

# Between the Romance of Collectivism and the Reality of Individualism

## Ayllu Rhetoric in Bolivia's Landless Peasant Movement

by  
Nicole Fabricant

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*Landless Peasant Movement organizers in Bolivia recognize the ayllu as a historical memory rather than a lived reality, and it provides momentum for local-level efforts to reclaim land and productive resources from agrarian elites. Yet contradictions between the discourse of collectivism and the practice of power-hungry leaders, vertical forms of decision making, and competition for limited resources often characterize the movement's political spaces and land-reform settlements. Instead of dismissing such tensions as negating the effectiveness of leftist politics in the twenty-first century, we must move toward understanding such friction as critical to movement building.*

**Keywords:** *Agribusiness, Social movements, Natural resources, Neoliberalism*

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In a country in which 90 percent of the productive land is owned by the wealthiest 7 percent of the population, displaced farmers, informal laborers, and small-scale producers have come together to claim territorial rights and the means of production by seizing and squatting on unproductive land.<sup>1</sup> Borrowing from the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement, Bolivia's landless have peacefully occupied haciendas in the eastern region owned by well-known enemies of the left and built cooperative farms, schools, and health clinics promoting indigenous medicinal practices. Organizers have also experimented with ecologically sound and environmentally sustainable agriculture in their new settlements.

The Yuquises occupation in the northern Obispo Santiesteban region of the Department of Santa Cruz put the Movimiento Sin Tierra (Landless Peasant Movement—MST) on the map for its sustained struggles in the lowlands against large-scale soy producers, who have been expanding their landholdings northward and displacing small-scale farmers. On August 8, 2004, 500 campesinos occupied Rafael Paz-Hurtado's<sup>2</sup> hacienda, known as Los Yuquises, located 170 miles outside the city of Santa Cruz. On May 8, 2005, nine months after the initial occupation, Paz-Hurtado hired *sicarios* (assassins)

Nicole Fabricant teaches anthropology at Towson University. This article is based on dissertation fieldwork from 2005 to 2007 carried out with generous support from the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Program. The author is deeply grateful to Robert Albro, Josef Barton, Rosalind Bresnahan, Micaela di Leonardo, Daniel Goldstein, Bret Gustafson, Douglas Hertzler, Benjamin Kohl, Andrew Orta, Ademar Valda Vargas, and Mary Weismantel for their insightful comments and suggestions. She also thanks the journal's editors and staff for their hard work.

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Figure 1. The Department of Santa Cruz, showing the Obispo Santiesteban and Ichilo Regions

from peripheral communities in Santa Cruz to displace them. On May 10, these armed hit men looted homes, burned pineapple and rice fields, beat and abused women, and took several MST members hostage. The military took control and claimed ownership of the settlement until the national government could resolve the dispute. Many landless, however, had no place to go and remained homeless for several months, living with their families in plazas and parks and even under a bridge. Despite their forced relocation, the landless continued to organize as a regional bloc and pressured the national government to survey this unproductive plot of land and eventually grant title to the movement.

This 200,000-acre hacienda came to be known as Pueblos Unidos (United Towns) and represents the first settlement in Santa Cruz to be titled to the MST as part of Evo Morales's agrarian revolution.<sup>3</sup> I arrived to conduct ethnographic fieldwork with the MST in January 2006, in the wake of the Yuquises land occupation, as movement intellectuals began imagining what this settlement would look like democratically, socially, and economically. I lived with MST leaders and members in both Obispo Santiesteban and Ichilo (Figure 1), participated in local, regional, and national-level meetings and protest marches, and observed spectacular agricultural festivals and fairs.

In the course of my fieldwork I became fascinated by the use of Andean historical memory as a cultural resource for political change—for redressing structural inequality and reimagining agrarian citizenship. Many scholars have focused on the use of historical memory as central to oppositional identity formation and movement building in Bolivia (Delgado, 2006; Farthing and

Kohl, 2007; Postero, 2007; Arbona, 2008). Primarily, however, they have centered their attention on the Andean region, since the mining unions, the backbone of the labor movement, have been considered the most revolutionary segment of the Bolivian working classes. June Nash's (1979) pioneering work on the miners in Siglo XX describes historical memory (rituals from the pre-conquest era) as critical to the shaping and strengthening of working-class consciousness. Magdalena Cajias de la Vega (2006) and Juan Arbona (2008) argue that these histories and memories of struggle in the mines proved critical to "translating" miners' political and militant identities to new urban, peripheral spaces like El Alto, which became the primary site of miner "relocation" in the aftermath of the neoliberal reforms.

