

Collaboration in a Postcolonial ‘Contact Zone’: The Challenges of Intercultural Education

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Preliminary Draft. Comments Welcome.

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, I received an email from Ana¹, an Aymara community educator from Bolivia who recently graduated from the Program for Training in Intercultural Bilingual Education for Andean Countries or the PROEIB Andes. The PROEIB (as I will refer to this program throughout this talk) is a master’s program for indigenous students based out of Cochabamba, Bolivia and supported by international development agencies. Since 1996, this program has trained indigenous men and women from at least six different South American countries with the aim of creating a critical mass of indigenous professionals who will work toward the advancement of an intercultural bilingual education agenda.² Ana, the Aymara woman I just mentioned, was responding to an email in which I told her a little about my new research project: an evaluation of the political impact of the PROEIB. She responded almost immediately, and with much enthusiasm. “For me,” she wrote, “the PROEIB Andes marked a milestone in my life; it has helped

me be a better aimara, a better professional, and to open my heart and mind in order to take on life's diversity, including its conflicts and tensions.”

I listened to a very different assessment of the PROEIB during a conversation earlier this year with Carmen, an Aymara intellectual who was among the PROEIB's first students and who now teaches at an intercultural bilingual education program run through a university in Bolivia. Carmen described the PROEIB as a colonial institution where, in her view, non-indigenous academics imposed a discourse of *interculturalidad* (or interculturality) which was superficial and folkloric. When I asked her to expand, she explained: “Interculturality. A matter of respecting he who is different, even if he steps on you, even if he kills you; you must respect the other.” And she added, “in such a racist and colonial country, to talk about cultural respect is suicide.”

Today I would like to offer some preliminary thoughts about the constitution of the PROEIB by taking these two visions, from two Aymara women, as points of departure. Is the PROEIB an intercultural haven, or is it in fact another imperial endeavor? To begin, it is useful to think about the PROEIB as a sort of “contact zone,” a term borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt's discussion of colonial encounters in which, in her words, “peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish on-going relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt 1992: 4). The PROEIB's founders sought to turn this concept on its head and create a horizontal and democratic space where colonial legacies could be challenged, where knowledge could be decolonized, and where power relations and hierarchies could be minimized, if not erased. In other words, they sought to create an intercultural space, one that moved beyond simply the

recognition of cultural difference—beyond multiculturalism—and instead promoted *intercultural* relationships and collaborations between indigenous and non-indigenous actors.

However, for a variety of reasons the program has found itself wrestling with the legacies of coercion, inequality, and conflict that tend to define relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous interlocutors in Latin America. It has been accused by many of training a certain kind of indigenous subject, the so-called “indio permitido” (or “authorized Indian”) who works within the parameters of what state (and international) entities deem “safe” (Hale and Millamán, 2005). As Silvia Rivera, Rosabel Millamán, Charlie Hale, and others have detailed elsewhere, this kind of subject emerged in the era of multicultural reforms that were intimately aligned with neoliberal policies throughout Latin America. Indigenous activists working outside of these boundaries are thus deemed unsafe, subversive, or in this new era of global terror, terrorists. The PROEIB is part of the legacies of this time in Bolivia, and for many it is no more than an instrument of colonial and imperial projects inserted in the region as one way to manage and control (indigenous) difference. In other words, it trains and crafts safe and compliant indigenous subjects who are then placed in positions of power at the level of government ministries, universities, international entities, and non-governmental organizations.

Yet, the different impressions from the two Aymara women I cited earlier show that the PROEIB’s story is not as simple as that; not an easy one to tell. It is messy, complex, and contradictory. Accordingly, this paper is only a preliminary exploration of the ways in which progressive politics, colonial legacies, and pedagogical practices come together in unexpected and often contradictory ways at the PROEIB. It is also an

opportunity to think about the real impact that this space has had on the professional and political lives and identities of the approximately 150 indigenous students who have attended and graduated from the program in the last ten years. I do this by analyzing some of the impressions that the directors, instructors, students, and others have shared with me over the past few months.

In this presentation, I will share some very preliminary thoughts about research that is still very much ongoing. To organize my thinking a bit, I use Pratt's suggestive notion of a contact approach, one she characterizes in the following way:

A 'contact' perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized...not in terms of separateness.. but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power (Pratt 1992: 7).

This approach then raises the following questions that we can ask about the PROEIB. What kinds of subjects are being constituted at the PROEIB? What are the "interlocking understandings" that students, instructors, and others have about the kind of project that the PROEIB represents? How do various actors view and negotiate the asymmetrical relations of power? While in many ways we can think of the PROEIB as inspired by the imperialism of good intentions, the testimonies of students, even those who are highly critical of the program, push us to consider a more complicated understanding of the cultural politics and unintended consequences of this space.

