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Between autonomy and heteronomy: Navigating peasant and indigenous organizations in contemporary Bolivia

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Abstract

This article analyses the Bolivian rural actors' projects and practices of autonomy. Autonomy is a polysemic concept and concrete projects—and their manifestations—of collective autonomy can only be defined, discussed, and evaluated based on specific understandings attributed to the notion by different collectivities. The authors explore the meanings of autonomy for indigenous and peasant agents in contemporary Bolivia, and to what extent their capacity to advance collective projects of autonomy was enhanced or hindered under Morales' government (2006–2019). The article's focus is the unfolding of these projects in relation to two of the main institutions of modern societies: state and market. The Bolivian case provides insights for the complexities that surround the concept of autonomy and its constant tension with heteronomy.

KEYWORDS

autonomy, Bolivia, heteronomy, market, peasant and indigenous organizations, state

1 | INTRODUCTION

Evo Morales' election as president of Bolivia in 2005 and the electoral victory of his party, the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), have been widely portrayed as the successful culmination of a protest cycle against neoliberalism and the triumph of radical politics that had as central actors the peasant and indigenous organizations. Morales'

government changed the structure of political opportunities for collective action of these groups, for example, through a Constituent Assembly process with widespread popular participation.

This project of “refoundation” of the Bolivian state and economy opened a wide debate on whether it represented the realization of popular sovereignty and the utmost attainment of collective autonomy or, on the contrary, that peasant and indigenous organizations had been co-opted and lost autonomy under Morales' government. Both arguments, however, oversimplify the nature of state and civil society relations in Bolivian history and lose sight of important dimensions of the notion of autonomy.

This article aims to offer a more complex understanding of Bolivian rural actors' projects and practices of autonomy. For that, we propose two questions: first, what are the meanings of autonomy for indigenous and peasant agents in Bolivia; second, to what extent the Morales' government (2006–2019) enhanced or hindered their capacity to advance collective projects of autonomy. We focus on the unfolding of these projects in relation to two of the main institutions of modern societies: state and market.¹ This, in turn, will allow us to provide new insights for the debate around autonomy, illustrating through the Bolivian case some of the complexities that surround the concept.

Our approach builds on Castoriadis' (1975) notion that autonomy is not something that can be fully realized: it is inherently a project. Furthermore, it is a project in a permanent, co-constitutive and conflictive relation to its opposite, heteronomy. While the discourse of modernity is firmly based on the promise of autonomy, the actual workings of modern institutions, such as the state and the market, have constraining effects on autonomy projects, which ultimately can lead to its opposite, heteronomy. Hence, the overarching structures of modernity and its practices create the permanent threat of *self-cancellation* of its promises (Wagner, 1994, pp. 5–6, 65).² As we will argue, throughout history this tension between autonomy and heteronomy was a constant in the dealings of Bolivian indigenous and peasant communities with the state and the market.

Additionally, we assume that autonomy is a polysemic concept that can significantly vary in time and space. As such, concrete projects—and their manifestations—of collective autonomy can only be defined and discussed based on specific understandings attributed to autonomy by different collectivities in particular circumstances. In other words, it is only in the context of a series of institutions, social relations, and political practices that actual—although always provisional—meanings of autonomy are defined.

Accordingly, the analysis adopts a relational and historical approach, articulating a broad and normative meaning of autonomy as the capacity of collectivities to choose and decide about their destinies and to give themselves their own law (Castoriadis, 1975; Domingues, 2019), with specific projects of autonomy in Bolivia. As we will see, the Bolivian case illustrates what González and Burguete Cal y Mayor (2010, p. 9) point out for the Latin American case: the presence of various ways by which autonomy has been assumed in discourses and practices. Hence, “it is better to think of ‘autonomies’ as a multicoloured image with culturally constructed contents and meanings.”

Bolivia's rural population (32% in the 2012 census) is composed of a plurality of groups with distinctive worldviews, forms of organization, and engagements with state and market. To develop our argument, we resort to a simplification of this plurality in two broad categories: Indigenous Organizations and Peasant Syndicalist Organizations. This categorization does not refer to the practical identity of the members of these organizations but to the politicized collective identity that they publicly assert.³ These are not homogeneous actors: actual practices and projects of autonomy of its members vary greatly. Sometimes, they are even in tension at different levels of analysis (national, regional, local, and household) and according to a series of power relations among them (such as those based on

¹This distinction between state and market adopted is only an analytical one, as the workings of these institutions and the projects of autonomy related to them are inherently imbricated.

²Debates on the autonomy-heteronomy relations date back to the Enlightenment writings; being articulated by classic authors such as Marx and Weber; and reaching its full development in the writings of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Foucault. Besides variations, the main argument is that modern institutions had led to the (more or less) unintended self-limitation and, for some, the cancellation of its central promises (Wagner, 1994).

³Collective identities have different configurations, which can be practical, systematized and politicized. As Domingues (2008, p. 89) points out, “Collective identities exist often as basically woven by practical reflexivity, shared memories, and practices in daily life, as well as by their daily reinvention. [...] They may be rationalized, whereby their specific elements are reorganized, some aspects stressed, older memories recovered, while other elements are disregarded or even discarded. Beyond that there may happen the politicization of collective subjectivity, which may acquire distinct contents [...]. In all these forms, identities may intersect, overlap, in as much as they are not exclusive.”

gender, class, and ethnicity). Accordingly, it is not possible to cover in one article the multiplicity of meanings of autonomy for rural agents in Bolivia. While we acknowledge the relevance of struggles for autonomy at the micro-level, given our objectives, we adopt a macrolevel analytic lens. We limit our analysis to the demands and projects put forward by the main indigenous and peasant organizations at the national level, as they were the ones with more chances to be reflected into public policies.

