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Ch'ixi landscapes: Indigeneity and capitalism in the Bolivian Chaco

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary debates around the ontological turn have pitted efforts to take indigenous ontologies seriously against demands to make visible the forms of dispossession and environmental suffering that characterize the (post)colonial and capitalist present. Meanwhile, a growing array of governmental projects seeks to identify and protect indigenous ontologies *in the face of* capitalist development processes, including through forms of collective tenure. How can we make sense of such initiatives, and what kind of territories do they encounter and produce? This paper engages this question ethnographically through an examination of everyday life in a legally recognized Native Community Land in the Bolivian Chaco. Drawing on Bolivian Aymara scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's notion of *ch'ixi*, I argue that indigenous territories are neither ontologically separate from, nor entirely subsumed by, capitalist development processes. Rather, they are subject to multiple land values, ontologies, and investments. A contested indigenous land titling process, capitalist labor relations, hydrocarbon compensation money, and efforts to maintain relations with spirit beings are all interwoven in the fabric of Guaraní everyday life. Such *ch'ixi* landscapes emerge at the confluence of capitalist efforts at rendering territories investable, governmental efforts at managing dispossession, and Guaraní efforts to maintain life and exercise territorial sovereignty amidst contradictory processes of (post)colonial governmentality.

1. Introduction

The so-called "ontological turn" in anthropology has reignited debates about how scholars engage and represent indigenous peoples and territories. Proponents have argued for "taking other ontologies seriously" – that is, moving beyond traditional notions of cultural difference to acknowledge that indigenous peoples inhabit and produce different worlds. Critics, on the other hand, have argued that such approaches rest on a reified notion of indigenous alterity that occludes the economic and environmental processes that shape real indigenous peoples' lives. The importance of such debates goes beyond academia, given that ideas about ontological difference underpin a range of political and governmental projects – particularly those targeting indigenous populations. Rather than debating the relationship between indigeneity and capitalism at a theoretical level, policy debates have tended to focus on how to protect indigenous life-worlds *in the context of* capitalist development processes. Such efforts to recognize and protect ontological difference form part of the empirical realities that many anthropologists seek to describe.

Recent initiatives to map and title "indigenous" or "tribal" communal territories are a case in point. Implemented across diverse postcolonial contexts, collective indigenous territories are often depicted and valued as sites of alternative, non-capitalist ontologies of land. In the context of contemporary land grabs, some proponents are calling for an expansion of indigenous and customary tenure rights across the globe (Rights and Resources Initiative, 2015a). But what do such initiatives achieve and what kind of territories do they produce? Do they prevent the penetration of capitalist development processes or enable non-capitalist ontologies and land values to flourish? Or do they merely obscure on-going processes of capitalist territorialization, echoing the erasures of some ontological turn scholarship? More broadly, what do communal territories tell us about the relationship between indigeneity and capitalism at the current global conjuncture?

This paper addresses these questions ethnographically through an analysis of everyday life in the Guaraní community of Tarairí, located in Bolivia's remote and gas-rich Chaco region. Tarairí is one 36 communities that make up the Native Community Land (Tierra Comunitaria de Origen – TCO) "Itika Guasu". Like many communal titling programs, TCOs designate land as "outside of the market" and were framed by global funders as a means of protecting indigenous cultures and livelihoods from ongoing processes of marketization. In practice, however, TCOs have failed to

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prevent indigenous territories being incorporated in and transformed by such processes. Nor have they resolved colonial legacies of racialized land inequality, which place severe constraints on indigenous livelihoods. Rather than acting as a container for ontological difference, TCOs are subject to multiple and competing land values, ontologies and investments. A contested land titling process, capitalist labor relations, financial agreements with oil companies, and efforts to maintain relations with non-human actors are all interwoven in the fabric of Guaraní everyday life.

These everyday realities demonstrate that indigenous lives do not unfold on a separate ontological plane, but are deeply imbricated in the colonial-capitalist present. Moreover, it is not only capitalist relations that penetrate indigenous communities, but also governmental efforts to recognize and protect indigenous ontologies in their wake. This double movement constitutes a complex terrain for indigenous struggles for self-determination. Drawing on Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera's concept of *ch'ixi* – a term that denotes the juxtaposition of contrasting elements – I argue that indigenous lives are neither ontologically separate nor fully subsumed by the modern, but rather entail fraught negotiations with, and everyday endurance amidst, contradictory processes of postcolonial governmentality.