I focus on the transport of memories of the *ayllu*—the fundamental unit of social organization of ancient Andean communities, based on kinship groups and communally held territory—to new agricultural spaces in the eastern lowlands. What is so striking about the contemporary use of the *ayllu* is that MST members, in contrast to their Andean forebears, do not share residence or descent. Some have never lived in an *ayllu* and do not understand what it represented historically, culturally, or socially. The imagined *ayllu*, or what Mary Weismantel (2006) calls the "activist *ayllu*,"<sup>4</sup> nevertheless serves as a powerful ideological construct for "rebuilding" democratic structures and agro-ecological communities in the wake of economic destruction. Originally, the concept was rooted in rural life and focused on questions of livelihood, but now it has become a mobile framework used by indigenous peoples, urban informal workers, and intellectuals to reclaim natural resources and promote redistributive legislation. While leaders often use narratives of the *ayllu* to create a shared vision of a socialist utopia, which calls for communal title, collective forms of production, and an alternative socioeconomic model, members often have a very different understanding of landownership and farming practices. Frictions between the romance of the *ayllu* and the reality of increasing poverty, inequality, and highly individualized solutions are typical of MST communal and political spaces. Instead of glossing over these tensions, I show that "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" are critical to negotiating new political subjectivities (Tsing, 2005: 4).

In what follows, I outline the context of the MST's formation and describe the political praxis and ideologies it employs. Then I analyze the use of *ayllu* discourses in reimagining an agriculture that has been commoditized and privatized for the sake of export-oriented production. Despite the significant loss of peasant land, convincing the landless that communal ownership and collective forms of production are more beneficial in terms of long-term sustainability proves to be one of the movement's greatest challenges.

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE LANDLESS MOVEMENT

Bolivia's Landless Peasant Movement was born in the Gran Chaco region of Tarija in 2000. At that time 80 percent of the area's campesinos had no title to land. Because of this, the region had become the epicenter of intense conflicts between large-scale cattle ranchers and poor farmers. Many of the landless

lived on large estates in conditions of virtual indentured servitude or on rented land, while those who could not find work as agricultural laborers drove minibuses, cleaned houses in the city, or worked as small-scale merchants and vendors. These thousands of disenfranchised and displaced campesinos offered the MST a ready organizing base (Friedsky, 2005). It held its inaugural march “for the recovery of our Mother Earth, life, and dignity” on June 9, 2000, in an effort to reclaim the right to land and autonomy. In less than a decade, MST-Bolivia became a 50,000-member national-level indigenous campesino organization made up of agricultural laborers, urban informal workers, and small-scale merchants and intellectuals that stands against an agro-industrial model of development bent on redirecting family farming toward global markets.

While many scholars consider organizations such as the MST a post-neoliberal phenomenon, inequality in landownership has a long history. As Herbert Klein (2003: xii) argues, “Bolivia is, and has been since the sixteenth century Spanish conquest, a capitalist Western class-organized society in which the Indians were for many centuries an exploited class of workers. The government, which extracted the surplus from the peasants and workers, was traditionally run for and by the ‘white’ Spanish-speaking and Western-oriented elite.” The wealth of the large landowning class has been built with the labor of poor peasants. The Spaniards systematically fragmented indigenous communities in the highlands and replaced them with large, modern plantations<sup>5</sup> (Klein, 2003; Dangel, 2007).

As this is a country largely dependent on agriculture, conflicts over land have arisen on many occasions. One of the ways in which campesinos traditionally survived was through their work, often under slave-labor conditions, on large farms. In return for the use of a small plot of land, campesinos served the owner’s family day and night, cleaning, cooking, and tending to livestock. The 1952 Revolution offered a glimmer of hope to small-scale farmers for a restructuring of social and economic relations (see Klein, 1969; Malloy, 1970; Dunkerley, 1984; Grindle and Domingo, 2003; and Gotkowitz, 2007). The architects of the 1953 agrarian reform modified landholding patterns and established the conditions for capitalist development. They returned usurped property to indigenous communities, stimulated agricultural production through capital investment, credit, and technological assistance, abolished debt peonage where workers were eventually paid salaries, and encouraged migration from the densely populated highlands and valleys to the lowlands (Gill, 1987: 32). With the opening up of the lowlands, the United States contributed millions of dollars in aid to stimulate large-scale agriculture and created an entrepreneurial-minded class of farmers in Santa Cruz. Colonization programs were put in place to the north of Montero (primarily in the Obispo Santiesteban region), and highlanders were relocated to agricultural colonies such as Warnes, Mineros, and Sagrado Corazón in the underdeveloped and underpopulated lowlands. Many of the current MST organizers moved to this region as part of these state-based initiatives. Recruiters promised migrants title to land, loans, food, and tools for farming. However, many of the settlers encountered a very different reality of landlessness, hunger, and desperation. MST organizers supplemented their income by working as wage laborers on the region’s ever-expanding sugarcane plantations.

