

The symbolic strategy of the movimiento al socialismo¹

La estrategia simbólica del movimiento al socialismo

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ABSTRACT

Is the MAS a grouping of social movements, a populist phenomenon or a new indigenous-campesino left-wing movement? How should we categorise the form of collective action developed by the coca-growers' movement? Is it a political party or a trade union network? What are the ideological and symbolic points of reference that accompany and guide this praxis? The answers to these questions point to a political movement with a completely new form of collective action.

RESUMEN

¿El MAS es una articulación de movimientos sociales, un fenómeno populista o una nueva izquierda indígena y campesina?, ¿cómo caracterizar la forma de acción colectiva generada por el movimiento cocalero?, ¿se trata de un partido o de una red sindical?, ¿cuáles son los referentes ideológicos y simbólicos que acompañan y orientan esta praxis? Las respuestas giran en torno a un movimiento político con una forma inédita de acción colectiva.

¹ This article appears in a book on the emergence and political development of the Movimiento Al Socialismo, written by Jorge Komadina and Céline Geffroy. It was published in 2007 by the Strategic Research Programme in Bolivia (Programa de Investigación Estratégica de Bolivia - PIEB) and the Centro de Estudios Superiores Universitarios (CESU-UMSS).

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In the afternoon of 22 January 2006, Evo Morales Ayma was sworn in before Congress as President of the Republic of Bolivia. This ceremony drew a symbolic dividing line between two eras: one, the age of neoliberalism (1985-2000), was vanishing over the horizon, while the other, whose contours are still not defined, was just emerging as the contingent result of the political struggles that had taken place over a period of several years marked by conflicts and elections, sacrifices and acts of petty small-mindedness, heroic feats and foolish decisions.

In the 1999 municipal elections, a new political actor, the Movement Toward Socialism (Movimiento Al Socialismo - MAS), managed to win 39 provincial councillors' seats in the Department of Cochabamba and captured 3.2 per cent of the valid votes cast in the country as a whole. This event constituted a turning point in collective action by the coca-growers' unions in the Chapare region: this social movement, whose struggles had hitherto focused on protests and demands, transformed itself into a political movement equipped with a strategy for taking and holding power and a strong cultural identity. The MAS's practices and representations changed the rules of politics in the region and the country, and turned its leader into Bolivia's Head of State.

The MAS's brilliant trajectory poses a series of questions for the social sciences in Bolivia. Is it a grouping of social movements, a populist phenomenon or a new indigenous-*campesino* left-wing movement? How should we categorise the form of collective action developed by the coca-growers' movement? Is it a political party or a trade union network? What are the ideological and symbolic points of reference that accompany and guide this praxis? Our response to these questions is to study the MAS as a completely new form of collective action that can be summed up in the concept of the *political movement*.

Although the idea of the political movement is not new, it has not been paid the same amount of attention as social movement theory. In our judgement, the MAS has characteristics that are without precedent in Bolivian history, and it is therefore unsatisfactory to define it as a federation of social movements (even though it is closely linked to them) or as a political party (even though it meets the official requirements to participate in elections). What is new about the

MAS, its *differentia specifica*, is that it is a political movement that acts in the borderlands between civil society and the political system of representative democracy.

The MAS codifies the mobilisations and representations of various different social organisations and projects them onto institutionalised politics through participation in elections, although it aspires to change the rules of the political game. The passage from protest and demand-based struggles to the political movement does not come about spontaneously. It occurs when the movement's leadership designs a strategy for taking power – in other words, when it acts in accordance with a strategic calculation that implies codifying and coordinating social protest in specifically political terms. While corporate and sectoral social movements fight against political exclusion and for access to resources and benefits, political movements question the political system's norms and procedures and propose to reform them. In other words, they tear up the rules of the game; they “upset the applecart.”

The MAS is not a party-political structure or a closed ideological community in the style of the old left-wing parties obsessed with preserving the purity of their ideological castles. The *instrument* is first and foremost a “system of signs,” and the purpose of our work is to study the symbolic structures that constitute collective action, going beyond the hypothetical “rationality” of ideologies and political practices. The emergence of the MAS poses some important problems for understanding political struggles. The political dimension is undoubtedly relevant to the structuring of collective action. Although this statement may seem obvious, it is in fact problematic because several different theoretical, psychological or culturalist approaches have specifically questioned the excessive weight given to the political explanation. Nevertheless (and this point is important), the emergence and development of a political movement – the MAS, in this case – certainly takes place in a context with possibilities and constraints, but, as Alberto Melucci (2000: 31) has pointed out, this does not explain the meanings inherent in collective action, as these are constructed by the actors involved. In other words, inserting the *movement* in a space that has constraints but also opportunities should not lead us to analyse it as a malfunction or anomaly in the political system; in fact, the system's rules can be transformed thanks to the collective action.

