

Being *cruceño* in october 2003: the challenges to identity¹

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on an analysis of institutional pronouncements published during the crisis of October, 2003, in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, in order to find out the thread which leads to an explanation of the construction of an identity discourse in Santa Cruz, and of the apparent representativity of the pro-Santa Cruz Committee. The author shows that the claim for identity reinforces the political demands and the relations of power in Santa Cruz, one of the most important cities of Bolivia.

According to a survey carried out by the Captura Consulting Group and published in *El Deber* newspaper, almost 60 % of those interviewed see the pro-Santa Cruz Committee as the most representative local institution. Far behind follows the Gabriel René Moreno University with 22 %³.

Why is the pro-Santa Cruz Committee so important and representative? Where are the social movements? Where are labor and union leaders?

The same survey backed up this data with another one: 50 % of those interviewed see the desire for autonomy as the most important for *Cruceños* [natives from and inhabitants of Santa Cruz], followed by a meager 18 %, by work opportunities.

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³ *El Deber*, September 24, 2005. "195th. Anniversary" supplement.

Why is autonomy considered more important, more urgent than work, health, and the citizens' security?

The crisis of October 2003, besides having immediate political results, provoked longer-term political and social changes. October 2003 has reinforced regional demands in Bolivia's East and West, and it has reinstated the debate over autonomy and identities.

Since October 2003 on, the *Cruceño* identity acquired four important dimensions:

1. it took a central place among the political demands of the pro-Santa Cruz Committee;
2. it became a social category that allows obtaining respect and power;
3. as a social category it has an opposite: the *Collas*;
4. the *Cruceño* identity bonds together social groups in Santa Cruz around a single idea and objective.

However, beyond questioning the process of building a *Cruceño* identity since October 2003, we believe it important to raise some questions to open up a discussion:

- What does this identity offer to the citizens who identify themselves with it?
- What other aspects of identities, of other modes, are included in the current *Cruceño* identity discourse?
- Which are the markers of "being *Cruceño*" that bind together those born in Santa Cruz along with the recently arrived *Colla* immigrants and with those immigrants coming from the country areas of the Department?
- What does the *Cruceño* cultural model offer to those who adhere to it?

Some of the conclusions of the research "Being *Cruceño* in October: An insight into the process of construction of a *Cruceño* identity since the October 2003 crisis," can help us cast light unto these doubts. The research was carried out⁴ with the support of the Program for Strategic Investigation in Bolivia (PIEB) and the History Museum of the Gabriel René Moreno University. Analyzing the official pronouncements published by Santa Cruz institutions between October 10 and 24, 2003, looking for the social representations of "being *Cruceño*" that were constructed during the crisis, we

⁴ Carried out by Claudia Peña Claros, in collaboration with Nelson Jordán Bazán.

start from the hypothesis that the identity discourse of “being *Cruceño*” was present at this moment of crisis and played an important role in the struggle for power.

The global context

Before focusing on the processes of construction of the *Cruceño* identity, it is worth taking a look at the wider context, from which we may better understand the challenges that identities present nowadays.

Words have always been powerful, but even more so today when communications technologies confronts us with instantaneous messages arriving from cyberspace, with live images from Bangladesh, with happy faces drawn with punctuation marks. We can look at all things in the world: from DNA structure to the star XRA 3245. And what is more important; not only can we see it, we can name it too.

A word, when pronounced, describes, but it also determines, differentiates, limits, activates, states. It acquits or condemns. Images and words. Never before in the history of humankind, what is strange to us had been so close to us. It's the globalization, we say. But, instead of homogenizing consumption and culture, what we call globalization has exacerbated differences. Eskimos distinguish more than 200 shades of white, every one named by a word. We are like those Arctic shades of the white color, every one of us fighting to distinguish and name oneself uniquely.

Identity, identities, therefore, become the main issue. Identities came to our minds along with the others, those unknown others with whom we chat today, wired to the web.