Much of contemporary inequality in landownership, however, has to do with the failure of the Agrarian Reform Act of 1953, “which liberated [a select group] of campesinos in the west but gave them no more than a tiny piece of land . . . and in the east, opened the valves for the extension of the large estates” (Friedsky, 2005: 1). Between 1952 and 1996, 55 million acres were distributed to a few thousand landowners while hundreds of thousands of campesinos had to split 45 million acres. Inequality grew ever more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s as members of the agribusiness elite formed alliances with military dictators who subsequently granted them large amounts of land as political patronage. For instance, General Hugo Banzer gave Sergio Antelo 116,647 hectares in seven separate land grants in Ñuflo de Chávez and Rafael Paz-Hurtado 76,000 hectares of land in five. Many of these large landowners are now leading the autonomy movement, which calls for the economic and political decentralization of the lowland region in order to control productive resources like land and gas.

Land concentration in the hands of a few reached a breaking point in the late 1980s with the first round of neoliberal reforms, which cut government spending and imposed a rigid monetary policy in order to control hyperinflation (Kohl, 2004). The New Economic Policy floated Bolivian currency against the U.S. dollar, privatized state-owned industries, and opened the country to foreign direct investment. This resulted in unrestricted investment of large private capital and governmental support for export-oriented forms of production such as sugarcane and soy, while little was done to aid the development of small-scale agriculture. Migrant farmers could not compete with such market forces, and many fell deeper into debt as they tried to create a niche within the rapidly expanding soy industry in Santa Cruz. They took out loans with interest rates as high as 18 percent in order to produce for companies exporting soy oil. In many cases they could not pay their debts and surrendered property, land, and machinery in order to settle monetary obligations. Landless peasants had few options but to migrate to city centers in search of employment in the informal economy. Many moved to peripheral areas such as Montero and Warnes while retaining connections to their agricultural communities.

The 1990s brought a wave of land reforms to end the corruption of military dictatorships and the new forms of “accumulation by dispossession” created by the expanding soy industry.<sup>6</sup> Most significant, the government established the Ley del Servicio Nacional de Reforma Agraria (National Institute for Agrarian Reform Law—INRA Law) to correct the shortcomings of the agrarian reform law by distributing land more equitably and rationalizing land markets and property titles in the east. Benjamin Kohl (2003) points, however, to the many contradictions inherent in neoliberal land legislation, which symbolically gives rights to indigenous communities but materially fails to follow through on its promises. The law extended land rights to campesinos and indigenous groups by exempting subsistence farmers from property taxes and granting land title to indigenous communities. Simultaneously, it clarified and secured property rights for large-scale landowners, many of whom secured their plots by paying an annual tax of 1 percent of the self-assessed value of the land. Because a landowner could assess plots of 50,000 hectares at US\$20,000 and pay an annual tax of only \$200 to protect his title, the law ensured the persistence of

large landholdings and inequitable distribution of productive resources. According to Kohl (2003: 342), "this self-assessment provision of the INRA law has turned one of the fundamental principles of the 1952 revolution on its head, changing the rallying cry from 'Land to the tiller!' to that of 'Land to the taxpayer!'"

Historically, the lowland unions<sup>7</sup> were the only peasant organizational structure capable of redistributing land and resources to poor farmers. They directed and participated in a wide range of activities, including the distribution of land, the initiation of infrastructural development, and the resolution of internal disputes. As market forces shifted toward investment in large-scale and export-oriented agriculture, however, peasants found a way to survive by commodifying their land, and the buying and selling of land led to the dissolution of the unions.<sup>8</sup> They could no longer organize a highly mobile and fragmented labor force and proved incapable of creating an alternative to an agro-industrial model of development that had left productive resources in the hands of a few.

Thus, the MST emerged to push for an adequate and fair redistribution of land and economic and social justice. While in the past peasant organizations had subscribed to state-based reforms, this new ideological and territorial practice called for an agrarian revolution from below. The MST has addressed the growing inequality and dislocation with a radical militant strategy of occupying land that initiates a legal process of surveying the hacienda, expropriating land if it does not fulfill a socioeconomic function, and eventually granting title to the landless. As Angel Durán, MST president in 2000, told Jean Friedsky (interview, October 13, 2005), the occupation of state lands was considered "more direct and more effective" than other tactics. The MST situates land occupation in class relations, since a successful occupation of unproductive land leads to the conquest of a piece of the means of production and thus the re-creation of the peasantry. Each successful MST land occupation leads to the establishment of an *asentamiento* (land-reform settlement) such as Pueblos Unidos and provides the springboard for further land occupations and thus the territorialization of the movement. Shortly after the first occupation in 2000, in June 2003, 300 landless peasants entered the Collana plantation in the highland department of La Paz and set up an encampment. This hacienda, consisting of 16,000 acres of unproductive land owned by the sister-in-law of the much-disliked president, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada,<sup>9</sup> was ripe for occupation. A series of land seizures followed, including that of El Cuchirón in Ichilo and Yuquises (now Pueblos Unidos) in Obispo Santiesteban.

