Imagining Bolivia

The Struggle for Democracy in the Midst of Competing Visions of 'The Nation'

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After two decades of political stability, Bolivia's democratic future became uncertain during October 2003, as Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada was forced to step down from the presidency amid social unrest known as the *guerra del gas* (lit. 'the gas war'). While the *guerra del gas* encompassed a wide range of social movements –many with divergent and contradictory goals– the common denominator was opposition to two decades of neoliberal socioeconomic policies. Nevertheless, the protests were substantially regional in character. While anti-neoliberal protests shook the capital of La Paz, counter-protests in defense of gas exports mobilized in the eastern lowland cities of Santa Cruz and Tarija. In response to calls for a return to a statist economic model by *guerra del gas* protesters, those in the (hydrocarbons-rich) eastern lowlands made their own political demands: political autonomy. The following two years has seen a series of political crisis that threatened the very existence of the Bolivian nation-state, as two drastically different and competing visions of the national political community clashed.

While the 2003 *guerra del gas* was more widely covered in the international media, the *autonomista* (pro-autonomy) protests across Bolivia's eastern departments were equally important. Two rallies, one on 23 June 2004 and another on 28 January 2005, organized by the Comité Cívico de Santa Cruz, turned out more than a hundred thousand supporters.[1] This regionalist movement flirted openly with secession and was a significant force in driving Carlos Mesa from the presidency in June 2005. In sharp contrast to the demands by *guerra del gas* participants –who demanded a stronger role for the central state in managing the country's natural resources– the *autonomista*

[1] The highest estimate, by the Santa Cruz newspaper *El Deber*, put the January 2005 rally at 350,000. That rally was organized well ahead of time, and included participants from the department's countryside, as well as delegations from other eastern departments.

demands included a smaller central state and increased regional, local political (and economic) autonomy.

At the heart of the crisis is the question of the very nature and legitimacy of the Bolivian nation-state. After twenty years of a liberal-pluralist political discourse, many Bolivians have begun to question the very foundations of their national political community. This is a paradox of democratization: The acceptance by broad sectors of the population of liberalism's emphasis on individual and group autonomy, coupled with pluralism's emphasis on the multicultural nature of Bolivian society, has eroded popular support for the Bolivian nationalism dominant since 1952. Ironically, the consolidation of democracy in the 1990s left the state vulnerable to competing claims from identity-driven political movements –both 'ethnic' (as in the case of Aymara movements) and 'regional' (as in the case of departmental *autonomista* movements).

This paper offers a preliminary framework with which to consider this paradox of democratization. It also seeks to understand the relationship between nationalism and democracy. Using the recent Bolivian crisis as a backdrop, I pursue the idea of democracy as type of 'imagined political community' described by Benedict Anderson (1991). Pluralist democratic theory has paid little attention to the formation of a 'demos' and its fundamental role in democracy and democratization. Yet one wonders: Is democracy without a *demos* even possible? This paper briefly sketches the relationship between the construction of a national community and the construction of a *demos*. Finally, this paper argues that political communities of the kind described by Anderson are dynamic, that is, just as they are constructed, they can be altered or (re)constructed over time. This is especially true in a democratic polity, where –at least theoretically– all matters are open to political contestation.

Democracy and the *demos* question

Remarkably, most theoretical discussions of democracy take an already existing *demos* for granted. Or, at best, they treat it in an abstract form, with little attention to how some collection of individuals come to see themselves as members of a political community. The 'demos question' is scarcely addressed, even among seminal accounts. David Held's (1996) survey of competing democratic theories is surprisingly silent on the issue. Givanni Sartori's (1987) analytically rich *Theory of Democracy Revisited* points out the conceptual ambiguity of the term, but then hastily moves on to discuss other areas of democratic theory. Robert Dahl (1982; 1989), one of the few pluralist theorists to press the importance of resolving this "shadow theory of democracy" nevertheless does not forcefully pursue the origins of how any group of individuals come to accept that they a political community. In part, pluralists move past the *demos* question because they assume that political communities are not homogenous, assuming instead both heterogeneous pluralism and interest-driven rationalism. Nevertheless, defining a polity's *demos* seems of paramount importance. How can any group of individuals govern themselves democratically if they have not first agreed that they are a political community, that they should collectively govern themselves?