PRODUCING INDIGENOUS SUBJECTS

As I began field research for this project, I sat down to speak with an administrator at the University of San Simon, where the PROEIB is housed. Like all others before her, this administrator praised the work conducted at the PROEIB, and proudly announced that it was one of their only “star” programs. I thought back to the first time I was at the PROEIB, back in 1998 as I conducted dissertation fieldwork. I too saw this program as a fascinating and important space where individual and collective ideas about indigeneity were continuously negotiated, and where local politics (at both ideological and material levels) were deeply affected by the global dimensions of indigenous political struggles. This was a place where men and women from over sixteen different South American indigenous groups gathered to share similarities and differences in their struggles and lives, and where they engaged and challenged both western and indigenous forms of knowledge. This included learning and practicing English, Aymara, Quechua, and French; learning how to use computers and email; and reading texts by Bourdieu, Foucault, and Bakhtin among others.

I shared my first impressions with Cecilia (the administrator I was speaking with), and asked her what it was about the program that she admired most. Cecilia immediately said that the most important aspect of this program was the foreign influence that it brought to the campus, the university students, and in particular to the students at the PROEIB. She was referring specifically to the directors of the program—one is Peruvian and the other is Austrian—and to the many European and North American lecturers that walked the PROEIB’s halls. I asked her what about this “foreign influence” was most significant in her view. It is worth quoting her answer at length:

This influence will contribute...to [changing] a community.

My hope is that the resentments [the students] have carried through generations disappear and instead turn into what we all want: a multilingual, intercultural country where different races...are not resentful of each other. At first I was scared of the students at the PROEIB. When I went there for the first time I felt rejected. My skin crawled from listening to them talk. But now these people seem to have changed. Of course, I always tell [the directors] that they must focus not only on pedagogy, but also on making these people understand that...we must forget what happened 500 years ago because I was not alive 500 years ago. That is interculturalidad: forgetting about all that from 500 years ago. These people need to understand, and they will understand. But it takes time. And we also need to remember that not all of us will be university professors. We also need laborers. But many of these people will end up in important places, like the ministry of education, and it is good that they will have a different attitude; a more open and welcoming attitude.

It is important to note that Cecilia's comments were made in the context of a tense and violent period in the history of Cochabamba. Only a week before this conversation took place the city had erupted in violent clashes that pit coca farmers and peasants from the countryside against white, mostly young, male, city dwellers. She had also referred to the recent election of Evo Morales with unease, proclaiming at one point in our conversation

that “if [Morales] could, he would execute all of us [who are not indigenous].” It was clear that at least for this administrator, the PROEIB was an important step toward the production of a different kind of indigenous subject, one that would learn to let go of resentments and, she hoped, one that would signal a more “intercultural” future for Bolivia.

But what, then, does interculturalidad really mean? How one answers this question entails significantly different political consequences. According to two Mapuche graduates of the program, the PROEIB did not advocate a “true” interculturality. In the offices of a Chilean government agency for indigenous development, I spoke with David and Claudia, both of whom had been a part of the first graduating class. When I asked them what they meant by saying that the PROEIB did not promote true interculturalidad, David answered with the following statement: “The PROEIB is very clear. The directors and many of the teachers say, ‘we will prepare these Indians to do something different’; but, they never imagined that we could actually be leaders in the social and political developments of our countries.” This comment reflects a widely shared view, among students, that the PROEIB’s heavy emphasis on linguistics and seeming lack of attention to the politics of struggle creates a space that removes the political edge from indigenous cultural politics.

But is this critique valid? Can we really declare the PROEIB one more example of the imperialism of good intentions, another version of a civilizing project meant to transform indigenous subjects? There is clearly much debate around this question, but it is worth considering some alternative readings of the program. To begin with, it is important to note that this is not simply a case of non-indigenous voices speaking at

indigenous students. The PROEIB has included several indigenous faculty members that have left their own mark on the pedagogical practices of the program. One teacher, a Quechua intellectual who I will call Fausto, has worked for decades on questions of indigenous education. Earning a PhD in England and having worked in various national and international programs, Fausto is hardly a cog in a colonial apparatus, but an important and independent voice in the formation of indigenous policies. Though he sees some problems in the current incarnation of indigenous education, as someone who has worked during times of military dictatorship and during times when there was no interest among international funders to support these kinds of initiatives, Fausto is hardly ready to declare the PROEIB a failure. Rather, he sees it as an opportunity to be seized, an opening to be pursued. His view of interculturality is also far from the pessimistic and cynical ones that many students seemed to express. Speaking in his office at the PROEIB, Fausto recalled a particular day in one of his workshops on indigenous language. In a space that included members of various language communities, students were asked to devote substantial energy to developing written and oral skills in their respective languages. Yet, when they came together, perhaps naturally, they felt it important to resort to a lingua franca, in this case the colonial language of Spanish, so that Aymaras, Mapuches, Quechuas, Guaranis and others would understand what the particular speaker wanted to convey. As students switched to Spanish, however, Fausto demanded that they stop. He insisted that they speak only in their native languages. Though students objected that their peers would not understand what they were each saying, Fausto responded that this did not matter. The point, according to Fausto, is not to be always understood, but to know how to speak, without apology and without fear. For Fausto, interculturality was

not about overcoming the cultural distance that separated different linguistic or racial groups; it was about enhancing the capabilities of all groups to have a voice and to find peace with the cultural distances that will inevitably be a part of plural societies.