### THE AYLLU AS A MODEL FOR NEW PEASANT POLITICS

The term "ayllu" has multiple referents, including household, extended kinship group, community, and array of communities. The sixteenth-century Spaniards who encountered the diverse ethnic groups of the Andes defined the ayllu variously as "kinsmen, family, royal lineage, moiety, kindred extended family, nation, and exogamic, endogamic, ethnic, and occupational group" (Godoy, 1986: 723). The structure and meaning of the ayllu, however, have changed dramatically over time. Modern ayllus in Bolivia are characterized by

nucleated settlements, communal landholdings, rotational political and administrative offices, land redistribution, and rural tax collection (Gelles, 1995; Godoy, 1986; Van Vleet, 2008).

For the purposes of this article, the ayllu indexes an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) organized around political and territorial claims.<sup>10</sup> While it is not an official part of the MST charter or declaration of principles, leaders have mobilized this discourse informally as a cultural and political resource for reshaping corporatist, union-style structures into more horizontal, participatory, and democratic forms. Whereas the unions relied on an executive arrangement in which one leader held much decision-making power, the MST models its organization on an idealized democratic structure of nested units making up a collective governing body. Rivera Cusicanqui (1990), writing about ayllu democracy from the perspective of Norte de Potosí, argues that the principles of rotating leadership, extensive consultation with the bases, and a horizontal form of governance conflict directly with those of liberal democracy. MST leaders echo her description of Andean notions of “collectivity” and “horizontality” as critical to agrarian and territorial autonomy. According to the MST organizer Pablo Mamani (interview, June 20, 2007),

The European structure of unions has been imposed upon us from above. We, the *compañeros* of the MST—when we talk about a horizontal structure, we are saying that the bases or the representatives of the movement have the same capacity, the same rights, and the same possibility to control the organization in an equal and fair manner. It is for this reason that we call for a horizontal structure. The decisions should be made by the rank-and-file members. Many agrarian unions have been dismantled because we have given leaders the power to make decisions for us, and it is for this reason that our goals have not been met.

While Rivera Cusicanqui considers ayllu democracy as deeply rooted in and limited to rural Andean communities, Robert Albro (2005) argues that the majority of indigenous peoples now reside in periurban areas and have transported the concept to those new spaces. For him ayllu democracy has become an overarching framework for popular protesting coalitions.

The MST's horizontal structure can be envisioned as a set of nested dolls—family, *núcleo*, settlement, regional bloc, departmental structure, and national leadership team. The settlement of Pueblos Unidos, for instance, consists of 300 families divided into 30 *núcleos* of 10 families each, with two coordinators, a man and a woman, to encourage gender equality. Several democratically elected representatives of the *núcleo* participate in commissions on production, education, health, communication, security, and political education<sup>11</sup> that undertake projects such as alternative forms of production, agro-ecology, and community justice. These commissions are decentralized organic structures that allow the organization to function in a cohesive but flexible manner. The same executive structure maps onto MST local politics, in which a regional team consists of representatives of different commissions and folds into larger decision-making bodies at the departmental and national levels.

As Albro (2005) notes in his work with national-level protest coalitions, ayllu politics is a spectacle-driven, discursive, and rights-based cultural heritage resource for crossing historic divides between indigenous and mestizo

communities. While discursive strategies are effective movement-building devices, they often involve disjunctures between the performativity of the collective as a decision-making structure and the self-interest of leaders and members. When, for example, Jorge Salvatierra, the regional organizer for Pueblos Unidos, repeatedly declined to allow members access to satellite photos of the property, INRA reports, and other documentation, community members suspected that he might be negotiating with land bureaucrats and government officials in his own interest. As Sian Lazar (2008) has observed on the basis of her ethnographic work with trade unionists in the highlands, leadership often becomes the terrain for struggles between the collective as an ideological force and the practices of self-interested individuals.