In relation to the concept of market, we adopt a sociological framework that, in opposition to the neoclassical concept of an abstract price mechanism, understands the market as a historical social structure. Its characteristics depend on relationships among actors who share practices, cognitive frameworks, and formal and informal rules (Smelser & Swedberg, 2005). To analyze indigenous and peasants' understanding of economic autonomy, it is very useful Polanyi's concept (1992) of multiple economic configurations. Economic orders are understood as diverse combinations of four principles of integration and institutional patterns: exchange with competence (market), redistribution (centrality), reciprocity (asymmetry), and subsistence (autarky). The boundaries and dynamics of markets depend on how the four patterns are integrated in time and space. From this analytical lens, the neoliberal market is one institution among other possibilities and, most importantly, it may be changed by collective action.

The concept of the state can be defined according to two different levels of analysis: the functional and the institutional. We adopt an institutional perspective,⁴ following Weber's (1978) ideal type of the state as characterized by four main features: a differentiated set of institutions and an administrative framework, the centralization of power, a territorially defined area where it operates, and the monopoly of authoritarian coercive domination. In other words, we understand the state as a political community that has a political apparatus of government ruling over a given territory, whose authority is backed by a legal system and by the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. However, as we will see, Bolivian rural actors' projects and practices of autonomy, both historically and currently, challenge these elements, therefore disputing this definition of the state.

Our main claim regarding the first question proposed is that the organizations analysed in this article have at the core of their projects of autonomy a transformative engagement with the main institutions of modernity which structures and functioning pose permanent threats of heteronomy. Politically, their projects of autonomy entail not only self-government but also inclusion and direct participation within the state to transform its *status quo*. In the economic realm, the framing of autonomy is not withdrawal from or integration into neoliberal markets. They struggle for changing the rules and policies that have sustained the neoliberal market and to get their distinct economic organizations, practices, and worldviews acknowledged as legitimate within an alternative economic order. Their demands for participation in market and state problematize the dominant understandings not only of these institutions but also of autonomy.

In relation to the second question, we argue that the strengthening of the indigenous and peasant autonomy projects was sidelined in the public policies and the governance model implemented by Morales's government. However, this fact did not result in a total loss of autonomy by these groups. Instead, it reflects the persistence of a tension between autonomy and heteronomy which has characterized the dealings of Bolivian indigenous and peasant communities with the state and the market.

This article is organized in four parts. The first briefly presents the historical background of Bolivian peasant and indigenous actors up to the beginning of Evo Morales' government. Based on qualitative methods⁵ and the critical review of documents and secondary literature, we point out how they engaged with state and market, highlighting the degrees of autonomy that they have managed to retain in relation to both institutions. We then analyse their main political and economic demands,⁶ exploring the meanings of autonomy that were translated into expectations

⁴As Weber (1978, p. 55) indicates, "It is not possible to define a political organization, including the state, in terms of the end to which its action is devoted," as these vary enormously among states and can be shared with other forms of associations, including non-political ones. Therefore, we do not focus on the functions of the state when defining it.

⁵This article relies on interviews, fieldwork, and ethnographic studies conducted by the authors with different rural actors across Bolivia, in the context of various research projects.

⁶Bolivian rural organizations also relate autonomy to a series of cultural demands that, while extremely relevant, will not be discussed here.

under Morales' government. In the third part we discuss to what extent, during the MAS government, the capacity of rural actors to advance their collective projects of autonomy were enhanced or hindered. We do so through an analysis of policy making and implementation related to the rural sector, and the patterns of state-rural organizations' interaction. Finally, we present the conclusions.

2 | BOLIVIAN INDIGENOUS AND PEASANT ACTORS: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The most prominent Indigenous Organizations at the national level are the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (CIDOB) and the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ).⁷ For the Peasant Syndicalist Organizations, the main representatives are the Unified Syndical Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB),⁸ the Syndical Confederation of Intercultural Communities of Bolivia (CSCIB),⁹ and the Confederation of Coca Producers of the Cochabamba Tropics (CPCTC).¹⁰

These organizations represent at the national level local community governments, which have been recognized, in different degrees and forms, by the Bolivian state (Albó, 1999, 2000).¹¹ Historically, these governments have played two main roles: regulation of the social, economic, and political relations of the group of people who live in a given territory; and political representation of these people in their dealings with the state. As we will point out, they have always been able to maintain significant (although varied) levels of political and economic autonomy.

In colonial times, highlands' local community governments (the *ayllus*) kept their collective territories and their own forms of political, social, and economic organization, enjoying to a great extent an autonomous collective life. However, they were also incorporated into the colonial order, mainly through the payment of taxes and by providing unpaid labour to the government. These practices persisted in the first decades of republican life (1825–1880). Far from considering this an abuse, the communities saw it as a *reciprocity pact* with the state, by which they paid tributes and provided workers in exchange for state recognition of their collective ownership of their lands (Platt, 1982). Their relative autonomy persisted, not as a result of a retreat from the state but precisely of their contacts with it. Until the late nineteenth century, the highland communities were, dialectically, autonomous and heteronomous agents.

In 1880, Bolivia's elites pressured the government to invalidate the community property system. They argued that the communities constituted an obstacle to the creation of a free market of land and labour and precluded the consolidation of commercial agriculture. A new agrarian policy was established to “rationalize” land tenure and “modernize” the country's agricultural production through the dissolution of the *ayllus* and their replacement by a new regime of ‘agrarian capitalism’” (Platt, 1982, p. 37). The liberalization of the land market, based on individual property titles, led to an increasing concentration of land.

The new agrarian policies affected not only the indigenous communities' land rights and livelihoods but also threatened their social and political organization, as its reproduction was closely related with collective forms of land tenure. The communities, however, resisted. Between 1910s and 1930s, there were a series of indigenous uprisings demanding the “restitution of communal lands usurped by the *hacienda* (...) the presence of Indian representatives in

⁷CIDOB, created in 1982, is the main representative of local and regional organizations of Bolivia's lowland indigenous groups. CONAMAQ, created in 1997, represents the *ayllus* federations of the Altiplano.

