repressed. Paradoxically, therefore, a discursive articulation that formed the basis of a counter-hegemonic strategy—centred on reforming natural resource governance—ended up being deployed as a way to *stabilise* resource extraction and arrangements around it, through justifying the repression of those who opposed it.

Here, perhaps, we see why radical leftists like Žižek (2006) see in populism an element of ideological mystification. Laclau himself warns about the peril of discursive articulation degenerating into manipulative rhetoric. In the institutionalisation of the populist rupture, he argues, the equivalential discourse risks becoming the *‘langue de bois’* of the state. When this happens, “the increasing distance between actual social demands and dominant equivalential discourse frequently leads to the repression of the former and the violent imposition of the latter” (Laclau, 2005b, p. 47). In other words, in the process of institutionalisation of a populist articulation, a signifier of equivalence, appropriated by state actors, can turn into a manipulative rhetoric that accompanies the repression of actual social demands.

Should this lead us to conclude that populism is a necessarily ‘post-political’ strategy—one that, as Žižek has it, harbours in the last instance a ‘protofascist’ tendency? The populism of the Morales government after its institutionalisation phase looked indeed ‘post-political’, as it served to displace social antagonism and foreclose transformative possibilities. Laclau (1977, pp. 196–97) himself concedes that populism is frequently associated with this type of class mediation strategies and with passive revolution. However, as I hope I have demonstrated in the Bolivian case, the problem is not populism *per se*, but precisely the class project and political trajectory that is articulated and sustained through populism.

First, I argue, what ultimately rendered the demands of the indigenous movement incompatible with the reproduction of the power bloc was the MAS’s conscious decision to leave the interests of key capitalist sectors untouched. To be sure, it is inevitable for a counter-hegemonic articulation (of which a populist strategy is the necessary ideological cement) to bring together diverse and potentially conflicting ambitions; and it is normal

that the process of institutionalisation may bring these tensions to the surface. Yet, I would insist that, by renouncing pushing the antagonism with the right further, the MAS reduced its room for manoeuvre for implementing reforms in the direction of plurinationality and away from extractivism (though its policy plans in this respect were experimental and admittedly ambiguous).

For instance, some of the central indigenous demands around territorial autonomy and for a greater participation in resource governance would have certainly be more easily accommodated had the Morales administration undertaken more comprehensive agrarian and extractive sector reform, increasing its ability to redistribute land and allowing for greater democratic control of resource extraction and rents. This is, of course, easier said than done, and there is no guarantee that such reforms would have eliminated tensions within the indigenous-popular articulation. The point is, however, that the MAS government quite deliberately chose not follow this path and, by partly aligning itself with landed and extractive capital's interests, it rendered the marginalisation of certain political projects (and the repression of the groups putting them forward) virtually inevitable.

Therefore, once again the disarticulation of 'the people'—and the repression of subaltern groups whose demands were deemed incompatible with the reproduction of the power bloc—was not the result of the populist strategy itself, but of the uneven and incomplete institutionalisation of demands resulting from the passive revolutionary 'statization' of a counter-hegemonic project (Jessop, 1990, p. 213).

Moreover, in the Bolivian case, it is clear that the Morales government *proactively* intervened to break up the indigenous-popular articulation through co-optation and repression. In this sense, the Bolivian political theorist Luis Tapia—a former member of the pro-MAS intellectual collective 'Comuna Group' (Baker, 2015), now a vocal critic of the Morales government—contests García-Linera's claim that, by including conservative elements in its 'Process of Change', the MAS achieved any form of 'expansive' hegemony:

I think that the process of political articulation carried out by the MAS is not hegemonic in a Gramscian sense, because [it is] a project of domination (*dominación*) and not of leadership (*dirección*). For Gramsci, to be the leader [of a hegemonic articulation], one must be ahead of the fragments that are articulated. Yet, the MAS has always been behind them. In this sense, it would rather resemble what Gramsci calls the "negative construction of hegemony", that is to say, by way of destruction and disarticulation. [...] Because what is clear is that it deployed repressive apparatuses and disorganised civil society. In fact the MAS is not a leader in civil society, it is a disorganising force of civil society (author interview, La Paz, 13 October 2014).

The active role played by the MAS in breaking up the indigenous-popular articulation makes it difficult to argue that such an articulation collapsed of its own accord under the strain of its internal tensions

Another problematic aspect of populism is that, in order for a collective identity to hold, it needs to constantly reproduce the threat of an external or internal enemy. For Laclau's critics, this is what makes populism a primarily reactive (and potentially reactionary) strategy prone to irrationality and authoritarianism. It is undeniable that the construction of 'the people' is predicated on the existence of a 'constitutive outside' (in Laclau's words, the common source of frustration for a chain of diverse but related demands and revendications). And it is clear that—as in the case of right-wing nationalism's pitting 'the people' against immigrants, minorities and other 'intruders'—this ideological strategy can indeed be reactionary. Yet, once again, the identification and 'naming' of such an enemy is a result of the political and class project that is being put forward, not simply of its ideological strategy.