It is perhaps this tension that forces movement intellectuals to keep reinventing democratic structures for holding leaders and members accountable for their actions such as proposals for a justice system based on indigenous customary laws or the traditional use and distribution of natural resources as a collective cultural right. Under the Law of Popular Participation, the state's recognition of "uses and customs" magnified the importance of cultural heritage as a basis for political and legal claims. Once again, the imagined ayllu proves critical to the MST's democratic spaces at the local, regional, and national levels. The punishments involved in community justice illuminate the fine line between individual needs and collective well-being. While community justice teaches someone a lesson about the consequences of departing from the established moral order, corporal punishment may alienate members from the larger cooperative. When the MST regional body decided that a young *compañera* should be publicly beaten and whipped to teach her about allegiance to the current administration, the discussions of this form of punishment (which in the end was never administered) humiliated her and eventually led her to resign from the movement. Instead of allowing this incident to cripple the regional bloc, however, members came together to propose alternative forms of punishment that would teach a lesson without degrading the recipient.

The discourse of an idealized socialist community or utopia—narratives of how *our* ancestors lived socially and economically—creates an imagined cartography for agro-ecological communities in the tropical Amazonian lands of Santa Cruz. By focusing on some of the Andean ideals regarding social obligations in Pueblos Unidos, I illustrate the challenges of reproducing an ayllu model in the aftermath of disruption and displacement. It is this friction that keeps the movement alive and creates a new plural model of agrarian politics borrowing from distinct highland and lowland traditions and rural and urban experiences.

### THE AYLLU AS A NEW SOCIOECONOMIC AND PRODUCTIVE MODEL

On a cold and windy day in April 2006, I traveled to the first of many meetings in which MST organizers would discuss the plans for the construction of an alternative community through the creative reassembly of parts of their Andean prehistory. The organizers had secured a run-down brick building, possibly a school gymnasium or auditorium, deep in the backwoods of San

Pedro for the event. Hundreds of campesinos were already gathered, crowded onto several rows of broken wooden benches facing a small stage, where half a dozen MST leaders sat looking down at them. Many of the leaders had a ball of coca<sup>12</sup> perfectly balanced inside one cheek, occasionally moving it from side to side in a rhythmic motion. Several organizers offered us a small plastic bag of coca as we dropped our belongings on the hard cement floor.

Two main issues were on the agenda: What would the campesinos' community look like, and how would an agro-ecological area be constructed? As the meeting began, one organizer raised his hand, asking to speak to all those assembled:

For five years, we have been fighting for Yuquises, since we first occupied the land in September of 2005. We have sacrificed long and hard—there were days without work, there were days during the occupation when our children fell ill and we had no doctors or medical assistance. And now we are about to receive title to this land from the government. This settlement has to change history. We have to begin thinking about the ways in which our economic model will stand against neoliberalism. We have to think about who will build the houses and create the schools, who will be the teacher, how many children. We need to think about how many children will need medical assistance and create medical brigades. We have to think about the ideology of the MST. . . . It's not just about getting our little piece of land and working independently. This is about a collective project with benefits for all. We have to think about how we will create a new system of production, health care, and education. And this is not going to be easy.

The speaker, Pablo Mamani, suggested that the settlers invent an entirely new economic model to suit their structural needs. As the meeting progressed that evening, many members discussed their distinct understandings of "community." Gregorio Cusipuma, for instance, who had migrated from Potosí to this region in the 1960s with his family to work on the sugar plantations, said, "There is no fear, the fear is gone. The Pueblos Unidos that we are going to create is going to be a new form of life; it will be our communal land and territory. No one will be able to take this away from us." Hector Velasquez, a contract agricultural laborer who had studied agronomic engineering in Tarija, had given up his career to become part of the movement. He suggested that the productive model had to be consistent with MST proposals for a new agrarian reform:

The Landless Peasant Movement stands against a neoliberal model in which agriculture is seen as a profit-making venture and productive resources are concentrated in the hands of cattle ranchers and large-scale soy producers. Our vision has to be farmer-driven, based on small-scale production, while at the same time being economically viable and ecologically sustainable.

Velasquez called attention to the importance of broader considerations such as families' long-term food security in making production decisions, an approach that was expected to result in more on-farm production of the food that families required for self-sufficiency.<sup>13</sup> For cash, settlers would need to rely on local markets, selling as much as possible to consumers in regional towns.

Another key organizer, Pablo Mamani, brought up the concept of the ayllu as the basis for a new agricultural model that could anticipate an alternative economic structure to neoliberalism:

We need to talk about collective land distribution, one that is equal and fair, in order to get out of this terrible poverty. We are not looking to distribute land on an individual basis. . . . We must come up with another system; we must own the land and work collectively. This community can be like those of our ancestors. We could have the first ayllu in Santa Cruz. Our ayllu would include collective ownership of land, reciprocal work groups, redistribution of wealth and resources, and small-scale production.