Non-pluralist theorists also pay scant attention to the *demos* question. Theorists of participatory and communitarian democracy, while emphasizing the bonds of communal attachment, do not clearly articulate a theory or framework for how the community comes into existence. Some non-pluralists, like Carole Pateman (1988) and Charles W. Mills (1997) have argued that the political theory underpinning liberal democracy contains unstated assumptions about the nature of the political community, assumptions with importance implications for gender and race relations. Yet even such criticisms do not go far enough to address what I call 'the *demos* question' as a fundamental component of democratic theory. Critiques of racial inequalities within a political community still presuppose existing racial or cultural groups, without clearly identifying how such

groups are constructed. Critiques of gender inequalities, likewise, still presuppose an exiting political community. It may be that French women are discriminated against in their political society –but why are they still 'French' women?

There has historically been a similar lack of attention to the *demos* question in the democratization literature. Moreover, the dominance of the nation-state model as the analytical framework for comparative studies of democracy has led to conceptual confusion, with the terms 'nation' and 'state' frequently used interchangeably. But while the state is a legal, institutional, and bureaucratic apparatus, the nation is substantially different. And though some nation-states are commonly perceived as culturally homogeneous (e.g. Japan, Portugal, Iceland), most nation-states are in reality comprised of multicultural, diverse citizenry. Yet because the nation-state model is dominant, states pursue (whether explicitly or implicitly) policies meant to reinforce (or impose) a common national community. This means that as states –including liberal democratic states– seek to maintain social cohesion by managing social conflict, they seek to strengthen social consensus over both the political and the national. Such policies inherently produce tensions in states with 'plural societies.'

Comparative studies of democracy, of course, have not been silent on the issue. The well-known consociational model proposed by Arend Lijphart (1980) addressed the issue of democracy in plural societies. Some recent studies that focus on cases from the developing world –particularly those by Benjamin Reilly (2001) and Andrew Reynolds (2002)– have addressed the issue of democracy in 'divided societies' and the struggle to consolidate democracy in polities with deep ethnic cleavages. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) draw attention to the national question when they argue that democratic consolidation requires widespread social agreement about the legitimacy and scope of the *polis* and the identity of the *demos*. But their argument gravitates towards the issue of 'stateness' (rather than 'nationness') as their dictum "no state, no democracy" makes clear.

Essentially, Linz and Stepan argue that the question of the political community is necessary for the state, and only indirectly for democracy.

One way to address the *demos* question is through the literature on nationalism. Historically, democracy and nationalism were closely related. The first wave of nationalist movements that followed the French Revolution was also a democratic wave based on the principle of popular sovereignty.[2] Conceptually, the two terms are also fundamentally similar: both are horizontally egalitarian communities. There are, however, two key differences between democracy and the nation. First, while democracy contains an implicit prescription for government (a method by which political authority is exercised), the nation does not. The latter is limited solely to delineating membership in the political community. Second, we more easily recognize the cultural character of the national community. Yet several nationalism scholars –most notably Ernest Gellner (1983), Benedict Anderson (1991), and Eric Hobsbawm (1992)– point out the constructed nature of national cultural communities. Likewise, the attention by political culture scholars as diverse as Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963), Robert Putnam (1994), and Howard Wiarda (2001) suggest culture may be an important component of democracy. Both sets of scholarship call into question the very premise of a clear-cut conceptual distinction between 'the nation' and 'the *demos*.'[3]

Democracy as an imagined community

Conceptually, the nation and *demos* can be reconciled through Anderson's definition of nations as "imagined political communities" –a typological definition that can easily includes

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[2] The first wave of nationalist movements coincides with Samuel Huntington's (1991) 'first wave' of democracy. Each subsequent democratic wave also coincided with a resurgence of nationalism: the second wave following the Second World War coincided with anti-colonialist, national movements in Africa and Asia; the third wave coincided with nationalist revivals in post-Communist Europe.