Likewise, in order to understand the specificity of the MAS as a form of collective action, we need to get beyond the idea – typical of liberal-institutionalist thinking – that politics has precise, legally consecrated institutional limits, beyond which lies a praxis that negates it, i.e. “anti-politics”. This prompts us to doubt the accuracy of certain concepts that have been reified by the social sciences, particularly the dichotomies between public and private, social world and political sphere, State and civil society. On the contrary, and leading on from the ideas of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1998), we need to recognise that politics takes place precisely on the fringes of the institutional system, where a dissent or conflict with the established power is generated. This should not be seen merely as a coming together of forces against a government, but fundamentally as a foundational act that forges political subjects whose vocation is to universalise the conflict. It is on the fringes of politics, says Rancière, where the movement that renews politics begins again unceasingly.

The political borderlands and the “construction” of the enemy

The consolidation of the system of representative democracy coincided with a new hegemonic project taken forward by economic and political elites of the neoliberal tendency. The new political arrangement’s strategic device was the institutionalisation of the party system, which was assigned one essential role: to mediate between the State and civil society. The epitome of this system was composed of the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario - MNR), Nationalist Democratic Action (Acción Democrática Nacionalista - ADN) and the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria - MIR), and other smaller political parties such as Condepa and Unidad Cívica Solidaridad converged opportunistically around it. The traditional parties took turns to hold power in fluid circulation, through coalition governments and pacts between the governing party and the opposition. This was the key feature of the neoliberal political model, also known as “pact-based democracy”.³ It was an arrangement that ensured that the country could be governed in the short term but it unleashed centrifugal effects in the long term: it introduced an instrumental political rationality and lacked the flexibility needed to develop deliberation processes for demands to be negotiated with civil society; it also legitimated political transaction

³ Pact for democracy (1985), Patriotic agreement (1989), Mega-coalition (1997) and Pact for Bolivia (2002).

procedures based on a new clientelist and patronage-based model. This structured a party corporativism which, in contrast to the authoritarian and centralist state corporativism of the nationalist period, distributed power among different parties, each of which controlled clientelist networks through which group interests were represented and mediated. At the same time, each of the partners in the “pact-based democracy” set up networks of power inside their organisations, which distorted reform processes. The crisis of the political parties called into question their leadership, mediation and representation roles, but also their “expressive role” that leads social groups to identify with political leaders and projects (the capacity to “embody” groups in the political arena produces mechanisms of symbolic identification between individuals). The collective action performed by these traditional parties is rooted in an ephemeral form of support that is limited to the act of voting and depends on the personality of the leaders and their specific responses to public policy issues. Their stated demands and interests therefore turned out to be negotiable, and parties with striking ideological differences such as ADN and MIR would thus abandon their principles and their ideological identity in exchange for jobs in government ministries. It is precisely this identity crisis that led to the rise and consolidation of the MAS, an organisation that sought to fill the vacuum created by the political meaninglessness of the neoliberal years. The disappearance of lucid, clearly recognisable boundaries between political parties facilitates the emergence of political movements that propose to draw new dividing lines and transform the existing balance of power.

As well as the traditional role of mediating between the social and political spheres, political organisations (parties or movements) perform a role of embodiment or identification, through which social groups are placed on the political stage, represented or made visible (Donegani and Sadoun, 1994). Thus, in the past, the so-called “class-based party” was a response to the working class demand for direct political representation in parliament. This implicitly questioned the idea of the politician as intermediary or ventriloquist, and renewed the quest for organic ties between the governors and the governed.

The emergence of a political movement cannot take place without the presence of a “constitutive Other,” the enemy or adversary, the negative referent that enables the boundary between the outside and the inside to be delineated. The construction of identity boundaries, the

differentiation of an “Us” in opposition to “Them,” constitutes the basis of political practices. This idea is particularly important to the argument presented here for two reasons. First, because it allows us to understand that the construction of political identities is a relational rather than a self-referential process; second, because identification processes always make reference to symbolic systems of opposites (indian, white; man, woman; left, right). Therefore, the existence of any identity is not conditional on the stability and coherence of a set of “cultural facts” or “ideologies.” Instead, it implies the affirmation of difference, the identification of an Other that constitutes the “outside” of a group. Moreover, in certain circumstances, when difference is exacerbated to the point where the existence of a group is called into question, this opposition can be activated so that it becomes a friend/enemy relationship; in other words, it turns into antagonism (Mouffe, 1999: 15-16).