As the community meeting unfolded, a series of unanswered questions emerged. In general, it was unclear how the many points raised by MST organizers and members could contribute to the development of alternative farming communities. Especially important to this discussion was how the notion of the ancient Andean community could be transported into the political space of present-day organizing to create a democratic structure of governance in new land-reform settlements. Cusipuma focused on territorial rights, while Velasquez articulated an alternative economic-productive model. While these individual threads invoked the ayllu implicitly, Mamani's historical/cultural frame of reference provided a more all-encompassing model for thinking about how the parts fit together.

At the conclusion of the meeting, MST members, through a democratic show of hands, decided that they would implement a model of collective landownership and mixed individual and communal forms of production drawn in part from memories of the ayllu.<sup>14</sup> Several months after the meeting, I observed how this imagined ayllu mapped onto community practice. Two aspects of the ayllu's economic organization in the agro-ecological community of Pueblos Unidos are critically important. The first is *ayni* (reciprocal exchange), in which a service rendered between equals in a symmetrical exchange is returned at some later time, canceling all debts (Mayer, 2002: 109). The second is *minka* (economic exchange among persons of differing socioeconomic or ritual status), in which a laborer provides work service in return for a meal or daily wage. Enrique Mayer (2002) has shown that peasants in an Andean highland community, while part of a capitalist system, are buffered from major transformations by the social reproduction of norms of reciprocity and exchange. MST leaders have revived and politicized essentialized notions of highland culture by labeling *ayni* and *minka* as inherently resistant to Western forms of capitalist production. These Andean notions of reciprocity and redistribution, then, have become critical to the revival of small-scale production and food sovereignty. MST organizers must rebuild fictive-kin relations and/or revive Andean models of social relations of exchange among members who do not share ancestral, territorial, or even laboring histories.

Leaders often talk about the benefits of collective labor for new models of agro-ecology, long-term sustainability, and the overall well-being of a land-reform settlement. If members of the community are disabled, elderly, or sick, they argue, the community will farm their plots through a rotating system of reciprocal exchange and use surplus revenue from communal production as redistributive wealth. Though the idea is appealing, it is easier to promote collective ownership and production than to work through the daily struggles and contradictions inherent in it. The activist ayllu is initially useful in building solidarity and imagining the possibility of an alternative lifestyle, but it begins to unravel as members opt for highly individualized solutions to poverty.

Discussion regarding individual versus communal production is a feature of daily life in Pueblos Unidos, where community members prefer to take care of their family needs first and those of the community only secondarily. Some members even complain that there is a contradiction between the public performance of collectivity and unity and the reality for members on the ground. An elderly woman from the Chané núcleo said, "In theory, they claim that they will take care of the elderly and the sick. I have arthritis, and it's hard for me to tend to the needs of my individual plot of land. But no one has really come to my aid. I don't have any family in this settlement and I need the help of the larger community." Her complaint was based on a fair criticism of the collective model: in theory, the elderly will be cared for, but in practice, able-bodied MST farmers often forget about them. Community meetings provide an opportunity for groups to come together and discuss the situation at hand. The various núcleos, armed with notes and ideas, publicly offer criticisms of the "collective model" and come up with solutions to some of the more immediate problems. In some cases, this requires the invention of a mixed social and organizational structure in which some members will subscribe to the communal model by tending to the needs of the elderly while others focus on individual or family production.

In the same way that Andean migrants have survived in the lowlands through mixed economic strategies by combining low-wage labor and subsistence farming, new models for the organization of agricultural communities are based on both collective ownership and individual forms of production.<sup>15</sup> While movement leaders argue that Andean ideals of reciprocity and redistribution are the sole solution to the problems of poverty and inequality at the local level, community members constantly debate the feasibility of such ancient structures in their new land-reform settlements. It is in and through these rich negotiations and daily tugs-of-war that movement members begin to combine political and organizational traditions, borrowing parts of the Andean ancient past while reinventing cultural framings that make sense in these new locations, where kin groups have been disrupted and social/political relations must be rebuilt over time and through much sustained effort.

### POLITICAL TUGS-OF-WAR AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

The community of Pueblos Unidos, one of 15 experimental MST settlements in the lowland region, joins with Tierra Prometida, its sister settlement in the Ichilo region, to form a departmental or state-level governing body, MST-Santa Cruz. The residents of Tierra Prometida have been waiting for nearly a decade for title to their land because it sits in the middle of a forest reserve, which is protected state-owned property under the Bolivian constitution. This MST encampment, approximately 150 kilometers northwest of Santa Cruz, lies close to the tropical forest of the Amazon, with all sorts of possibilities for fruit and vegetable production, mixed agriculture, and eco-friendly tourism.