[3] Interestingly, the two share an epistemological root. Though most democratic theorists accept *demos* to mean 'a people,' Aristotle explicitly stated that *demos* meant 'the poor.' The Greek word for 'a people' is *ethnos*, which more commonly denotes a cultural and historic community, much like the Latin *natio*.

democracy. Critical of Gellner's formulation of constructed nationalism, Anderson makes clear that 'imagined' nations are neither 'false' nor 'ungenuine.' Individuals have sincere, authentic attachments to their national community, a community with very real, tangible cultural foundations. Like the nation, a democratic community is limited, sovereign, and horizontally egalitarian. It is limited, because membership is not universal, but specifically delimited by law (as is suffrage). It is sovereign, because the community does not recognize any higher authority (God, church, or king) over itself. And it is horizontally egalitarian because all citizens are (legally) considered equals before the law. A democratic community is also imageind in the same way as Anderson's nation. In all but the smallest of democratic communities (the village of committee) individual members may never meet each other, but nevertheless develop strong bonds of loyalty to each other because, just as in nations, "in the mind of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991, p. 6). Finally, just as a nation requires a set of myths, rituals, and heroes that form a foundation for the cultural community, so do democracies.[4]

If we accept the nation-state as the current model for sovereign political community, a deeper understanding of the nature and development of national communities is instructive. I adopt Anderson's framework not because it is the most accurate (there are, after all, important criticisms by other nationalism scholars), but because it is the most malleable. Because Anderson frames the nation as a 'type' of imagined community, he implicitly creates a portable conceptual category that can be applied to other political communities.

Here, I wish to briefly sketch out four similarities between democracy and the type of imaged community Anderson describes. First, the democratic community includes mechanisms and

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[4] Can we even think of a democratic states that does not have a pantheon of 'founding fathers' and other heroes immortalized in public monuments, a historicist understanding of the past as a struggle to forge the community and protect it from others, or periodic rituals to honor the community's symbols (the flag, the constitution, the house of parliament)? How different is this from the continual recreating of the communal bonds in 'homogenous empty time' described by Anderson?

institutions that socialize its members into the civic values necessary for communal life. This is done through the educational system, museums, public monuments, and periodic rituals. Second, the modern democratic community is routinely recreated in 'homogeneous empty time' through modern communications media. Perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the fundamental liberal democratic rights is freedom of the press. The idea that modern imagined communities are made possible by print capitalism –especially the novel and the newspaper, which allowed citizens to imagine themselves as part of a larger community– is particularly poignant for democracies, where 'pop culture' (to the novel and newspaper we now add radio, television, the internet) routinely reinforce both the community's scope and its values. Third, in a very general sense, the role of 'public intellectuals' in both types of communities is remarkably similar: They played a vanguard role in establishing the polity and continue to mobilize the masses in support of the community and its institutions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, like the nation, the democratic community cannot exist until it has resolved the issue of who constitute 'the people' (that is, who gets to vote) – the very community that will exercise political autonomy. In fact, the struggle to determine who is and who is not a member of the community is the first political question both the nation and the democratic community must resolve.

If nations are imagined or constructed, then more so are democratic communities. Few would argue that democracy is a 'natural' form of human political organization in the way that kinship might be. Despite its historical roots in Classical Greek and Medieval Italian city-states, modern liberal democracy is a recent phenomenon dating back (at most) only two centuries. More importantly, all existing democracies were clearly constructed and established at some very specific point in time by some particular set of individuals.[5] Here, discussions of how modern nations emerged are instructive. Both in European and New World contexts, new political elites challenged

[5] For example: When 'the Italian nation' came into existence is an interesting academic debate. But when the Italian state or Italian democracy were established are matters of historical record (1861 and 1946, respectively).

established authorities (the monarchic court or the colonial empire) by appealing to newly emerging national identities. In short, modern representative states were constructed alongside the new national communities such states were meant to govern –the origin of the one tells us much about the origin of the other.