From its very beginnings, the MAS expressed a series of antagonisms and contradictions in Bolivian society and signified them in a way that was different to the neoliberal symbolic structures, so that these were gradually replaced by a radically new emerging vision. The secret of antagonism lies precisely in inventing new languages to replace the words used and over-used by the dominant order to organise and signify both everyday experiences and political struggles (Melucci 2002).

These ideas lead us to a better understanding of how important the unceasing production of the demarcation between “friends and enemies” is in the construction of the political identity of the MAS. The obsessive, paroxysmic identification of the enemy and the constant appeal to confrontation have played a decisive role in the emergence of the political movement, because they have re-drawn the boundaries of the political field in Bolivia. This process of “construction” or “making visible” is part of the very origin of the political movement. To construct its own identity and defend itself from the attacks coming from all sides in the form of false accusations or real threats, the MAS denounces acts of sedition and evil intentions. In his election campaign and post-election speeches, Evo Morales declares that there is a conspiracy against the *instrument*. Sometimes this is blamed on the right-wing parties, sometimes on foreign agents; the enemies are equally likely to be the DEA, the large landowners in the eastern lowlands of Bolivia, the US embassy, the police or the traditional parties, and even conspirators inside the

movement itself. However, it is interesting to note that, in contrast to other parties of a more indianist tendency, MAS speeches do not often use the word *q'aras* (whites, mestizos), perhaps because the MAS has reached an agreement with many different sectors of the population and also with *q'aras* abroad, particularly in Europe, where Evo displays his indigenous identity with very successful results. There is not such a marked ethnic characterisation of the opponent as, for example, in the Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti (MIP), Felipe Quispe's party. The unmasking of the enemy is, of course, essential to achieve group unity. This real or imagined enemy is everywhere, although in the early days of the MAS the coca growers really were surrounded by adversaries who sought to eradicate coca leaf crops completely.

A key feature of politics is, of course, the struggle to establish a legitimate classification system that keeps social groups separate. Division and conflict are not social pathologies or deficiencies in the political edifice; instead, they play an essential role in politics. Mouffe's statement regarding "the impossibility of having a positive without there being a trace of negativity" (1999: 159) reiterates the strategic argument of contemporary theories on identity, which see it as the construction of meaning on the basis of social relationships. Following on from this, identity is defined as an ongoing process of creating meaning to interpret similarity and difference.

The external enemy

From this analytical standpoint, we can distinguish three symbolic maps or territories on which boundaries of identity and politics have been drawn. The first boundary separates the external, foreign enemy – specifically, US imperialism – from the Bolivian "nation" and people. Thus, the MAS programme states: "First, Bolivia fell into the clutches of the English. Later, it passed to the Yankees and was subjected to the rule of transnational companies from Europe, North America and East Asia, together with their servants the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation" (MAS, 2004: 4). This symbolic division, the foundation of all nationalisms, has been deeply rooted in the Bolivian political imagination since the Chaco War and fed into the ideology of the 1952 Revolution, the military nationalism of Ovando and Torres (1969-1971) and the discourse of the "old" Bolivian left (Antezana, 1983). The opposition between the nation and the anti-nation (the term used by Carlos Montenegro, the

ideologue of revolutionary nationalism), between the fatherland and the anti-fatherland, has significant appeal because it enables the “Us” to be expanded to include a whole range of social groups. These are not limited to the *plebs*, the most impoverished population group, but include the middle classes and even “patriotic” sectors of the business community. Only the oligarchy remains outside the protective cordon of this territory, in order to allow for antagonism or the “populist rupture” (Laclau, 2005).

This opposition is clearly visible in two social demands that are presented via the MAS: the defence of coca leaf and the nationalisation of oil and gas resources. On important occasions, which are ritualised in order to communicate the messages more effectively, Evo Morales wears a huge garland of coca leaves round his neck. There is always coca on the table when the MAS leadership sits down to talk. On several occasions, the movement has staged mass coca-chewing sessions in public as a protest symbol, and every march organised by the MAS has been accompanied by the delicate leaf. Coca is omnipresent: it is the founding myth of the MAS.