⁸The CSUTCB is the largest Bolivian rural organization and has the most diverse constituency. Created in 1979, it unifies peasant unions all over the country.

⁹Created in 1971 as the Union Confederation of Bolivian Settlers, the organisation exchanged “Settlers” for Intercultural Communities in 2008, aiming to reflect the cultural diversity of its members. Its constituency are peasant unions of communities of migrants which settled in the tropical and eastern zones of Bolivia since the late 1950s.

¹⁰CPCTC, created in 1992, represents coca growers of six federations in Cochabamba. Two of these federations are members of the CSUTCB, while the other four are affiliated to the CSCIB.

¹¹Local community governments are known by different names depending on their social and cultural characteristics: unions, *ayllus*, *capitanias*, peasant and indigenous communities, among other terms.

the Congress and in the local power instances (...), and free access to the market” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1984, p. 52). In the process of resistance, they revitalized “the traditional communal authority systems that liberal legislation sought to abolish” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1984, p. 38).

In what concerns the eastern lowlands, during the colonial period the region was almost exclusively inhabited by indigenous people except for a few members of the Catholic church aiming to “civilize” them through the mission system. Different from their highland's counterparts, most of the lowlands' indigenous groups were nomadic hunter gatherers and did not engage with the state or the market. However, in the late nineteenth century, with the liberalization of the land market and the “rubber boom,” the region gained a new economic potential and acquired relevance for the Bolivian state. The government distributed land concessions to private entrepreneurs to exploit its natural resources (Lema, 1998). As a result, the number of whites and mestizos who settled in the area increased, and the indigenous population were forced to work in the rubber plantations. Hence, since the last decades of the nineteenth century, the autonomy of the indigenous peoples of the eastern lowlands was severely restricted, as they lost their territories and were increasingly surrounded and exploited by religious and private economic agents.

With the National Revolution of 1952, a new project of state and society, as well as of the relationship between them, emerged. The revolutionary nationalist government actively promoted the reorganization of society along corporative lines, replacing the indigenous forms of organization with peasant unions. In 1953, responding to the mounting societal pressure by rural actors, an agrarian reform was enacted, transferring the land from large farms to them through their unions.¹² Access to land was articulated through class categories.

In almost all the country, the *hacienda* system was abolished, and the farmer class extremely weakened, while a new class of communal peasant owners was strengthened. The peasant unions acquired centrality in the mediation between rural communities, the state and the market. However, in most rural areas, the unions coexisted and articulated with the communal structures. The attempt to substitute community organizations with unions failed, with the emergence of hybrid models that allowed, once again, the persistence of indigenous forms of social, economic, and political organization.

Another central goal of the revolutionary nationalist government was the expansion of the agricultural frontier by encouraging the immigration of the Andean population towards the eastern lowlands. Since the 1960s, lands formerly occupied by the indigenous people were granted to a myriad of actors. This triggered a new process of exploitation of the local indigenous labour force. In addition, the migration of peasant families from the highlands imposed a system of parcel production and private land ownership, contributing to the process of deterritorialization of the indigenous peoples of the region (Patzí, 1999).

Since the 1980s, a new politicized collective identity emerged, articulating ethnic and national belongings. Rural and urban community organizations rebuilt themselves around it, based on the restoration of indigenous practices and memory to replace the class reference that had predominated in previous decades.¹³ One important milestone in this process of social reconfiguring was the “March for Territory and Dignity” by the Indigenous Organizations of the eastern lowlands, under the leadership of CIDOB, in 1990. The importance of this march is reflected in the legal changes and policies adopted by subsequent governments. In the early 1990s, Bolivia ratified the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 on the rights of indigenous peoples and legally recognized the first

¹²On the protagonism of rural actors in bringing about the Agrarian Reform, see Soliz (2021), Urioste et al. (2007), and Gotkowitz (2007).

¹³In the political realm, the main historical practices are a rotative system of leadership and an assembly, with decisions taken collectively based on direct participation, deliberation, and consensus. On the economic dimension, the collective land ownership, labour relationship, and the collective management of commons are central features. Labour institutions within the community include the *chunca* (putting teams together to work the land), *mita* (the obligation to take one's turn to perform farm work and other duties), *minca* and *ayni* (working for the benefit of the community or an individual, to be paid back later in kind), *departir* (an arrangement related to the working of agricultural land, usually between someone who owns draught animals and someone who has land but no animals to plough it), *waki* (an arrangement for agricultural work, usually settled at harvest time by allocating alternate furrows), *sattakha* (setting aside a furrow at the edge of the *legua-kallpa* or small plot of land, to be used by certain people) and *kala* (exchange of *leguas-kallpas* between community members with the aim of obtaining plots of land nearer to their houses and thus easier to work). While some of these organizational features existed since colonial times, they became articulated with other political and economic practices. For instance, currently collective and individual forms of land property coexist. Also, besides maintaining their political forms of organization within the community, their members now participate as representatives in different levels of government, mainly in the local administrations.

indigenous territories. The 1994 Constitution acknowledged the multicultural and pluriethnic nature of the country. New legislation was passed in the following years, including the bilingual intercultural education reform, and state restructuring laws, which promoted the political and administrative integration of rural and indigenous communities and the establishment of collective areas for specific ethnic groups, called Indigenous Community Territories (TCO).

These progressive reforms were, however, made under the hegemony of neoliberalism. Structural adjustment policies, privatization, the rollback of the already fragile welfare state, and labour market deregulation laid the foundations for the loss of legitimacy of successive governments and the convergence of social movements around a shared agenda. This social energy gained impetus in the 2000s, when civil society organizations mobilized in defence of community-managed territorial resources and for the control of public goods such as land, water, and oil and gas deposits.