While other nationalism scholars such as Anthony Smith (1986) and Liah Greenfeld (1992) argue that nations have deep historical, cultural roots, such claims are difficult to extend into post-colonial contests such as Latin America, where state boundaries were arbitrary and cultural legacies more suspect. Of course, such critics of the imagined communities theory of nationalism do not discount the role played by elites in the construction of national identities. They merely emphasize the importance of past historical cultural legacies on evolving national identities. Greenfeld's account includes the case of the United States, a multicultural post-colonial nation and an example of 'open-civic' nationalism. But Smith's emphasis on the ethnic origins of nations is problematic. While Smith's theory does not ignore the recentness of post-colonial nationalisms, his approach still emphasizes their roots in older ethnic identities. Unlike Anderson, Smith and Greenfeld see nations as developing slowly, over centuries, where Anderson seems them moving much more quickly and recently. John Kelly and Martha Kaplan (2001) go farther, arguing that nationalism –especially in the post-colonial world– is in large measure an artifact of the period following the world wars. Without discounting older incidents of nationalism and nationalist movements around the world, Kelly and Kaplan (like Anderson) suggest that nation-states were large measure a product of international political forces that emphasize the nation as the focus of sovereign political power. As with Anderson, their emphasis on post-colonial nationalism led them to consider the (quite conscious) construction of national, political identities.

The extent to which the nation became an agent of 'self-determination' has clear implications for democratic theory. Clearly, the question of how the national community came to be

constituted –especially its membership and territoriality– is a political question, with immediate implications for the subsequent formation of a polity. Yet Anderson's framework of nations as imagined political communities also suggests that if the national imaginary is a continual, ongoing process, the national imaginary can also be deconstructed and reimagined over time. And if the national imaginary is originally constructed through elite discourse, one could expect that a new dominant political elite could significantly reconstruct new national imaginaries. One could also expect that as the political process is opened to greater popular participation, the national imaginary is further opened to deconstruction and reimagining.

I suggest that democracies are in a perpetual state of 'reimagining' because of the nature of the political community. If a democracy allows for open discussion of political issues, one of these must be the scope of the community itself. This, however, makes democracy potentially dangerous to existing national political communities. I want to be clear here: I do not suggest that democracy should be avoided in order to protect national communities, but simply that careful attention to how democratization opens up the issue of the political community itself. I also suggest that nations themselves are frequently reimagined during moments of sharp political upheaval. The combination of the two supports the idea of democracy as a dynamically imagined community. Here, I turn to the Bolivian case –particularly the legacy of the 1952 National Revolution on the national imaginary and the subsequent deconstruction of this community during the democratic period.

1952 and the Bolivian national imaginary

The 1952 Bolivian Revolution was one of the major revolutions of twentieth century Latin America.[6] Yet the April 1952 uprising, though relatively quick (the *ancien régime* was swept away in

[6] At one time, the Bolivian revolution ranked with the Mexican revolution; both substantially reshaped their respective social and political structure. The revolution, though considered a 'failure' compared to Mexico's 'success' was broadly discussed. See Huntington 1969 (p. 275), Skocpol 1979 (p. 287), Hobsbawm 1992 (p. 23), and Knight 1990 (p. 182).

only three days of fighting), was itself the product of nearly two decades of evolving nationalist revolutionary political discourse. Though most political histories trace the revolution's origins to early twentieth century Bolivian history –frequently citing the role of the Chaco War with Paraguay (1932-1935) as a catalyst– they tend to focus on the April 1952 uprising, relegating preceding events to the role of 'precursors.' A recent volume edited by Grindle and Domingo (2003) includes chapters from a number of prominent political historians who study Bolivia; all the authors take this approach in their reflections of the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution. Eric Selbin's (1999) comparative study of Latin American social revolutions synthesizes the conventional view of the 1952 Revolution as the starting point of what would later become an 'uncompleted' social revolution.[7] Bolivian accounts, however, understand 1952 quite differently. They view the events of April 1952 as the victorious moment of a revolutionary process –a process that began long before and continued long after 1952.[8] A close look at the post-1964 regimes also demonstrates a sense of continuism: each of the military regimes (at least until 1978) not only explicitly declared themselves as 'restoring' the revolution, they were actively supported by competing factions of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) –the party that shepherded the national revolution.

A brief comparison to the Mexican Revolution (1910-1928) is instructive. First, Bolivian political intellectuals clearly looked to the Mexican case as a model for their national revolution. Second, despite their different origins and trajectories, both revolutions were accompanied by dual

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Seminal accounts of the 1952 Revolution and its aftermath include Alexander 1958, Klein 1968, Malloy 1970, Dunkerley 1984, and Malloy and Gamarra 1988.