In the early days, at the end of the 1980s, the coca growers were fighting against eradication policies that were based on the systematic use of violence. The coca grower was stigmatized as a drug trafficker and coca leaf was banned worldwide by the United States. The coca growers’ resistance therefore sought to remove that stigma. The symbolic struggle became the essence of the coca-growers’ movement: the coca leaf was not a curse but a legacy from the ancestors who, in turn, had received it from the gods; it was therefore a sacred leaf. But millions of small farmers and indigenous people in different regions of the country also depended on coca for their livelihoods. The destruction of the crop, instigated by foreign powers, was not only unjust and irrational from the economic point of view; it was also an unpardonable affront both to Andean and Amazonian culture and to the country’s sovereignty. Coca leaf began to acquire meanings it had formerly lacked.

As well as its direct message, its reference to something real, and – to borrow a concept from the field of linguistics – its meaning, every object of discourse can take on connotations and enter the realm of signification, as Roland Barthes (1957) observed. Everything has the potential to belong to the domain of the sign, and therefore become myth. So it is with the myth of coca: the

sacred leaf, whose origins are almost unidentifiable, takes on qualities that enshrine it as a symbol of the reconquest of national sovereignty, a weapon in the anti-imperialist struggle, the representative symbol of a “civilisation.” The meanings already attributed to the coca leaf were not erased, but other connotations were added over time so that it ended up uniting multiple contradictions. It ceased to be a mere social demand and became a symbol, by definition ambivalent and powerful.

This symbolic displacement involved politicising coca through the construction of a “chain of equivalences” (Laclau, 2005) that allows the defence of coca to be easily associated with the defence of Andean culture, sovereignty and national dignity, which are felt to be threatened by US imperialism. Coca is like a symbolic constellation because it includes sets of meanings that come together in a certain space and around the same nucleus. In each set there are correlations, lines of convergence, points of connection and similarities that reveal the same stereotypes, tropes and images, which can be read as the symbolic structures of coca leaf. The symbol undergoes a transformation and a kind of metonymy occurs: part of its meaning is extracted and given value, and thus stands for the whole.

The external enemy was also made visible through the presence of the transnational oil companies that started to operate in Bolivia, encouraged by the economic policy that Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada introduced and all the neoliberal governments in succession took forward. These companies were perceived as part of the “foreign power” that was appropriating the country’s natural resources with the complicity of the elites. The oil companies were not just associated with US imperialism, however. They were also seen as representing a more diffuse but equally powerful enemy: globalisation.

If those are the meanings of difference, what are the contours of the “Us”? The people and the State. The State is perceived as the guarantor of sovereignty, the economic agent that produces and distributes wealth, but also as the institution that symbolically embodies the nation. Thus, the MAS “rejects all forms of imperialist penetration or subjugation (e.g. the FTAA) that seek to exert domination over the will of the Bolivian people, the national State or the wealth and destiny of the Republic” (MAS 2004: 20). In fact, the entire political, economic and cultural

programme of the MAS pivots around the idea of a strong State: “We will recover ownership of the strategic state enterprises (YPFB, ENDE, ENTEL, LAB, ENFE, Comibol, etc.) to ensure a balanced use of resources that does not damage our environment. The profits they generate will no longer go abroad. 100 per cent of these profits will be used to implement social policies that benefit this country’s majorities” (*ibid*).

Nevertheless, the key symbolic structure is “the people,” the “simple, hard-working people,” the “dispossessed and marginalised.” The movement’s main election slogan was “*Somos pueblo, somos MAS*,” which carries the dual meaning of “we are the people, we are the MAS” and “we are the people, we are the majority.” On this level, the MAS discourse differs from the traditional (working) class-based appeal of the old left because the “people” of the MAS is a symbolic structure rather than the real set of impoverished or oppressed social groups. “The people” is a successful combination of demands and representations emanating from various different sectors of society, not just the coca growers. These groups only come together because between them and the adversary there lies what Laclau (2005) called a “principle of antagonism,” a power difference. This antagonism operates as a result of the combination of the different fractures that exist in Bolivian society, which merge together in a higher-order contradiction.

Thus far, it might be said that the MAS is a phenomenon that can be described as a populist nationalism; Stefanoni (2003) was not wrong to define the MAS as a “plebeian nationalism.” Things seem to be more complicated than that, however, because the movement also employs other dimensions of identity. Before analysing them, we need to return to the idea of “identity boundaries.” In sociological terms, it can be said that identity is a social relationship rather than a component of culture. In the production of meaning, interaction itself is what constitutes identity, which can be thought of as a symbolic boundary that separates the members from the non-members of a social group. Identity boundaries are also shifting and porous; they can be crossed and constantly redefined depending on the way in which we perceive the Other. The boundary is neither clear nor static; it can involve many different planes which may divide or overlap.