The national context

However, we are not interested in the web-chatting “others.” The “others” whom we will focus are near to us, with them we share the three-colored national flag and a national football team -- which almost always loses (there are Bolivian national teams that win, in other sports, but sports journalists only talk about football). These “others” began surrounding our house around year 2000, they knocked our door on February 2003, and finally invaded our living room in October 2003.

They had always been there, with their own rhythms and timing, with their powerful pronunciation of the letter “s”, and their manifold, countless folded traditional skirts, the *polleras*. Not everything is accountable for, said René Zavaleta.⁵ One can count when one equals one, and together they make two. But when one is not equal to the other (one), then one will not even want to place oneself alongside him or her, fearing one could be confused as a single two.

In our country, those who count had not abstracted themselves from arithmetic: the bureaucracy, the political parties have not been able to build a national imaginary; they continue taking decisions according to their group interests. Zavaleta said that the State, through political parties and the bureaucracy as holders of political organization, produces a utilitarian knowledge of society, aiming simply at justifying and legitimizing the established order (the political parties’ monopoly on power, the applicability of democratic rules, etc.). This utilitarian (and therefore, false) knowledge is so because political parties, and also the bureaucracy, have not been able to get rid of their class interests in order to construct the “State’s interests.”

This impossibility for knowing is intrinsic to the nature of the Bolivian society and State. Intrinsic to a society which is characteristically variegated, that cannot be apprehended by the State (in this sense being an apparent State, not a real one), and intrinsic to the nature of the Bolivian State which persists in being a reflection of a specific class that monopolizes power and denies representativity to the State.

In this kind of reality, crises emerge as moments of breakdown, opening possibilities for meetings and knowledge.

“(…) the crisis is a result and not a preparation. The crisis is the form of the pathetic unity of the diverse just as the market is the routine concurrence of the diverse. (...) The crisis, therefore, not only reveals what is national in Bolivia, but it is in itself a nationalizing event: the various historical times change with its occurrence.” (Zavaleta, 1983:19).

⁵ “If representative democracy is, after all, the compatibility between the quantity of society and its qualitative selection, then here: randomness, charismatic confrontation, a patrimonial expression of power and regional opposition to it are thus more possible than its numerical scrutiny. One cannot count numbers where men do not considered themselves equals one to the other, i.e., where the capitalist prejudice of equality does not reign, but rather the precapitalist dogma of inequality. (...) This variegated and unequal form of (Bolivian) society hinders, to a great extent, the efficiency of representative democracy as the quantification of political will.” (Zavaleta, 1983: 15).

In October 2003, it appeared that everybody raised our heads and saw the same things. After much time of being submerged in our own affairs, those very well known daily affairs, we raised our heads and saw the “others” affairs. We felt summoned, questioned, challenged... and we named it. Then, other “others” also raised their heads, and saw the “others” affairs. And they felt summoned, questioned, challenged... and they named it too.

Many names for only one October.

We are interested in one of those names: the one near us, which belongs to us. In Santa Cruz de la Sierra, October had several names. Some of them were new, most were already used names, recovered from the past. One of them was pronounced facing the others while we were looking for ourselves, trying to gather together around a protecting fire: the *Cruceño* identity.

Finally, “we” ... We?

Who summoned the *Cruceño* identity to give a name to that October that so moved us? The departmental Command of the MNR [the political party of then Bolivia’s President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada], the Prefect of that time, the pro-Santa Cruz Committee, the Federation of Santa Cruz Fraternities summoned the *Cruceño* identity, like someone who looks for a mirror, finds it and puts it in front of him to see what is behind him. On this mirror we can see, then, besides our own figure, everything surrounding us, which allows it to emerge from the diverse and differentiate itself among the rest.