In this cycle of protest, Indigenous and Peasant Syndicalist Organizations forged strong ties among them, and with new emerging organizations (such as the Coordinating Committee for Water and Life) and older and urban ones (such as the Federation of Neighbourhood Committees). One key demand was a Constituent Assembly for the refoundation of the state and the economy, based on the collective principles and values espoused by rural communities. In 2004, they formed the Pact of Unity, with the aim of articulating different popular actors. They gave their backing to the MAS, reflecting the party's ability to channel the political demands of grassroots civil society organizations.

The Indigenous and Peasant Syndicalist Organizations that we analyse in this article were central players in this cycle of protest that culminated in Morales' election. They had high expectations that their historical agendas would be incorporated into state policies. That is, that their autonomy projects would be enhanced. To examine to what extent was the case, we need first to establish what these projects were.

3 | INDIGENOUS AND PEASANT AUTONOMY: PROJECTS AND MEANINGS

As we saw, since colonial times Bolivia rural actors have managed to retain significant degrees of autonomy both in relation to the state and the market. This autonomy, however, was never unambiguously and homogeneously defined or experienced. Neither it was free from conflicts with and resistance from other political and socio-economic actors. As such, their history is one of permanent mobilization to defend, expand, and consolidate their ability of defining the terms of their existence as active collectivities. In this long-term struggle, they developed particular framings and projects of autonomy. There is, undeniably, some overlapping. Most notably, national Indigenous and Peasant Syndicalist Organizations did not seek to retreat from state and market. Instead, they demanded participation into these institutions but on their own and favourable terms. However, there are important differences in what "participation" and "favourable terms" meant, as well as the proposed ways to achieve it.

One of the Indigenous Organizations main demands has been the collective ownership of a *territory* and the right to manage it according to their "uses and customs." The main demand of Peasant Syndicalist Organizations has been land distribution and the right to manage it within their community governments.

For the Indigenous Organizations, a *territory* is not only the basis for material reproduction in the "economicist" sense attributed to the concept of *land*. It is also an essential space for the reproduction of their culture and identities, and the exercise of their right to self-determination. The quest for territory involves a claim to *relative autonomy* substantiated in the right to manage these territories according to their own interests and forms of social, political, and economic organization. In other words, the indigenous demand for territory is not only limited to the collective ownership of land but also includes the right, within these spaces, to adopt their systems of political authority, to explore the resources within it as they see fit, and to apply their own forms of justice, among other features. As such, it is a demand for autonomy: a claim to the right to define and live under their own rules, actively and collectively deciding about their destiny (Castoriadis, 1975).

The Peasant Syndicalist Organizations have claimed land distribution and the right to manage it according to their community government rules and practices. The claim for land entails both the access to new lands and the titling of those already occupied, including both individual titles of property for small rural producers and collective land rights. In their discourses, the access to land is often framed in terms of autonomy, understood as the private ownership of their means of production to halt peasant exploitation by other actors, and the regulation of land rights—both individual and collective by local governments as a protective measure against a free land market. In comparison to indigenous organizations, their understanding of autonomy (and of its opposite, heteronomy) emphasizes the economic dimension, focussing on the exploitative dynamics of class relations in rural areas.¹⁴

For the CSCIB and one of its most prominent sectors, the coca grower's federations, the demand for communal land rights is not a relevant one. While deeply inserted in political communal dynamics, the members of these communities almost exclusively rely on individual land plots for their productive activities. As we will discuss later, the main demand of the coca grower's movement has been the defence of their livelihood, translated into the right to produce the coca leaf in their private "chacos." Collective land rights and the respect for their differentiated forms of organization—issues central to contemporary indigenous and peasant movements in Bolivia—were never part of their demands (Guimarães, 2014).

Individual small private property and collective land rights are inserted in the relatively autonomous communal organization of political and economic life in most Bolivian rural zones. To hold land, property owners must accomplish collective roles within the community government, otherwise they may lose it. Additionally, although the law allows for it, in practice they cannot freely sell their land without consulting the community. Thus, local framing of "individual titles of property" questions liberal understandings of it.

The claim for territory and land distribution is related to the demand for control and management of common renewable natural resources within it. This demand has been central for both types of organizations. The Indigenous Organizations also claim the right to prior and informed consultation, through their own institutions, for the exploitation of the non-renewable resources within their territory. Additionally, they have demanded that companies exploiting these resources paid compensation for environmental, social, and economic damages (Bazoberry, 2016; Fernández & Puente, 2012; Lavaud, 2007). Territory, land distribution, communal government, and control and management of common resources are intertwined and at the core of their concept of autonomy.

Another central demand of indigenous and peasant organizations has been market participation in their own terms. In fact, since the colonial period, rural actors have been involved with monetary exchange (Larson & Harris, 1995). However, their engagement in market transactions has not implied abandoning other principles of economic interaction such as reciprocity, centrality, and autarky. Even more interesting, these practices allowed them to develop a distinctive understanding of market institution from a liberal one.

Indigenous and peasant organizations have relentlessly struggled to protect their economic practices and meanings through different strategies. One of them has been the transformation of mainstream market rules and regulations through two main demands: first, a legal framework that acknowledges their different forms of economic organizations from traditional privately owned businesses or state-owned companies (such as Community Economic Organization and Peasant Indigenous Economic Organization); and second, normative changes and policies oriented to promote their alternative practices of ownership, labour relations, price setting mechanisms, and distribution of earnings.

Community Economic Organization (OECOM), claimed by Indigenous Organizations, is the economic arm of community governments. The main goal of OECOM is to get every community member involved in the enterprise and to guarantee fair exchange and commercialization for their communal production. The OECOM reveals how community regulation and redistribution (centrality), subsistence production (autarky), production to sell (market),

¹⁴This framing of the land question, dominant dates to the 1952 Revolution, and its class reading of Bolivian rural problems. The notion that "the land belongs to those who work it," (Ticona, 1995, p. 211) emphasizes the economic dimension over the cultural and the political ones.

and mutual care and reciprocity (asymmetry) are intertwined with transforming market structure and strengthening territorial self-management (Wanderley, 2019).