[7] Selbin writes: "There is unquestionable consensus that a revolutionary process *began to unfold in Bolivia in 1952* [italics added] …" (1999, p. 34).

[8] Fernando Mayorga writes: "The revolution of 52 was, without a doubt, the establishing moment of the Bolivian nation and the nationalist ideology occupied the 'hegemonic center' of the *process that culminated in the April insurrection* [italics added], that is, civil society was shaped and defined … through the revolutionary nationalist discourse" (1993, p. 23, my translation). Examples of this view of 1952 and the 'national revolution' in Bolivian accounts include Ayala (1956), Céspedes (1956), Bedregal (1958), Smith Ariñez (1960), and Antezana (1969). Such authors are marked by a tendency towards a teleological view of history. Accounts of continuism after 1964 include Garcia Argañaras (1993). Some English-language accounts also note a continuation after 1964. See especially Mitchell (1977) and Malloy and Gamarra (1988).

processes of state-building and nation-building. Both revolutions were successful in fundamentally (and in large measure irreversibly) transforming their respective social, political, and economic structures. Both revolutionary experiences also included long periods of turbulent violence that saw opposing (even counter-revolutionary) forces vie for control.[9] Where the Bolivian revolution 'failed' was in the inability of the MNR to consolidate its monopoly on power and establish the kind of lasting hegemonic single-party system as Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).[10]

When considered as a 'national' revolution, the Bolivian revolution seems to have been firmly consolidated and certainly not a failure.[11] The 1952 Revolution was the culmination of a broad collective revolutionary project aimed at consolidating a new national identity based on integrationist *mestizo* nationalism.[12] The nationalist project proclaimed a community where class, ethnic, and regional distinctions were subsumed under a common, corporatist nationalist identity. Among the key reforms of the 1952 Revolution were: agrarian reform and the abolition of the semi-feudal *hacienda* system, establishment of state control over much of the country's economic activity, and universal adult suffrage. In short, the national revolution was also a 'democratic' revolution. Prior to 1952, voting was heavily restricted to property-owning adult white males; the vast majority of the population (especially the indigenous majorities) were excluded from the electoral process. With the advent of universal adult suffrage –and the recognition of the indigenous *campesinos* as fellow-

[9] Though the violence of the 1952 revolution was brief, the similarity with the Mexican case rests with the back-and-forth nature of the political struggle, with revolutionary and reactionary regimes briefly winning ascendancy between 1936 and 1952.

[10] My interpretation differs from the one presented by Selbin (see p. 33-39), who argues that Bolivia's revolution was institutionalized (establishing a government) but not consolidated (convincing people to "embrace the social revolutionary project" p. 13). Yet the key features of the revolutionary project were already accepted by a critical mass of the population before 1952.

[11] It is important to properly distinguish between the nation-building and state-building elements of the Bolivian revolution. Where the MNR failed was in building a sufficiently autonomous state.

[12] The MNR's revolutionary nationalist project was 'integrationist' because, like other nation-building projects (e.g. France, Russia, Mexico) it aimed to assimilate various social groups –regardless of regional, ethnic, or class differences– into a single homogeneous community. They pursued this goal by promoting a Spanish-lanugage *mestizo* (mixed race/ethnic) national identity. The nationalist revolutionary project was also 'integrationist' in another sense. Throughout much of Bolivian history, political life focused almost exclusively on the capital city. The national integration program pursued by the MNR also emphasized a need to incorporate the 'frontier' provinces more closely into national political, economic, and social life.

citizens– the leaders of the national revolution turned to creating a new sense of national identity. And while the 1930s saw a brief burst of regionalist movements (particularly in lowland Santa Cruz), these had all but disappeared by the late 1950s, in large measure as a product of deliberate state policies meant to more closely integrate (both politically and economically) previously marginalized regions of the country.