What did that identity mirror show us? Crafted by the pro-Santa Cruz Committee and other groups of power, the mirror proposed us, first, a “chaotic” October, when Santa Cruz and our way of being us, *Cruceños*, were threatened by tyranny. October was not about the gas controversy or about [the President] Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, nor the more than one hundred dead people in El Alto and La Paz. It was about the “enemies of this town,” who were trying to damage the “productive process in which we are engaged, which we have chosen as the way to solve the socio-economic crisis.”⁶

Afterwards they proposed to us an October marked by another difference, not the obvious difference between chaos and order, but the difference between Bolivia and Santa Cruz. This

⁶ *Santa Cruz al país* [Santa Cruz to the nation]. Statement published by the pro-Santa Cruz Committee and Santa Cruz’s parliamentary Brigade, 13 October, 2003.

differentiation crossed over the whole discourse by the pro-Santa Cruz Committee during the October crisis: the Bolivian West, the old Bolivia, on one side; and on the other, Santa Cruz, the thrust, the future. This controversy contains several opposed categories:

- Bolivia as an incarnation of the past vs. Santa Cruz as an incarnation of the future;
- Bolivia is the West of the country vs. Santa Cruz is the East;
- Bolivia carries in itself the reason of its impossibility: the inability to be a real country, of which we all could feel part, is at the heart of its nature vs. Santa Cruz is a true reality and a promise for the future, because its own nature has the keys allowing its development;
- The nation was built upon the Andean way, it is based on the Andean way vs. The way of being in Santa Cruz and the business thrust there are alien to Bolivia.

Considering these elements, it is clear that Santa Cruz is being built as a reality distinct from Bolivia (it is conspicuous that this discourse makes use of “Bolivia” and not “the rest of Bolivia”). If Bolivia is different from Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz is not Bolivia, or at least is outside it. It works according to different values, has a different way of solving problems. Santa Cruz has the correct way of solving problems.⁷

This leading idea organizes the reading of the reality made by the pro-Santa Cruz Committee in October. Such reality is represented as having these features:

1. In order to be feasible, Santa Cruz must “redeem” itself from this Bolivian nature that difficult its advance;⁸
2. To be feasible as a republic, Bolivia should make deep changes in its organization; regional autonomies should be instituted;
3. Bolivia should adopt the *Cruceño* values and customs to be feasible;
4. If the political structure remains unaltered, the best course for Santa Cruz would be to estrange from Bolivia so as not to share its losing fate.

A consequence of this representation is the reading of the October crisis by the Civic Committee:

⁷ The fact of seeing your own things as adequate and the others’ things as mistaken is a common feature of identity constructions in general (Wieviorka, 2003). It is a way of assuring safety and certainty for people who adhere to a particular identity.

⁸ Rubén Costas, president of the pro-Santa Cruz Committee, affirms: “Now we can easternize the westerners”. *El Deber*, October 1, 2003.

- the protests of La Paz and El Alto are incited by small groups of radicals;
- the protests are irrational, social demands are unrecognizable among them;
- the chaos and anarchy coming from the Bolivian West are connatural to *collas*;
- chaos and anarchy threaten the *Cruceño* way of life;
- street protests only try to harm Santa Cruz, they are incited by enemies of Santa Cruz; therefore it is necessary to defend the city from the marches, imposing law in all its rigor.

If chaos and anarchy, coming from the Bolivian West, were threatening Santa Cruz, then it is the West that threatens Santa Cruz. But there is more to it: the discourse of the pro-Santa Cruz Committee in October affirms that the State is a *Colla* State, sharing with western Bolivia some features that make it unfeasible, which also harm Santa Cruz. We can therefore infer that when mentioning the State, it is also the *Collas* that were being mentioned.

In front of this failed State, the pro-Santa Cruz Committee proposes “the self-determination of peoples,”⁹ a re-founding of Bolivia, and autonomy. These proposals are based on a “*Cruceño* nature.” Before describing this nature, the pro-Santa Cruz Committee tries to justify itself through it, and, from then on, it demands a new political organization of the country.

During the October crisis, the position of the local elite, that began demanding respect for the law, went on to demand a structural reform of the Bolivian State, as an essential condition for the permanence of Santa Cruz in the Bolivian national structure.¹⁰

But what image of the *Cruceños* does this mirror show?