Peasant Indigenous Economic Organizations (OECAs) bring together families of a rural community (or neighbour communities) with similar economic interests. Peasant, indigenous, and family units advanced a lengthy campaign for the recognition of OECA as a form of economic organization based on a model of development of solidarity and reciprocal production for food sovereignty. Self-management, rotating leadership among members, general assembly decision making, collective price setting consultation, and communal revenue distribution are some of OECA's main practices. Members understand that prices set collectively are fair and stable, in contrast to those set by intermediaries or conventional enterprises. Part of the revenue is reinvested in the association and the rest is redistributed in cash or under the form of services such as health insurance, training courses, or scholarships for the members' children (Pari, 2017; Flores & Ton, 2015; Wanderley, 2019). OECAs, formed by family units, reveal how production to sell (market); subsistence production (autarky); association, economic regulation, and redistribution (centrality); and mutual care and reciprocity (asymmetry) are entangled in transforming market structure (Wanderley, 2019).

Their search for economic autonomy goes beyond the three types of coping economic strategies—*avoid*, *create*, and *integrate*—proposed by Vergara-Camus (2017) and reveals a fourth alternative—*transform*. The latter is distinct from *integrating* market relations or *avoiding* market transactions. It is also distinct from market *creation* since it is not only setting local or fair markets. Instead, *transforming* national market rules and regulations is oriented to reconfiguring economic order from a Polanyi's substantive economic perspective. It is important to notice, however, that *avoid*, *create*, and *integrate* are interwoven with *transform* in the Bolivian case.

Coca growers frame their project of economic autonomy as the defence of the coca leaf. Originally, this was articulated in terms of economic rights. But given the criminalized nature of coca, they had to find a more legitimate language to frame this demand (Grisaffi, 2019, p. 3). They did so at first by appealing to the language of national sovereignty, accusing US interference and the imposition of drug policies against the nation's interests. They demanded the adoption of a “sovereign” demilitarized strategy to fight narcotraffic that respected the specificities of the country and clearly differentiate between coca and cocaine. In a second moment, the movement incorporated elements from the cultural dimension of coca production, such as the claim of the coca leaf as the symbol of Bolivian indigenous culture. Thus, they articulated their economic demands (through a corporatist discourse defending the source of income of its members) with political (a strong nationalist discourse of state sovereignty) and cultural (the defence of the millenary “sacred” leaf) arguments (Guimarães, 2014, pp. 314–315). Although some of these demands were met, the limit established for coca production is currently the main topic of discontent by these organizations.

Both types of organizations also demanded political self-representation, understood as the participation of their own representatives on different levels of government and state institutions. The Indigenous Organizations demand was framed in terms of the establishment of a “quota” system to assure their representation. Being a minority group that is also spread in different electoral districts, it proved very difficult to elect representatives by the rules of the Bolivian electoral system, based on majority and/or territorial criteria. Differently, the Peasant Syndicalist Organization engaged in electoral competition through the official party system. The party option is a longstanding strategy for some organizations, and in the 1990s, it became more widespread among different rural organizations.¹⁵ They modified their political strategy, hitherto based mainly on social mobilizations at the sidelines of state institutions, and adopted a *dual strategy* that articulated mobilizations with independent electoral participation. Through this new strategy they gained a share of representation within the formal structures of the state (Van Cott, 2005). Differences aside, in both cases they did not seek to enhance their political autonomy by distancing themselves from the state but by participating in it. Overall, their demands do not challenge the formal structures of political representation, demanding instead inclusion within it to have a say in law and policy making, and in the definition of the ultimate goals of the Bolivian polity.

¹⁵The CSUTCB was the main force behind the formation of the first peasantry-indigenous parties seeking self-representation in the early 1980s. In the 2000s, besides the MAS, other sectors of the Peasant Syndicalist Organizations created the Indigenous Movement Pachakutik (MIP) which, although less successful, also served as an electoral vehicle to seek political self-representation.

4 | INDIGENOUS AND PEASANT AUTONOMY UNDER EVO MORALES

Following through on its political commitments to the social movements, the MAS government convened a Constituent Assembly in August 2006. This ushered in a period of profound discursive and political changes that redefined the scope of what was possible and desirable. This process reached its apogee in the new Constitution approved in 2009, which re-valued the community and its principles of living as a collective, as opposed to the values and principles of the liberal political project. Indeed, a new symbolic framework for the imagined political community and the legitimizing principles of citizenship marked the early years of the MAS government. Being indigenous and belonging to a community became cornerstones of Bolivian identity. This process took place by means of the introduction of a new vocabulary in political discourses and national legislation, with terms such as *Buen Vivir*, Mother Earth, political and economic pluralism, community, and solidarity.

In the following years, a prolific legislative production was approved with an important participation of Indigenous and Peasant Syndicalist Organizations. The field of politics was also transformed, with the inclusion of new actors with less privileged, rural and indigenous backgrounds in the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary. In this new context, what happened with the collective projects of autonomy of the indigenous and peasant organizations? To answer this question, we now analyse if their main demands changed or persisted under the Morales' government, and to what extent they were attended.

4.1 | Indigenous demand for territory

The territorial demand persisted and was at the centre of the Indigenous Organizations agenda during the Constituent Assembly. Politically, it required the territorial reorganization of the country with the creation of indigenous autonomies with executive, legislative, judicial, and administrative powers. Thus, they demanded the recognition of their structures of governance and a degree of sovereignty over their territories (Bazoberry, 2016; Fernández & Puente, 2012; Schilling-Vacaflo, 2008). The territorial demand entails the recognition of indigenous/“originarios” groups as collective subjects of law. Legally, the 2009 Constitution provides the basis for it, mainly through the figure of *Indigenous First Peoples and Peasant Autonomies*. It guarantees indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and “to autonomy, self-government, culture, recognition of its institutions, and the consolidation of its territorial entities.”¹⁶ Thus, it recognizes indigenous' territory and autonomies and the right to self-government within these spaces, “exercised in accordance with its norms, institutions, authorities, and procedures.”¹⁷ However, the specific mechanisms, structures, and dynamics of how these rights would be exercised, implemented, and guaranteed were yet to be defined.