Many of the migrants initially worked in the region as contract laborers on sugarcane plantations or rented small plots of land for subsistence agriculture. With the advent of neoliberalism and shifts in national agrarian policy, however, much of the sugar production turned to soy, while commercial logging

grew with increased international demand for processed forest products.<sup>16</sup> Commercial logging became important in the 1970s and has rapidly increased in subsequent years. In 1996, because of a shift in forestry law that allowed private landowners to exploit forest resources on their land for the first time, Bolivian elites began logging at unprecedented rates and exported over US\$112 million in primary and processed forest products.

Highland migrants and lowland indigenous peoples who had historically depended on forest products for their livelihoods came together in the early 2000s to take action against illegal logging. Five hundred families invaded a portion of the forest reserve that had been sold to members of the local elite on October 13, 2000, and squatted there. For more than seven years this encampment survived because of its rotating cycle of occupiers, many of whom traveled back and forth to agricultural provinces such as La Enconada and Ayacucho to make a living. MST members farmed small plots of land on the site, left their núcleo for weeks at a time as contract laborers, and returned with resources and cash for further investment in the community. Once again, Andean migrants and lowland Indians relied upon such creative forms of economy in order to preserve the possibility of permanent settlement.

The same kinds of tensions or daily struggles can be seen at the level of the region and the state. I once accompanied a group of MST organizers to a meeting in Ayacucho to discuss a proposal to convert the movement into a peasant union. After many years of waiting for an escape from poverty, a group of squatters had decided that this would be a quick and easy solution to their problem because it would guarantee individual title and enable members to sell their plots to the highest bidder.<sup>17</sup> Ayacucho is a small town with dirt streets, houses made of the branches of the *motacú* (a tree native to lowland Bolivia), and women selling *chicha* (corn beer) and other refreshments. The meeting was to be held in an abandoned barn. On one wall Ernesto Cusipuma of the MST had hung a number of posters, hand-painted by women and children in Tierra Prometida, illustrating an imagined community based on Andean ideals of reciprocity and redistribution (Figure 2). One poster in particular offered a pictorial representation of the benefits that such an economic-social model promised: free health care and medical coverage, organic food for poor people, schools and better education, and cultural enhancement. Walking me through this visual/ideological space, Cusipuma told me that this last image represented the creative use of Andean culture as a vehicle for political and economic change. He spoke of the challenges, however, of reproducing an Andean socialist model in the lowlands, especially in a region characterized by advanced capitalism and large-scale production.

The meeting began at noon, when Cusipuma led the group in an MST cheer: "*¡MST, esta lucha es para vencer!*" (MST, this fight is worth the struggle!). When the crowd cheered back, he added, "*¿Cuándo?*" (When?) and it shouted "*¡Ahora!*" (Now!). Then everyone took a seat, energized by this impassioned call and response (Figure 3).

While the posters and cheers expressed a passionate commitment to collective change, project members from one group, Núcleo Primero de Agosto, a community of Tierra Prometida, offered an alternative vision of change: a highly individualistic and capitalist-driven response to the problem of land inequality. The romance and momentum of the ayllu discourses presented by



Figure 2. Poster of Imagined Ayllu

members of *Pueblos Unidos* were absent as political differences produced tension in the room. Many community members had already traveled to Santa Cruz and filed their land petitions as individual rather than communal requests. This breaking of the collective contract had powerful symbolic and legal implications. It cut short the process of transferring land title from the group or collective unit to individuals, since some objected to this reconfiguration of the settlement. Consequently, the Centro de Estudios Jurídicos e Investigación Sociales (Center for Judicial Studies and Social Investigations—CEJIS) lawyers had to pull the entire file from INRA until the problem was resolved.<sup>18</sup> Pablo Mamani attempted to reinforce the collective nature of the movement:

When we speak of communal land, we are talking about the actual petition for a plot or parcel of land. An example is that if we petition for 50 hectares [per family], it means that we need 2,500 hectares for an entire community. This means that they will give the land title to 50 *compañeros*. For the 2,500 hectares, you will receive only one title to the land, with the motive that you not be able



Figure 3. A Meeting of the Tierra Prometida Community

to traffic land. This will protect the nature of the organization as well. If not— if we give title to each individual *compañero*—you will get bored and will want to go to the city, and you will put your land up for rent or sell your plot to someone else, and then the organization will disappear. In this regard, we 50 *compañeros* must organize ourselves in a collective way, and the decision must come organically out of discussion, debate.