Ethnic and cultural boundaries

The second boundary drawn by the MAS has an ethnic-cultural referent and separates the arena dominated by internal colonialism from the indigenous and first peoples. Here we find a displacement of the meanings typical of revolutionary nationalism, which were produced around the equivalences of people=nation/oligarchy=antination. The MAS has introduced an ethnic view of political and cultural processes that draws on the *katarista* discourse and the discourses of the indigenous peoples of the lowlands. “Internal colonialism has failed to build a modern nation-state,” so that the task in hand is no longer to renew the indigenous foundations of the “imagined nation,” but rather to build a multinational and pluricultural State (MAS, 2004: 5-6). Thus, the national State is deeply racist and must be founded anew on the basis of indigenous autonomies.

The MAS posits an opposition between the “mechanistic paradigm of western culture,” which destroys nature, and the Andean-Amazonian paradigm that maintains a “symbiotic relationship with the environment, in total equilibrium with nature.” In other words, a dividing line is drawn against “the Newtonian paradigm which believes that the world is an inanimate machine governed by enduring mathematical laws.” It goes on to state that “we are adversaries of the age of enlightenment as theorised by the English philosophers and economists John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, and of the economic ideas of Adam Smith, all of them ideologues of today’s industrial society, the so-called modern society” (*ibid*: 7). Modernity is linked to the market economy, which relentlessly seeks to “achieve the objectives of the world view of western culture.” In short, we are not just dealing with a political cleavage but an antagonism between civilisations, to coin a term (*ibid*: 1-2). This is why the MAS proposed “the urgent need to take forward the political, structural, administrative and institutional transformation of the National State, recognising the autonomy of the indigenous nations so that they can guarantee public freedoms, human rights, citizens’ prerogatives and national sovereignty” (*ibid*: 18). Another symbolic classification that carries a great deal of weight is the one that separates liberal democracy from the Andean form of community organisation, which has been able to preserve collective values and solidarity against the individualism and egotism of capitalist modernity.

This ethnic boundary is not in fact occlusive, however; it is constantly reformulated depending on who the MAS is talking to. According to statements made by people who belong to the movement or belonged to it in the past, the MAS discourse, particularly in the speeches of Evo Morales, has undergone a metamorphosis. To start with, it did not include the ethnic-cultural

antagonism and instead set forth a *campesinista* vision that reflected the identity of the small farmers in the valleys of Cochabamba, constructed on the basis of a revolutionary trade unionism that emphasised their rights as smallholders and citizens, as well as negotiated interaction with local power structures (Gordillo, n.d.). In fact, this rhetoric reflected the identification of the coca growers in the tropics as “settlers” or “coca farmers” and not as indigenous people, a category that was instead claimed by the Yuracaré or the Yuqui, thanks to the influence of the indigenous movement in the lowlands. In a second phase, the MAS rhetoric absorbed the influence of *katarista* indianism, drawn principally from the discourse used by Felipe Quispe to challenge the State during the conflict in the year 2000.

Gradually, as people aligned with the indianist tendency joined the MAS, the discourse swung towards that paradigm. Nevertheless, from 1999 until Evo Morales took office as president, the MAS clearly differentiated itself from the more radical indianist proposals associated with the MIP’s Aymara Nation thesis, because its strategic objective was to expand the range of groups it appealed to. While the MAS was drawing flexible political boundaries, the MIP was hardening its views. Evo settled the dispute in the electoral arena and won over the supporters of both Felipe Quispe and Alejo Véliz (who had unsuccessfully put forward the thesis of the “Quechua Nation”).

The ethnic identity of the “settlers” in the Chapare was basically Quechua and Aymara, and the *campesinista* discourse shifted and linked up with the ethnic dimension, so that the *campesino* identity based on coca leaf started to be combined with an ethnic-cultural identity. This melting pot of origins was eventually expressed in the category of smallholder coca farmer combined with an indigenous identity. In the process, the reference to a common ancestor allowed them to come closer to other groups.

Furthermore, Evo Morales took office as President in Tiwanaku. The ceremony was attended by indigenous leaders from all over the American continent – Morales spoke of *Abya Yala* – bringing gifts that symbolically conferred power on the new authority. Heads of state, ambassadors and personalities came from all over the world, joining young Europeans and North Americans from the New Age spiritual movement in search of light and strength from the sacred

stones of the old world. The *amautas* officiated at the carefully planned rite. Evo wore a poncho and a ceremonial *ch'ulu* (cap). He spoke with one finger raised before the crowd listening to him, standing in the middle of the Gate of the Sun, which the pre-Hispanic peoples had adored as the god that gave them power and the light that enabled life. It was the reconstruction or invention of the investiture of a new Inca or perhaps a Jach'a Mallku (great Andean leader) in the first decade of the 21st century.