The government did so by presenting in 2010 the Framework Law for Autonomies and the Law 45 of Jurisdictional Demarcation. But for the main Indigenous Organizations, this constituted a betrayal. These laws limited the practice of indigenous autonomy and the application of indigenous justice. It also subordinated the claims of indigenous territorial autonomy to departmental boundaries, therefore violating the integrity of some territories and their right to self-determination. Additionally, the legislation did not establish the veto power of communities on development projects on their territory. The right of prior consultation is recognized, but the results are not legally binding. Finally, the sovereignty of indigenous peoples within their territories is essentially a partial one, as the central state withholds the control of non-renewable resources and retains the sovereignty over subsoil rights.

Lack of implementation, contradictions between different bodies of legislations and policies, and open violations ensued. Soon indigenous movements started to mobilize around some of the same demands they had been articulating since the 1990s. In 2010, for instance, CIDOB called a national march with the support of CONAMAQ. Their

¹⁶Chapter 1, Article 2.

¹⁷Chapter 7, Article 289–290.

demands were related to the Autonomy Framework Law, particularly that the communities should have veto power on projects that affect their territories, such as mining and hydrocarbon concessions. In the following years, other marches were organized, all claiming recognition and respect of their territories, and their autonomy in its management. A central topic continued to be the occupation of these territories by other actors, and the extraction of natural resources or other development projects, which endangered it. One of the most important episodes occurred with the project of a road through the National Park Isiboro-Sécure (TIPNIS) and the territories of the Mojeno, Yuracaré, and Chimane indigenous groups. The reaction to it led to a march that was violently repressed by the government. After that, CONAMAQ and CIDOB officially broke with the government. The Indigenous Organizations denounced the violation of the constitutional principles of prior consultation, free consent, and autonomy on indigenous territory, as well as the negative social and environmental impacts of the project.

4.2 | Peasant and indigenous demands for land distribution

The peasant and Indigenous Organizations demand for land distribution, and titling was addressed with the Law 3545 of Communitarian Renewal of Agrarian Reform (2006). The Law reaffirms that large properties should fulfil a socio-economic function, otherwise they would be expropriated. It also states that indigenous and peasant communities should be prioritized on the distribution of fiscal land. Additionally, the Constitution established the limit for land-size titling at 5,000 hectares.¹⁸ However, it also “allows for agro-industrial groups to be constituted by an unlimited number of business associates, who are each permitted to have that maximum 5,000 hectares ... The 5,000-hectare ceiling, moreover, is not retroactively binding on pre-existing large properties” (Webber, 2017, p. 336).

Although Law 3545 resulted in a significant increase in land titling by simplifying processes and increasing institutional efficiency, it did not lead to the empowerment of the popular strata of the rural population or the transformation of the agrarian class structure. As different studies highlight, Morales agrarian reform had highly contradictory results. Firstly, the process was more one of land titling and legalization of existing occupation than of new land distribution. Secondly, land distributed was mostly public land, with an insignificant actual redistribution. As Webber (2017), p. 330) argues, “there has not been extensive, egalitarian reform in Bolivia” under Morales' government. Thus, “without attention to expropriation and redistribution of large landholdings this has not led to an overturning, or serious modification, of the extant class structure in the countryside.”

Additionally, while most of the land (around 53%) distributed was titled as Indigenous “Originary” Peasant Territory (TIOC), medium and large property owners also received a significant share of it (around 14%) (Vergara-Camus & Kay, 2018, p. 231–232; Webber, 2017; Colque et al., 2016). Finally, the quality of the land registered and distributed varied considerably: the “marginal lands” with low agricultural potential were assigned to the large population of small peasants, while the “potentially productive lands” remained concentrated in few hands of the agribusiness sector (Webber, 2017, p. 331;341).

For some groups, the process of land titling had negative consequences. That was the case, for instance, for the coca grower's unions of the Chapare and other Intercultural Communities of the CSCIB. Land titling in the Chapare finalized in 2010. The regularization of the land market, however, brought problems that limited the coca grower's autonomy, understood by them as access to land and the legal right to grow coca on it. Firstly, the prices went up and land became unaffordable for many of them, chiefly for newer generations.¹⁹ Additionally, the individual private property of land weakened the “social control” previously exerted by the unions, which in some cases of “transgressions” of its members could lead to land confiscation. There is an abundance of complaints by both union authorities

¹⁸CPE, Art.38.

¹⁹A common complaint is from families with sons at the age to leave the family house and have their own coca production but cannot afford a piece of land (Grisaffi, 2019).

and grassroots members that they cannot force people to obey the collective decisions anymore, as now recalcitrant coca growers cannot be punished: national law and private property rights protect them (Grisaffi, 2019).

Therefore, indigenous and peasant organizations' demand for land was very partially and problematically addressed. For some Peasant Syndicalist Organizations, ultimately the reinforcement of private property rights had not only economic but also political consequences in terms of the decline of social cohesion. Hence, their ability to act as autonomous and active collectivities was significantly diminished.

4.3 | Political self-representation and political participation

All the organizations analysed in this article were founding members of the “political instrument” that, since 1998, has adopted the MAS acronym to compete in elections. Since then, the number of MAS' elected officials exponentially increased, culminating in the election of Morales as president and the winning of most seats of both legislative chambers as well as numerous local and departmental authorities. Many of these authorities are members of these organizations. They were also incorporated in different ministries and other state institutions.

This direct participation in government, however, is neither exempt of contradictions and conflicts nor experienced in the same way. While some actors interpret it as the achievement of autonomous political self-representation, others argue that their inclusion within state powers and institutions was not translated into enhanced autonomy. Some members of the Peasant Syndicalist Organizations expressed concerns that the selection of candidates for the MAS lists is no longer based on local decisions but on top-down impositions of a small group of party leaders increasingly distant from the base.