- In the first place, *Cruceños* are depicted as being *one*: the man of the plains. No class distinctions are admitted, nor of social status, hierarchical values etc.
- Secondly, he is definitely a man, the *Cruceño* is seen as a man with specific features.¹¹
- According to the local elite’s social representation, the *Cruceño* is loyal, respectful of traditions, proud of his roots, tending to progress, and a peaceful individual.

⁹ *Por una nueva República* [For a new Republic]. Pronouncement of the pro-Santa Cruz Committee, *El Deber*, October 17, 2003, A31.

¹⁰ *Ídem*.

¹¹ The *cruceño* woman, as a social construction, had other features, making her role invisible in public, politically and economically.

In what context did the Civic Committee and local groups of power take the mirror of the *Cruceño* identity as their discourse? It was in the context of the serious crisis of October, 2003. Beyond the fear of pillage that could come from the marches reaching the city of Santa Cruz,¹² the groups of power also feared that the crisis of October 2003 would end up in:

- a different distribution of State political power, up till that moment centralized in a few hands: the political parties (whose pyramidal organizational structure was neither inclusive nor democratic), and of whose structure the Santa Cruz elite formed an important element;
- a triumph of the demands of social groups active in Santa Cruz but tied to the West of the country, among them the Landless Movement, which would challenge the Santa Cruz productive model.

On Monday, October 13, the Agriculture Minister, Guido Añez Moscoso, arrived in Santa Cruz on the presidential airplane and had meetings with local businessmen, with the local parliamentary brigade and the pro-Santa Cruz Committee's board. Far from questioning State centralism, the pro-Santa Cruz Committee issued a communiqué together with the parliamentary brigade, accusing the “destabilizing movements” of aiming to “interrupt the productive processes” in Santa Cruz.¹³

The Santa Cruz elite is part of the central State structure. Not a few of the pro-Santa Cruz Committee board former members are also members of the political parties and have hold positions as governmental authorities,¹⁴ without this causing criticisms or questioning by other civic leaders at this point.

In the light of this, we can state that the “others” in the civic discourse are the *Collas*. If it is true that the *Cruceño* civic criticized the centrist State, it did so when it was on the verge of

¹² The fear of chaos and slavery was constantly referred to in Committee communiqués. In February 2003 there was looting in Santa Cruz, coming from marches called by the Departmental Workers organization, and carried out when marches in La Paz were detained and the immediate conflict practically resolved. On October 9, one such march entered Santa Cruz's main square, without causing fear or opposition from the local civic leaders.

¹³ *Santa Cruz al país*. Pronouncement published by the pro-Santa Cruz Committee and the Santa Cruz Parliamentary Brigade. October 13, 2003.

¹⁴ For example: “Ten years ago Wimar Stelzer Jiménez was declared president of the civic entity (...) Stelzer was vicepresident of the entity and president of the Federation of Professionals. After serving at the institution, he was a militant of Acción Democrática Nacionalista (ADN) y prefect of Santa Cruz (...). At the moment he is a municipal councilor (...),” *El Deber*, February 9, 2005, A12.

succumbing to the demands of the social movements of El Alto and La Paz. In times of low conflict, the political leaders of Santa Cruz make up a part of this State.

But the *Collas* in themselves are not what is being dealt with. It is the *Collas* in terms of power which are in question. The process of social construction of “being *Cruceño*” is a reflection of the power relations that organize society in Santa Cruz, and at the same time, play a part contributing to its sustenance. When speaking of social representations, we are talking about discourses that struggle for exercise power in the social and political fields.

The social representation of “being *Cruceño*” used in October 2003 arises from the political demands of sectors represented by the pro-Santa Cruz Committee. As generally happens in current social movements, the strength of the mobilization is based on two axes: political or economic demands, and the cultural or identity demands, both interwoven and dependent one on the other.

All this leads us to recognize that the social construct “*Cruceño* identity” is the way in which the local elite, through the pro-Santa Cruz Committee, links itself to other regional and national sectors in the current historical moment.

The mirror of *Cruceño* identity is the spot from which power groups in Santa Cruz formulate their own political discourse and group demands, transforming them into regional discourses and demands, shared by the general population.

How does the Committee achieve that its discourse be shared by the general population?