Another key program of the national revolution was educational reform, by which Spanish literacy was imposed on the nation's *campesinos* ('Indians' became 'peasants') in what Aurlyn Luykx (1999) describes as 'citizen factories.'[13] This new national discourse was reinforced by a collective political mythology that wove post-Chaco history into a single narrative, as reflected in the teleological tendency in Bolivian historical accounts. Later movements and regimes (whether civilian or military) made significant efforts to establish their legitimacy by explicitly connecting themselves to the events and heroes of this revolutionary national narrative. Other discourses, such as identity politics –principally revolving around ethnic and regional differences– would not gain salience in Bolivian politics until after the democratic transition.

In the later phase of the democratization process (after 1985), members of the political class adopted a new liberal-pluralist discourse that fundamentally reimagined the role of the Bolivian state, its relationship to citizens, and the nature of 'Bolivian' citizenship as they sought to consolidate a "new collective imaginary" (Fernando Mayorga 1993, p. 168). This new discourse identified by Fernando Mayorga became the prevailing language of politics among the political parties that dominated formal institutional (i.e. electoral) politics through the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, it seems that the democratization process itself prompted a new 'reimagining' of the Bolivian nation by opening the *demos* question. This was to be expected, of course. The transition from authoritarianism

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[13] Luykx's work focuses on recent Bolivian history, and looks to how students resist the kind of cultural assimilation imposed on them by public schools (what she calls 'citizen factories'). I have merely used her catch-phrase, since it describes the kind of educational reformism adopted by the national revolutionary movement's leaders –reforms meant to crate new 'Bolivian' citizens.

to democracy was followed by a transition from a statist economic model to a neoliberal one. Since the post-1952 state was in large measure legitimized as a 'patrimony' of the national revolution, the dismantling of that state had to coincide with a new legitimizing discourse meant to support the new neoliberal state. Similarly, in place of a homogeneous *mestizo* national identity, the new Bolivian democracy was lauded as a 'multi-ethnic' and 'pluri-cultural' community.

The paradox of democratization

Ironically, the process of democratization and the adoption of a new liberal-pluralist discourse by political elites have put the Bolivian state –and, subsequently, Bolivian democracy– into jeopardy from two directions. On the one hand, the embracing of the polity's cultural pluralism legitimized pre-existing ethnic or regionalist claims against the central state's authority. On the other hand, the turning away from the 1952 national state model (particularly the state's economic functions) were resisted by those who least benefited from neoliberalism and, hence, clung to the previous national imaginary. In short, the very success of the democratic transition weakened the state's claim to sovereign authority. This is what I call the paradox of democratization.[14] The very process of a transition to democracy asks citizens to imagine for themselves a better political community, to imagine a democratic polity markedly different from the one they experience. A democratic transition is, then, a process of political imagining. But because democracy is (in large measure) a method of open political contestation, this form of political imagining takes on a more fluid and chaotic character. Different visions of a 'new Bolivia' emerge and compete against each other in the political arena. And as with any political competition, there are winners and losers.

One way to understand the current Bolivian political conflict is as the struggle between different competing national imaginaries. I identify at least three different competing discourses. The

[14] This 'paradox' is also similar to the 'dilemma' of pluralist democracy identified by Robert Dahl (see Dahl 1982), which pits the competing claims of a need for political authority and individual autonomy.

first is the older national-corporatist discourse inherited from 1952, with its emphasis on a single national community and state control over natural resources. Another is the new liberal-pluralist discourse that emphasizes a multiculturally diverse society based on individual (not collective) rights and a *laissez faire* state. The third is a sectarian community discourse based on smaller, more local attachments based on shared cultural identity. This discourse has several manifestations in Bolivia. One is the set of various indigenous discourses that challenges the 'neocolonial' Bolivian state and calls for political autonomy for indigenous communities. The other includes the regionalist discourses coming from places like Santa Cruz or Tarija, which similarly challenge the 'centralist' Bolivian state and demand regional political autonomy and self-government.