In some cases, political self-representation in local governments is seen as reducing instead of enhancing community autonomy. In interviews conducted with local authorities of different municipalities of the Chapare, many of them expressed their frustration of having to follow official rules and bureaucratic procedures, which they considered as limiting their capacity to act as they see fit and to give themselves their own rule. As one Mayor put it, “It was better before when there was no state. The base decided in a meeting, and as secretary of my union, my central, I just did it. Now it has changed because I must follow laws ... No one is happy. They [the base] do not understand that we cannot just do things, they feel that they lost power and that we do not want to obey anymore.”²⁰ They also saw as problematic that now they must listen to different actors of the municipality. As one councilman from Chimoré explained, “When we have to do the budget, or make decisions, we have to listen to everyone, not only the coca growers. We have indigenous people here, we have banana producers, they want other things, so there is conflict. Before we could decide organically, there was consensus. Now it's only fights, and everyone blames us.”²¹

The Indigenous Organizations also demand broader participation in law and policy-making, and direct representation in state institutions. As we saw, differently from the Peasant Syndicalist Organizations, their demand was framed in terms of a quota system, The Organic Plurinational Electoral Law, intended to address this point. However, both CIDOB and CONAMAQ consider that it did not accommodate their historical demands for self-representation. The number of seats reserved—only seven—and the procedure for electing representatives for it were highly criticized by them. Moreover, since the TIPNIS conflict, the MAS government disowned CONAMAQ and CIDOB leaders and groups which were critics to its policies, while backing up leadership claims from others that, although not elected by the members of these organizations, supported Morales' administration. These government-backed leadership contests led both organizations to split into two. Additionally, the government adopted a discretionary distribution of benefits or privileges in return for corporate political support. This model of governance has entrenched the capture of policies and projects by organizations with more political weight, through top-down, undemocratic procedures. It also tended to undermine peasant indigenous autonomy through co-optation mechanisms. In this process,

²⁰Interview in Villa Tunari, 2007.

²¹Interview in Chimoré, 2006.

the strong ties which had been established between the different indigenous and peasant organizations during the cycle of protest that led to Morales' election were severed. Altogether, these dynamics hindered their capacity to advance their collective projects of autonomy.

4.4 | Peasant and indigenous socio-economic demands

Great expectations in relation to their socio-economic demands were raised with the inclusion of the plural economy model and of the *Buen Vivir* values such as community strengthening and environment sustainability in the new Constitution. This progressive legal frame and a macroeconomic scenario of exceptional state revenues created a promising context for coherent public policies to advance an alternative economic order.

One of the most important achievements for the Indigenous and Peasant Syndicalist Organizations was the approval of the Law 144 Productive Community Farming Revolution (2011) and the Law 338 on Sustainable Family Farming and Sovereignty (2013), which recognized the two forms of collective economic organizations—OECOM and OECA— respectively. However, these laws, as others related to the values of *Buen Vivir* have not been translated into coherent public policies. In the case of OECOM, a Supreme Decree establishes the regulations for legally registering them. Nevertheless, the requirements are complex and encounter important political and bureaucratic obstacles.²² With respect to OECA, no progress has been made to change the commercial code for their legal registration. The legal vacuum has obliged them to maintain legal forms that are not suited to their structures, practices, and purposes.²³

Undeniably, some policies responding to rural actors' demands were implemented, such as the agrarian security system and infrastructure delivery (e.g., roads, access to electricity and water, and schools). But during the 14 years of Morales' government, there was not an effective strategy to create the conditions to promote peasant and indigenous economic activities and, accordingly, increase family income and support better living conditions. In fact, the Morales government did not change the meagre amount of investment directed to peasant and indigenous communities. Accordingly, the economic barriers that characterized previous periods persisted for most of them. In terms of income, the average of farming families was US\$ 4,721 per year and, considering the average composition of the five-member families, the annual per capita income was less than US \$ 1,000 annually in 2017 (Coralay & Jiménez, 2018). Similarly, more than two thirds of the population covered by the same study was poor in terms of unsatisfied basic needs index. At the municipal level, rural poverty was widespread, fluctuating between 59% and 92% of the total population. Also, inequality between rural and urban populations has not decreased significantly.

The MAS government allocated most of public spending to the oil and gas industry, mining, and agribusiness, and to the detriment of other sectors of the economy such as small-scale family farming, tourism, and industry. Thus, the vicious circle was perpetuated: state revenue increasingly depended on the surplus generated by the extractive industries, and, at the same time, most of the public investment in economic activities was oriented to large-scale projects in these same sectors (Wanderley, 2018). Under these conditions, it is not a surprise that there was a decline in the number of people working in farming, with continuation of rural-urban migration and farmers and rural producers becoming traders, transport workers, builders, and miners working in the informal sector. Multi-activity and pluri-residence are the new features of the contemporary countryside in Bolivia. The country's small-scale agricultural production has not grown to meet the increased domestic demand for staple foods

²²The Supreme Decree No. 2849 (2016) establishes that the registering an OECOM is entangled with the process of registering TIOCs. More specifically, for rural communities to be accredited to exercise the rights and duties corresponding to an OECOM, they must present the state document legally recognizing their existence as a territorial community.

²³In legal terms, the organizations have two alternatives: to register as non-profit organizations, which means that they are not allowed to generate a surplus income from their activities, or to register as cooperatives which do not reflect their identity.

(Tito Velarde & Wanderley, 2021). The products that the country used to be self-sufficient in, such as fruit and vegetables, are increasingly imported.²⁴

The promotion of agribusiness, natural gas, and minerals during Morales' government had other negative impacts. Not only natural gas and mineral deposits are in indigenous and peasant territories but also the agricultural frontier expansion for agribusiness has not respected TIOCs and national parks (McKay, 2018).