Interculturality, he seemed to say, was about the importance and democratic value of listening, even if one did not always understand.

Another indigenous faculty member, who I will call Mateo, offers an additional counter-example to the view that the PROEIB sought to take the politics out of indigenous education. Mateo heads a relatively new program at the PROEIB that is called the Indigenous Leaders Training Program. The goal of this program is to identify indigenous students from various communities that would come to the PROEIB in order to develop education programs that would be implemented in their local communities. These students do not receive a degree, but are afforded the opportunity to come together and take courses in a prestigious university center, establish networks, and move between the classroom and community political organizations. This initiative was born out of a demand from community organizations and Mateo has been a powerful advocate in institutionalizing this dialogue. As I sat in on one of the program's activities, students listened to the experiences and views of two older leaders of the indigenous movement, one from the Bolivian altiplano, the other from the Bolivian lowlands. While they had different interpretations of the current context of indigenous politics in Bolivia, by listening to these leaders' trajectories in the movement, the students understood the broader importance of the learning they were acquiring. As one leader passed around pictures of indigenous peoples in chains (photographs taken in the early twentieth century and which he recovered from an archive in Spain), students understood where his passion

came from. As he passed around another photo of himself as a young man in the jungle, wearing only a loincloth, this leader joked that he didn't come to the PROEIB dressed in the same way as he was in the picture, because he did not want to, in his words, "scare the children." The laughter of the students allowed a transition to the more serious round of questions about the kind of everyday negotiations that indigenous people make to be members of their own local communities and of broader national and international ones. Rather than suggest that students should simply become good intercultural technicians, these kinds of encounters seemed to encourage them to think more boldly about who they were and what the arc of indigenous activism could look like.

It is also important to note that even the critical voices of former graduates, those who accused the PROEIB of imperialistic paternalism, were making those critiques from spaces within education ministries, international development agencies, and national universities. Malba, a Mapuche now working within the Chilean state, suggested that while some instructors wanted to "trap us within their [western] logic," the PROEIB also gave her and others the tools to debate questions of colonization and identity, internally and externally.

CONCLUSIONS

That this program has produced radicalized indigenous intellectuals and placed them in strategic points of transnational activism and education seems to suggest that the possibilities of change are very much alive in the wake of a decade of indigenous intercultural education at the PROEIB Andes. However, it also is important to explore the

role of these indigenous graduates in today's Bolivia, a country that for the first time has an indigenous president, Evo Morales.

I would like to conclude with some thoughts on this, which add yet another layer of complexity. During the week in January when I arrived in Bolivia, there had been a major shake up in the president's cabinet. The Minister of Education, an outspoken and "radical" aymara sociologist, was sacked by the president. While I can't get into all the reasons for his removal, it is crucial to note that his replacement did not come from the world of indigenous movements and intellectuals, but rather from the urban teachers' union, a powerful part of Evo's constituency. This new minister and the union he represents have never been friendly to the project of indigenous bilingual intercultural education, seeing it as a part of the neoliberal baggage of previous presidents. This move accompanies other education initiatives like literacy programs run by Cuban educators. These programs may have a strong popular and leftist component, but they leave behind any discussion of cultural difference and colonial legacies. As for the numerous indigenous professionals who were at the ministry working for the previous minister, as often happens, they too found themselves out of work. One PROEIB graduate, the critical Aymara professional who equated interculturality with cultural suicide, could not help but see the removal of an indigenous education minister as a step backward. Almost not believing her own words, she declared "things were better for us [indigenous people] with the neoliberals. Who would have thought *they* would be more open?"

In a recent article about the "menace" of multicultural neoliberalism and the emergence of the so-called "authorized indian," anthropologist Charles Hale states:

Far from opening spaces for generalized empowerment of indigenous peoples, these [multicultural neoliberal] reforms tend to empower some while marginalizing the majority. Far from eliminating racial inequity, as the rhetoric of multiculturalism seems to promise, these reforms reconstitute racial hierarchies in more entrenched forms.

While indigenous movements have made great strides over the past two decades, it is now time to pause and take stock of the limits and the political menace inherent in these very achievements (1994).

This presentation has been a first attempt at doing just that. Yet, thinking back to Pratt's notion of a contact approach helps to complicate the stark distinction made between "safe" and "unsafe" indigenous subjects; between colonial and decolonizing spaces. Can any attempt at institutionalizing interculturalism or cultural sensitivity ever escape hierarchies and unequal power relations? Is it too simple to dismiss a program like the PROEIB because it is funded, directed, and largely controlled by non-indigenous "outsiders"? It is easy to be critical of this kind of "intercultural" project. But it is hard to ignore what former students, almost invariably, say: that regardless of the problems, the PROEIB changed their lives and offered them opportunities they would have otherwise not had. While we need to look carefully at the selection of these students, and think about the role of indigenous elites in representing community demands, we should not forget about the possibility that even limited and problematic programs can be part of often dramatic social change.

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¹ All names have been changed to protect the privacy of those who spoke with me about this project.

² The program now also includes indigenous students from Mexico and Guatemala.