The MAS as embodiment of anti-neoliberalism

The third boundary differentiates neoliberalism and its operators – the established or traditional political parties – from the social movements, particularly the MAS. This is the axial point, the main dichotomical classification that frequently appears in the foreground, because it enabled the MAS to express the demands of different social groups affected by the economic policy and political exclusion put in place by neoliberalism. According to the statement made by a leader, during election campaigns the MAS “emphasised a discourse that was anti-neoliberal and anti-political parties in order to win the support of the impoverished middle classes and all the other groups hit by neoliberalism,” and managed to embody this anti-neoliberal subject.

The historic number of votes obtained by the MAS in 2005 cannot be explained without the framework of political opportunity shaped by a complex and profound crisis in the state and, in particular, the collapse of the political party system. But it is also impossible to understand those results without explaining the political strategy that allowed the *instrument* to embody the desire for change in many sectors of society, not just the *campesino* movement, who were tired of the corrupt, patronage-based political system and an economic policy that was untransparent, inefficient and demagogic. The MAS managed to polarise the country between the people and the elites and assumed the leadership of both, especially in the west of the country where the upper class was suspicious of the power of the business elite in Santa Cruz. The moderate scattering of votes characteristic of previous elections became polarised voting in two large blocks: the left and the right, which together captured 80 per cent of the vote. The MAS had finally seduced the middle classes. One of its correct decisions from that point of view was the choice of Álvaro García Linera as its candidate for vice-president. An intellectual, university

lecturer and political analyst with a respected track record, he symbolised the unity of the Bolivian left and represented the middle classes. For those sectors of society, García Linera was the symbol of intellectual and moral renewal.

In short, what characterises the MAS in symbolic terms is not the supposed dialectical synthesis of Marxism, indianism and nationalism, but the way in which these elements are specifically combined depending on the context and the political adversary. Therefore, what appears to be ideological and programmatic “vagueness” or “inconsistency” should not be seen as a sort of ideological underdevelopment. In fact, it constitutes the very key to the explanation because it reflects that this constellation is typical of a “radically heterogeneous social terrain” (Laclau, 2005: 128), that only the MAS was able to interpret. It is probably for this reason that such semantic diversity coexists in the symbols used or instrumentalised by the movement; it is this that facilitates the widespread adherence of numerous social groups who recognise themselves in one or another of these signs.

The movement managed to assemble symbolic structures that were fed by the three identity boundaries. These were radically different to neoliberalism’s system of values and representations, and they allowed the MAS to challenge the State and the political system as well as appealing to civil society, thus transforming society’s entire field of meanings. In addition, the call to unity is something like the symbolic capital of the MAS: the solidarity, complementarity and reciprocity spoken of by both the grassroots members of the movement and its leadership.

When Evo talks of conspiracy, he always refers to different enemies even though the discourse remains the same. The enemy swings in the wind of the moment, but the discourse resists the draught; it is impermeable because there needs to be an enemy – it is what keeps group identity standing. This symbolic structure can reach the heights of myth. French political scientist Raoul Girardet (1999: 11) suggests considering the discourse on the “enemy conspiracy” as a mythical tale whose function is to shape a coherent and complete belief system with no other legitimacy than its mere affirmation and no other logic than its free development. In other words, the myth is thought of as a call to join the movement, an incitement to action, an exceptionally powerful energy stimulant. The myth of the enemy is always associated with other constellations such as

the myth of the saviour, the myth of the golden age and the myth of unity. There is not much difference between the great myths of traditional societies and those of modern society; in both cases, there is the same fluidity and also the same vagueness in their respective contours (*ibid*).

This variety of symbols that cohabit in the movement's ideology can be explained by Lévi-Strauss's notion of bricolage (1989 [1962]), which involves working with the materials that are at hand, without a defined plan, through means and procedures initially designed for a different purpose. It is possible to establish a relationship between this course of action and mythical thought, because the latter draws on a repertoire of instruments whose composition is irregular and to some extent limited; nevertheless, when no other resources are available, the only option is to use what already exists and re-accommodate it in a sort of intellectual bricolage (*ibid*: 57).