As these competing discourses clash, the continued existence of a single polity can come into open question. And if democratization emphasizes the rights of self-determination and popular sovereignty, how can a democratic state legitimately prevent a Balkanization of politics? If democracy is consolidated when it becomes 'the only game in town' as Linz and Stepan (1996) argue, what prevents the political players from taking their ball and going home? Even if democracy is the only game in town, does it have to be played on one field? Or can it be played on two or more fields? At the heart of this democratization paradox is the problem of democracy in societies that are culturally divided –and particularly when those divisions coincide with economic divisions. In the Bolivian case, with hydrocarbons heavily concentrated in one region of the country, the availability of competing political discourses means that disaffected regional leaders who become 'losers' in the national arena can simply adopt a different, regional discourse and claim that they are, in fact, a different national community altogether. This is as true for indigenous proponents of a Kollasuyu as it is for regionalist proponents of a Nación Camba.

The October 2003 protests marked a return to a national discourse reminiscent of 1952. Evo Morales and his supporters are less part of a 'new' wave of socialist governments in the region than a

return to the principles of the Bolivian national revolution. It is not surprising that the core principal demand of the *guerra del gas* protest involved the loss of national control over the very resource Bolivians fought to defend in the 1932-1935 war with Paraguay. Similarly, calls by regional leaders in Santa Cruz and Tarija for secession in defense the right to exploit and export 'their' resources as they wish were met by counter-claims by Andean Bolivians that 'their' blood was spilled in defense of this 'national' resource. The current conflict over natural gas exports is thus transported into 'homogeneous empty time' through a process of collective imagining and the mythos of the collective suffering and struggle in the trenches of the Chaco is made present. It is no surprise that Morales' discourse is less socialist than nationalist –when he speaks of 'recovering' of the nation's resources he echoes the founding fathers of post-Chaco Bolivian nationalism.

In contrast, a growing number of Bolivians (particularly in Santa Cruz and Tarija) have begun embracing a new communal identity. Often, this identity is referenced in opposition to an 'Andean' Bolivian identity.[15] This new identity is supported by a competing 'national imaginary' constructed in much the way as described in Anderson's model. In the past ten years, a series of monuments to regional heroes have gone up throughout Santa Cruz, along with a renaissance of regional folk culture in public festivals, and even in history museums and other academic establishments such as literature.[16] It should come as no surprise, then, that regionalist calls for secession to establish a 'Camba Nation' resonate with much of the region's population. Ironically, the regionalist discourses are further reinforced by the liberal-pluralist discourse that consciously emphasizes all the country's cultural differences. In large measure, the quest for Bolivia's political

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[15] Interestingly, this 'anti-Andean' discourse is remarkably similar to the 'anti-colonial' indigenous discourse. Like the latter, the regionalist discourse denounces the 'exploitation' of the political capital (La Paz) and its attempt to 'impose' its culture (the image of Bolivia as an 'Andean nation').

[16] In recent years, television newscasts in Santa Cruz have consciously chosen to use regional dialect, rather than 'standard' Spanish. There is also a dictionary of the regional *camba* dialect. All this closely resembles the process of nation-building described by Anderson 1991.

stability depends on the acceptance by an increasingly fractured population that they do in fact comprise one single political community, and not two or more such communities.

(Re)imagining Bolivia?

The upcoming constituent assembly elections (set for July) may serve as a conduit for a new political reimagining of Bolivia as a political community. This will depend, in large measure, on whether enough political will exists among competing political elites to continue as part of a single political community. Here, the long-standing attachment to national identity plays a powerful role. Though the post-1952 Bolivian nation was 'imagined' (in the way Anderson describes), it nevertheless holds a strong attachment among most citizens of Bolivia. Calls for outright secession either have received limited support or have been tempered into demands for local, regional political 'autonomy.' Here, the recent election of departmental prefects –the first ever in Bolivia's history– and the government's acceptance to hold a referendum on the question of regional political autonomies have gone a long way towards appeasing regionalist demands.

Nevertheless, the way in which Bolivians have described the constituent assembly –as a place to 'refound Bolivia'– suggests that the process can be understood as a process of political imagining. The 255 delegates elected to the constituent assembly will be tasked with establishing a new polity that can accommodate competing political discourses. One of the assembly's first tasks will no doubt be to define the nature and scope of the new political community. This will mean articulating a clear conception of the *demos*. It will also mean articulating a clear conception of a 'Bolivian' national community. Of course, they could also come to an impasse and decide that they represent very different –even opposing– political communities. The outcome is unknown.

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