Leaving aside explanations related to power groups and the ownership of the mass information media, not because they be unimportant, but because they do not form part of our study, we propose the following explanations:

1. Of the social sectors of Santa Cruz that expressed themselves through institutional pronouncements between November 10 and 24, 2003, the local elite is the only one that had built a vision regarding “being *Cruceño*” as part of their reading of reality. Thus they accumulated the symbolic capital revolving around this construction -- which is no little capital.

2. In a city of immigrants where everybody carries along his or her culture, the social representation of “being *Cruceño*” builds a discourse of belonging and this discourse handles simple, manageable and flexible features.
3. “Being *Cruceño*” moulds together different and differentiated social groups around something which is viewed as positive and, for that reason, desirable. As a person who is blamed, marginal, ignored, I hold, then, the possibility of social recognition, of a sense of group, if I tie myself to the *Cruceño* identity discourse.
4. As with every social representation, “being *Cruceño*” is providing a certain order which determines a model of behavior, at the same time granting a code for interchanging and for naming and classifying. It provides something very important in times of crisis: certainty.
5. The *Cruceño* identity discourse is in a sense triumphalist; thus opening possibilities for a better future, allowing an involvement in reality to improve it. It looks to the future rather than the past. Contrary to the persistent, generalized attitude by which we disregard ourselves, nullifying Bolivia and Bolivians, the *Cruceño identity* discourse allows us to feel pride and expect a promising future: it promises success.

As with all processes of constructing an identity, the social representation of “being *cruceño*” in Santa Cruz contains contradictions and blanks, and it changes over time. More than a reflection of reality, it is a net of senses, a way of knowing that enables us to decrease uncertainty and take swift decisions in an ever more complex and changing world.

The discourse of the pro-Santa Cruz during the October crisis managed to overtake the symbolic capital of the social construction of the “*Cruceño* identity.” The Committee is currently the owner of the mirror that lets us look and name ourselves, and also look and name the context. This implies that it is the groups of power in Santa Cruz who determine and limit the social representation of “being *Cruceño*.” These groups are who, in the final analysis, decide, one way or the other, who can call oneself “*Cruceño*.”

When, in October 17 in Santa Cruz city’s main square, a large group of youths (which now no one wants to acknowledge were part of their institution) shouted: “Whoever does not jump is a *Colla!*,” as they chased and kicked peasants from Yapacaní who had arrived to protest against the then President of the Republic, a shadow was placed behind the mirror. The shadow was generated by fear, and it generated fear. And although those from Yapacaní shouted: “I’m *Cruceño*, I’m

Cruceño!” to defend themselves, they were repudiated, chased and abused by the *Cruceños* who already had the power to present themselves as such and be recognized as such.

So, we want to know:

- How has continued the construction of the identity of those “*Cruceños*” still between quotation marks who, in October 17, were rejected and repudiated?
- How do they currently satisfy their need for social inclusion?
- How do they affirm a discourse enabling them to say, “I exist, I’m worth something.”
- And returning to the identity discourse of the pro-Santa Cruz Committee: How could it articulate a discourse that embraces national issues, if it bases its discourse on the generalized disregard towards “the other,” that is national, that is the *Collas*?
- And from the other side: How to construct identity discourses from the West? What is its content? How do they see us?

The pro-Santa Cruz Committee has constructed a certain discourse of the *Cruceño* identity since October 2003. It is true that that has been done it without consultation. But power acts like that; power is exercised, not discussed. It is our responsibility and challenge to exercise a power and give this discourse an inclusive, tolerant content, benevolent in its intercultural aspect and toward the “other.” To demand that public policies in Santa Cruz take into account immigrants in terms of identity. To demand that public policies, and also the pro-Santa Cruz Committee, construct cultural milestones of “being *Cruceño*” that add up instead of taking away, recognize instead of deny, dialog instead of attacking.

Do not we, *Cruceños*, have “limpid foreheads”? Do not we have a “loyal heart”?¹⁵

¹⁵ As stated in the lyrics of the hymn of the department of Santa Cruz.

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