This idea of bricolage is a feature of human rationality as opposed to scientific rationality. Surely for that reason, Levi-Strauss notes that it is a way of thinking that generates myth. Thus we can understand that in the construction of the MAS ideology there is a series of elements that are not linked to each other *a priori*, but which form a constellation that carries meaning. The movement has collected a variety of elements and fused them together in an amalgam of new meanings which throws out messages in all directions and appeals to many who recognise themselves in them.

The dramatic genius

Sacrifice, heroism and even recklessness are passions that unleash or accompany collective action. Craig Calhoun (1999) says that these emotions, characteristic of social movements and by definition the opposite of rational thinking, cannot be explained by theories of rational action based on particular interests and rational calculation. Likewise, to ensure that the motivations and volitions of the people involved are not lost sight of in structuralist explanatory models, the expressive dimension must be included in the analysis of collective action. Calhoun's argument coincides here with the views of the "new social movements" theorists such as Jean Cohen (1985), the above-mentioned Alberto Melucci (2000) and Alain Touraine (1973), for whom the construction and legitimation of a social identity is more important in the analysis of social movements than strategic calculation, whether for taking power or to achieve certain political

reform objectives. Be that as it may, the important idea is that collective action cannot be understood without recourse to an analysis of the struggle over meaning, the battle to ensure that a social identity is recognised by society. This is why political movements are so “intensely expressive” and obsessed by organisation, discourse and dramatics. Melucci goes further and refers to them as a “system of signs” that speaks of what is happening and reveals the molecular changes taking place in society; thus, they act as “prophets of the present,” assigning a new shape and a new face to power (2002, 2-3 and 60).

The emergence of the MAS, which is inseparable from the collective action of the coca growers’ movement in the tropics of Cochabamba from which it arose, cannot be contemplated without considering that expressive, signifying dimension. The coca growers’ marches in 1994 and 1995, their resistance to the plans to eradicate coca crops, the “coca war,” the expulsion of Evo Morales from Parliament in 2002, the deaths, the acts of heroism and the narrative that the players weave from them – all are indispensable for the analysis of the political movement. As we already emphasised, this does not imply that collective action dispenses with strategic reasoning. Our aim is to stress that the construction of a political identity is complex, perhaps because it does not exist prior to the struggle but is forged in the course of successive mobilisations, defeats and victories. As Calhoun correctly says, it is a happening, not the reflection of the structural position of a social group. The weaknesses and fissures in the so-called “structuralist models,” once dominant in the sociology of collective action, led to the emergence of alternative approaches that have explored the emotional dimensions of mobilisation processes.

If collective action is basically a “system of meaning” that is expressed through symbols and emblems of identity, we might add that identity is something that must necessarily be externalised – narrated – in order to exist. With regard to the subject at hand, a complex structure comes to light. Natalia Camacho studied the two great coca growers’ marches (1994 and 1995) to assess the experience of negotiation and conflict with the government in a situation in which each side was exerting pressure on the other. According to the working hypothesis in her research, the coca growers’ march can be seen as “a pressure ‘tactic’ aimed at creating ‘public spaces’ for negotiation, not just with the government... but also with public opinion” (1999: 7). In other words, pressure is exerted in order to negotiate from a more advantageous position. This

instrumental vision forms part of a long political tradition of mobilisation typical of trade unionism and the Bolivian left. Nevertheless, the march also “represents a social group’s ‘desperate’ recourse to revelation,” through which different social groups seek to make themselves visible to a country that has turned its back on them (*ibid*). Here there would be an expressive function by means of which the latent, statistical group becomes a real group that sees itself as taking action en masse. This argument is valuable because it indicates that the mere act of mobilisation by an excluded group points *a priori* to innumerable political problems: exclusion, subordination, etc. It refers us to the way in which the relationship between the State and social groups is organised and immediately raises the issue of these groups’ autonomy.

From the standpoint of political anthropology, the idea of sacrifice invites us to think that the analytical model of the ritual, as applied to traditional societies, can also be used for contemporary societies, particularly in the domain of politics. In accordance with its classical meaning, ritual can be understood as a symbolic, habitual and socially modulated behaviour whose purpose is to differentiate and revitalise symbols. Specifically, the political ritual has four characteristics: first, it enables identity to be represented through the association between people and symbols, founding myths, and the boundaries between friend and enemy; second, leaders use it to assert their authority over the group and give legitimacy to their role of representing or speaking for people; third, it encourages solidarity and unity between sympathisers; fourth, it makes it possible to construct political reality because certain events or personalities enable reality to be interpreted and other visions to be challenged as inimical (Kertzer, 1996).