2. Other worlds? The ontological turn and its critics

While contemporary discussions of ontology are diverse,[2] an important strand of anthropological work is a "reinvigorated engagement with radical alterity" and a call to "take other ontologies seriously" (Blaser, 2014). Influenced by the perspectivist approach of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and grounded in a rejection of a "thin" understanding of culture-as-identity, this body of scholarship rejects the modernist idea of cultural difference as multiple perspectives on the same reality, arguing instead for the existence of multiple realities or worlds (Viveiros de Castro, 1998: 478; see also 2012). Indigenous peoples have been a central object of, if not central participants in, such debates, where ontology is often used "to signal a difference between a given Indigenous group and various agents of western modernization/colonization" (Blaser, 2014: 51).[3] Ontological turn scholarship challenges the epistemic asymmetries that have historically marked scholarly engagements with indigenous peoples, calling on the ethnographer to rethink her analytical concepts in symmetrical dialogue with other ways of understanding reality (Blaser, 2010). It also highlights the importance of place, counteracting a tendency in some Marxian-inspired political ecology work to assume that local dynamics are always derivative of extralocal forces (Coombes et al., 2012).

Yet, the ontological turn has also produced powerful critiques. Bessire and Bond (2014) argue that its construction of ontological difference rests on a targeted erasure of ethnographic evidence, which obscures the economic and environmental processes that shape real indigenous peoples' lives. They make this point forcefully in relation to the question of environmental suffering. Observing that "many of the more corrosive consequences of industrialization are unfolding in those areas long believed to be most pristine" (446), they argue that ontological anthropology's division between modern and non-modern forms is "incapable of accounting for those disruptive beings and things that travel between ontologies", which includes the impacts of logging, mining, agriculture, and oil extraction.

But does a recognition of the economic, social and ecological effects of globalized capitalism necessarily stand in opposition to the notion of ontological difference? Bolivian Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui provides an alternative to this binary, depicting a Bolivian socio-cultural reality in which indigeneity is *present amongst*, but not subsumed by, the modern. She describes this using the Aymara word *ch'ixi*, which denotes "a color that is the product of juxtaposition, in small points or spots, of two opposed or contrasting colors... ch'ixi combines the Indian world and its opposite without ever mixing them" (Ibid: 105). What emerges is "the parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not extinguish but instead antagonize and complement each other" (Ibid.). In her account, ontological difference does not exist apart from the modern, but rather permeates it, providing a basis from which to transform and decolonize the present and future.

Bolivian sociologist Rene Zavaleta's (1986) concept of a *sociedad abigarrada* (motley society), which Rivera Cusicanqui references, similarly stresses how indigenous socio-cultural formations are asymmetrically articulated with, rather than separate from, relations of colonialism, capitalism and modernity. A similar point is made by Marisol de la Cadena, who draws on Marilyn Strathern's concept of "partial connection" to examine indigeneity in the Andes as "a complex formation, a historic-political articulation of more than one, but less than two, socionatural worlds" (2010: 347; see also de la Cadena, 2015). In the very different context of Eastern Zimbabwe, Donald Moore (2005) uses the concept of "entangled landscapes" to describe the co-existence of multiple spatialities and sovereignties emergent from a complex history of colonial rule and postcolonial governmentality. Audra Simpson makes a similar argument with regards to sovereignty, insisting that "Indigenous sovereignties and Indigenous political orders prevail within and apart from settler governance" (2014: 10–11).

Rivera Cusicanqui's concept of *ch'ixi* provides a useful lens through which to understand the everyday entanglements of indigeneity and capitalism in indigenous territories of the Bolivian Chaco. Yet, a focus on indigenous territories also highlights another important point. Ideas about ontological difference are not just a theoretical proposition; their mobilization in governmental projects has played an important role in *shaping* the political, cultural and ecological landscapes that many indigenous peoples today inhabit. Indeed, this is part of the critique. Bessire and Bond (2014) warn that the ontological turn bolsters contemporary forms of governmentality that designate particular socio-natures as worthy or not of protection. Rivera Cusicanqui grounds her concept of *ch'ixi* in a critique of the political effects of multicultural tropes of indigeneity, which award indigenous peoples "a residual status that, in fact, converts them into minorities, ensnaring them in indigenist stereotypes of the noble savage and as guardians of nature" (2012: 99). Audra Simpson is equally scathing of "notions of lost worlds, worlds of yesterday, of perfect timeless tradition, that sets up an impossible burden of proof for Indigenous claimants today" (2014: 163). She highlights the need for a "historical accounting" of how such ideas have been complicit in colonial forms of governmentality predicated on indigenous dispossession.

As such, approaching indigenous territories as an ethnographic object requires first examining how particular ideas about indigeneity have been operationalized in their production. Rather than examining the processes of subject-formation this has entailed, my account focuses on the ambivalent positioning of Bolivia's TCOs in relation to ongoing processes of capitalist development. As the next section demonstrates, TCOs mobilized unrealistic global expectations for indigenous socio-natures, while failing to prevent

[2] This includes recent geographical scholarship influenced by Science and Technology Studies (STS), Deleuzian philosophy, and phenomenological approaches.

[3] Insofar as indigenous ontologies are associated with relations with non-human entities (whether spirit beings, animals or plants), such work resonates with broader geographical discussions of more-than-human agency. In this sense, the concept of "ontology" bridges distinct approaches to thinking "beyond the human" (Kohn, 2015) – a project in which Indigenous scholarship is given a privileged value.

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