For a coalition of subaltern groups of indigenous origin, for instance—as in the Bolivian case—there was nothing irrational in identifying the country's racist landed oligarchs as its main political antagonist. There is no doubt that the disappearance of a constitutive outside would have challenged the counter-hegemonic articulation and, at the very least, forced it to readjust its ideological strategy. The problem, however, is that the interests of landed and extractive capital were not defeated, but subsumed into the agenda of the new power bloc (had they been defeated, the disappearance of this 'enemy' would likely be considered as a political achievement rather than a problem). In this way, the 'threat' disappeared, but the class and political antagonism was not overcome. Rather, the MAS, through class mediation and transformist tactics, impeded the development of a more genuinely indigenous-popular hegemony and ideologically reframed indigenous 'corporatism' as the new 'constitutive outside' (associating it rhetorically to neoliberalism and imperialism).

6 Conclusions

In this paper, I aimed to shed light on the tension-fraught relationship between the radical ideological strategy of the Latin American left—understood as an instance of 'populism' in a Laclauian sense—and its less-than-radical policy orientations, particularly as regards resource-based development. Through the case of Bolivia, I explored how the populist

discursive strategy of the Morales government—characterised by a novel combination of left-nationalist, indigenous and radical-environmentalist themes—related to the goal of stabilising resource-based accumulation in the face of conservative reaction as well as social opposition ‘from below’. I found that populism—as a way of constructing a popular identity, through articulating social demands in opposition to a common ‘enemy’—was effective in challenging the hegemony of neoliberal forces and favouring their replacement with a new, ‘indigenous-popular’ power bloc. Nevertheless, when indigenous demands that constituted the popular articulation—notably, ambitions to mobilise resource wealth for the promotion of ‘plurinationality’—became impossible to meet, the same discursive strategy was used by the government to legitimise its control over and repression of the indigenous movement.

I argued, therefore, that official discursive strategies, as part of a ‘mode of regulation’, can be mobilised to reduce social opposition to resource-based accumulation. In the case of Bolivia, this went from building on popular struggles and imaginaries in order to push through a progressive institutional restructuring of natural resource industries, to turning the same discursive articulation against sectors opposing the expansion of extractivism. In the latter case, populist discursive strategy degenerated into ideological manipulation, deployed to justify repression. This led me to side with Laclau—against some of his critics on the left—in defending the transformative potential of populism, and to argue that the degeneration of discourse observed in Latin American left governments signals a problem not with populism *per se*, but rather with the political and class projects that these governments put forward.

The theoretical implication of these findings, I think, is clear: in order to understand the political nature of populism, one must get out of the sphere of discourse and ideology, and consider the class relations and shifting correlations of forces that underpin it. In the present conjuncture—characterised by the end of a political cycle and the aggressive comeback of the right—it is important, therefore, to resist the temptation to blame the left’s shortcomings on their populist strategies. Rather, we should focus on these governments’ problematic politics and the ways they turned, at least in part, against the very popular forces that made their ascendance to power possible.

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¹ I use the phrase ‘resource-based accumulation’ to refer to the processes of generating, extracting and distributing value associated with natural resource exploitation. It is not strictly speaking a capital accumulation process, because much of the value is not generated in the production process (that is to say, it is not surplus value extracted from labour) but rather appropriated through rent relations. For this reason, resource-based accumulation generates dynamics of struggle that are primarily over value *distribution*—that is, over the appropriation and redistribution of resource rents (Andreucci et al., 2017).

² In Bolivia, the term ‘*campesino*’ refers mainly to Quechua and Aymara speaking rural populations in the Andean highlands (Perreault, 2008, n. 2). Politically, the *campesino* bloc includes the two main rural workers’ unions—the Unified Syndicalist Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB) and the National Federation of Peasant Women of Bolivia–‘Bartolina Sisa’ (CNMCIOB-BS)—as well as the Syndicalist Confederation of Intercultural Communities of Bolivia (CSCIB), representing peasant migrants in the lowlands (known originally as ‘*colonizadores*’ and, more recently, as ‘*interculturales*’), and the two main coca-grower (*cocalero*) confederations in Cochabamba and the Yungas (COCA TROPICO and COFECAY). *Campesinos* may identify culturally or linguistically as ‘indigenous’, but politically this label is restricted to lowland groups pertaining to the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (CIDOB). In this paper, I also use the term ‘indigenous’ to refer to the highland federation CONAMAQ (National Council of *Allyus* and *Markas* of the *Qullasuyu*). Although their members self-identify primarily as ‘*originarios*’, and the two organisations have different histories and objectives, CONAMAQ has been closely allied to CIDOB since 2002 and can be considered to form part of the same political movement (Garcés, 2010).

³ Resentment towards Chile went back to the 1879-1883 War of the Pacific, in which Bolivia lost access to the sea.

⁴ All translations from the Spanish are my own.

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