The fall in the price of natural gas and minerals since 2014 and, consequently, the reduction in export revenue, put fiscal pressure on the economic model of Morales' government. In fact, in May and June 2015, three supreme decrees were enacted to increase the revenue from extractive activities. These decrees authorized oil companies to start operating in the country's 22 protected areas and rollback indigenous peoples' right to prior consultation on projects in their territories.²⁵ These measures encourage the expansion of the agricultural border and consequently the acceleration of deforestation in Bolivia in the last years of Morales' government (Wanderley et al., 2020).

Summing up, as far as their economic autonomy is concerned, Peasant Syndicalist Organizations saw very few of their demands addressed, while for the Indigenous Organizations, the historical abuse of extractivism and other forms of occupation of their territories persisted. Although the legitimacy of the "process of change" has been based on the political commitment to do away with the neoliberal model and found a postcolonial state, the policies and actions during Morales's 14 years in government have not followed a path consistent with official discourses, the new constitution, and the laws that have been approved (Wanderley, 2018).

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This article proposed two questions. The first referred to the meaning of political and economic autonomy for rural actors in Bolivia. The second examined the extent to which the new political cycle inaugurated by Morales election enhanced or hindered the capacity of rural actors to advance their collective projects of autonomy in the sense of their "capacity to choose and decide about their destinies" and to "give themselves their own law."

As far as the meaning of autonomy is concerned, the Bolivian national rural organizations discussed in this article have at the core of their projects of autonomy a transformative engagement with the main institutions of modernity—state and market—whose structures pose permanent threats of heteronomy. As such, the Bolivian experience problematizes simplistic understandings of indigenous and peasant autonomy as necessarily entailing retreat from modern institutions. Additionally, in demanding inclusion on their own and favourable terms, they dispute the very same constitution, functioning and, therefore, the meaning of state and market.

The Indigenous Organizations have had as their main demand the right of self-determination and to the territory. Hence, the quest for autonomy is at the core of their existence although it is not framed as the denial of the Bolivian state. As Ramos (1990, p. 6) points out, indigenous people use the legal protection of citizenship to claim their rights. While they do not seek secession from the state, their claim to territory is not simply the "ownership of land." They seek the recognition of some level of sovereignty over these spaces, in a model of *nested sovereignties*, that guarantees the right of self-determination of indigenous peoples on issues of direct relevance to them and, at the same time, the recognition of their traditional forms of political and economic organization. As such, their demands raise questions about what degree of autonomy is possible within the framework of the modern state, as they necessarily entail the dissolution of monopolies usually associated with the state apparatus such as the production of law, the administration of justice, and the exercise of sovereign authority over the national territory.

For the Peasant Syndicalist Organizations, the precondition for collective self-determination is, to a great extent, understood as the right to private property under collective territory and land rights. Individual small-property

²⁴To give an idea, the National Statistics Institute reported that food's import increased from 236 million dollars in 2006 to 689 million dollars in 2014.

²⁵These measures ignore Article 352 of the Constitution, which provides for free, prior and informed consultation in keeping with the indigenous nations and peoples' own norms and procedures and open the way for transnational corporations to explore oil in these areas, paying no heed to indigenous communities' opposition or the environmental and social damage that this may cause.

owners are inserted in relatively autonomous communal organizations and must fulfil collective roles within community governments. Thus, their understanding of “private property” questions liberal definitions of it. For both types of organizations, autonomy is also understood as political self-representation within the institutions of the Bolivian state. Thus, they claim both the right to autonomously institute their local societies according to their own world-views and their forms of organization, and direct participation in the formal democratic institutions. They aim to have a say in law and policy making, and in the definition of the ultimate goals of the Bolivian polity. Hence, politically, their projects of autonomy entail not only self-government and self-determination but also inclusion and direct participation within the state.

In the economic realm, both types of organizations seek to *transform* liberal market rules and regulations. Market transformation is distinct from the strategies of market avoidance, integration, and creation (Vergara-Camus, 2017). Two main demands were enacted to enhance economic autonomy: a legal framework recognizing their diverse forms of economic organizations and public policies supporting their alternative practices of ownership, labour relations, price setting, and distribution of earnings. Their autonomy project is well portrayed as a search for an alternative market institution in opposition to a neoliberal ideal. In Polanyi (1992) perspective, they aim at transforming the model of a unique and dominant self-regulated market towards other of balanced articulation of market, autarky, centrality, and asymmetry. Moreover, as van der Ploeg and Schneider (2022) show with the case of Brazil in this issue, market is understood by these actors as an institution that may vary and transform through collective action, in opposition to a homogeneous free and unregulated market as portrayed by the neoliberal framework. The exceptions here are the CSCIB and the coca growers that, in the economic realm, seek a more classical market integration. However, given the particularity of its main product, they formulate their demands in broader political and cultural terms, articulating economic rights to political and cultural understandings of autonomy.

As far as our second question on the achievements of autonomy under Morales' government is concerned, we showed that despite the innovative constitutional principles, the set of laws approved in line with an alternative development paradigm, jurisdictional demarcation of TIOCs, and land distribution in favour of indigenous and peasant people, the overall policies implemented were oriented towards an intensification of the extractive economic model.

State policies (or the lack thereof) resulted in the deepening of land and resource grabbing based on alliances between large corporations, governments, and different social actors; the displacement of rural communities; and the threat to collective rights of indigenous peoples. The objective of strengthening the indigenous and peasant political and economic autonomy projects was sidelined in the public policies and the governance model implemented by Morales's government.

In conclusion, the election of the MAS brought about expectations of major transformations in the country. For the Indigenous and Peasant Syndicalist Organizations, hopes were high that their demands would be attended to and their autonomy strengthened. At least during Morales' rule, that was not the case. However, this does not mean that they fell into passivity and heteronomy. The tension between autonomy and heteronomy that historically has characterized their relation to state and market persists, and their long-term struggle for autonomy, that is, to define the terms of their existence as active collectivities, is still ongoing.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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