The best example is the self-sacrifice that takes place during marches. When demands are not addressed through conventional channels, the mechanisms for exerting pressure shift to another level with the aim of gaining the public’s sympathy due to the sacrifice it involves. The march “implies a major mobilisation of human and material resources” (Camacho, 1999: 14) and is more important than the road blockade or the hunger strike. Bodies are exposed, firstly to the elements and the adversities of inclement weather, and secondly to the television cameras and, by extension, to the public eye. Tormented bodies, bleeding feet, people lying on the ground in a faint, hungry and tired children – all are on display. The march is an appeal to intimate, deep-seated emotions. It is a mechanism for blaming “the Other,” but also invariably leads to a

network of solidarity forming around the marchers, which holds the promise of future alliances (Contreras 1994).

Another dramatic resource is the symbolic takeover of cities. Pablo Dávalos says that the “takeover” of a city, particularly the main square, is a political event that “is inscribed within the tradition of indigenous uprisings; it has symbolic connotations and forms part of the symbolic imaginaries of indigenous peoples” (2001). This author has studied the Inti Raymi festival in Cotacachi (Ecuador), one feature of which is the ritual “takeover” of the central square, in remembrance of a similar act perpetrated by the Spaniards more than five centuries ago. The occupation of the square implies a symbolic appropriation of the power to institute new referents and meanings. In the indigenous world, “the march to the capital, to the city, mobilising the community to “take over” the city, to take ownership of that faraway centre,” (*ibid*) may involve the symbolic universe of the festival and the ritual ceremony. It is the revolt against the means of domination, which are not just economic but also ritual, ideological, symbolic. The takeover, the march to the capital city, the mass rally – all the acts carried out by the MAS en masse have a dual meaning. Firstly, they demonstrate its capacity to mobilise people, the force of numbers, the strength of the masses, and secondly they allow individuals to see themselves through the eyes of their equals as part of that collective body, and therefore as different from the rest.

Conclusions

The unique experience of the Movement Toward Socialism has called into question the established system of classifying political practices and institutions under the principle that these are separate from the social “world.” Our finding that the political movement involves both spheres and is constantly mobilising a dual code – political and social – should not lead us to categorise it as a prime example of “anti-politics.” On the contrary, the evidence requires us to reflect on a new form of collective action and implicitly challenges the consistency of political theories based on clearly differentiating between these two domains.

The political movement is first and foremost a “system of signs” that codifies political reality and destabilises the collective certainties and beliefs instated by the adversary in order to

establish a new system of meaning. One important symbolic device is the marking out of political boundaries. From this point of view, the MAS has produced and created a series of different oppositions and political classifications: imperialism/nation, internal colonialism /indigenous and first peoples, etc. The key point of the argument we have been developing throughout this article is this: the plurality of demands raised by the MAS, whose origins go back to the interests of various different social groups, became unified thanks to the presence of the Other, the negative referent that enabled an antagonism to be created between two political fields: neoliberalism/anti-neoliberalism. Throughout this article, we have stressed that identities are not immutable realities, because their content is re-signified depending on the interlocutor and the context: they are relational and strategic.

Collective action cannot exist without the production of meaning. But what is the function of the symbol from the perspective of the political movement? It is to bring about a political practice autonomous of the system of meanings put in place by the State: to provide strong ideas and supply persuasive images through which the political struggle can be grasped on the basis of new codes; in short, to construct events by using alternative cognitive patterns. To sum up, the MAS has constructed (and reconstructed) a symbolic apparatus for the purpose of combating neoliberalism's belief system, unifying its supporters and encouraging action.

By transposing various different elements that converge in its own, original ideology, the MAS has put together a bricolage of symbols that have turned into others that are denser in meaning, transcendent. This willingness to appropriate figures so different to each other – Túpac Katari, Che Guevara, Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, among others – has led to the adherence of sympathisers whose life histories are very diverse and dissimilar. These symbols have been externalised through a dramatisation, a staging that has made their appeal very effective. This, as we have explained, may be anchored in the imaginaries of indigenous peoples and in their ritual devices such as sacrifice, the myth of the golden age, etc. Evo Morales did not invent these structures. They already existed in the imaginaries and mental images of the Bolivian people, particularly the different indigenous and *campesino* groups. But he did update and transform them in a process that brought about a new configuration of symbols and meanings. In short, the MAS embodied the spirit of the age.

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Translated by Jorge Komadina Rimassa

Translation from **T'inkazos**, La Paz, v. 11 n. n.23-24, Mar 2008.