During the meeting, members engaged in an intense debate about the benefits of collective ownership of land versus the union-style structure, which afforded individuals titles to plots. Some worried about the slender thread upon which their survival depended. It was this sense of vulnerability that caused a number of peasants to support settlement conversion and fed their desire to sell their parcels to survive. Mamani spoke yet again:

It is for this reason that we speak of a new land reform, land redistribution [that is collective, equal, and fair], so that we can all escape from this terrible poverty that envelops us. And not individually, because individually, the *compañero*, in order to plant two or three hectares, must get a loan from the bank, and the bank maybe will lend him money at 19 percent interest, and in a year he will be accruing more and more interest and he will become landless and finally maybe once again be working as a slave, working for the big *latifundistas* in this region. Is this what you want, *compañeros*?

After several hours of debate, Silvia Vásquez, the CEJIS representative, intervened to distinguish between “possession” and “property.” In a condescending way, she tried to explain the difference by using the example of a

shirt that is someone's possession but may be lent to another person as contrasted with something that can be bought and sold. As her explanation lengthened, Mamani's face turned bright red and he stood up and said, in great exasperation, "Thank you, Silvia, that's enough!" He then pulled her aside during the intermission and told her, "It's not your place to intervene in organic MST matters. This is something the *gente de base*—the community—needs to resolve on its own. You are a member of the CEJIS, not a member of the movement." In response, she turned to him and said, "Who are you? You aren't even a *dirigente* [leader]. Who are you to tell me what to say and what to do?"

After isolating Silvia, Mamani assumed the floor and declared his intention to open a "democratic" decision-making process. One leader suggested, "We must talk, argue, ask questions, and eventually reach an agreement." Issues such as collective ownership of land must be debated for hours; individual members must work through their concerns and ultimately come to consensus. In this particular case, each núcleo broke up into small groups to debate the benefits of collective ownership. Two leaders, Pablo Mamani and Ernesto Araúz, circled the room, rotating into and out of the various groups. They referenced the ayllu of their ancestors and used Pueblos Unidos's alternative experiments of collective production and community governance as a model for reclaiming land and the means of production. They spoke to members about the ways in which individual land title and parcelization of communal plots have historically divided indigenous communities and eventually displaced them; they assured members that the MST model would bring an end to the vicious agribusiness expansion that preys upon poor families and their productive resources. A land-reform settlement would guarantee permanence and provide long-term food and sustenance to its residents, while a union would lead only to poverty and inequality.

After several hours, the members of Primero de Agosto decided to remain a part of the MST. They weighed the advantages and disadvantages of the collectivist model and in the end judged it more beneficial to take part in a movement that could potentially offer substantial structural change than to choose immediate and probably self-defeating solutions to the problem of poverty.

### REVISITING THE ACTIVIST AYLLU AND THE INDIVIDUALISM/COLLECTIVISM DEBATE

The activist ayllu offers a notion of a pure indigenous community, differing from the neoliberal model in terms of what land-reform settlements could look like physically, economically, and productively and how they should be organized. Notions of collective labor and redistribution of wealth are appealing to campesinos initially because they provide the hope of independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency. The ayllu vocabulary expresses the possibility of a future in which campesinos can subsist peacefully while preserving biodiversity. This utopian political project holds the prospect of real political and economic advancement independent of the agribusiness community and the

opportunity to grow healthy food for poor people while simultaneously creating domestic markets.

Yet most scholars fail to recognize the daily conflict between the movement's rhetoric of collectivism and members' highly individualistic desires. John Gledhill (2004: 339) attributes the heightened egotism of new social movements to the larger political economic system of neoliberalism:

Changing social conditions, coupled with the implantation of a culture of consumerism, have fostered neoliberalization of everyday life. Such a tendency is deepened by the effects of neoliberal economic policies—in terms of the kinds of solutions available to poor people for coping with immediate immiseration—and the failure of the collectivist projects of social progress offered by both populist and leftist regimes. Even when people participate in collective movements, they still have to devise individual day-to-day strategies.

While scholars like Gledhill and David Harvey (2006) consider these contradictions to negate the effectiveness of leftist forms of organizing, their views do not capture the tension inherent in peasant politics. They obscure the dynamic democratic processes of change at work at the local, regional, and national levels. Day-long negotiations help to resolve tensions and achieve consensus that strengthens collaborative efforts at change. Only through such friction can individual identity be incorporated into a broader transformative agenda.

In contrast to these intellectuals, Bolivian scholars argue that individualism has always existed. Xavier Albó (1977: 21) has written of the “Aymara paradox,” the existence of a strong communitarian ethic alongside a tendency toward individualism and factionalism. He attempts to resolve the paradox by proposing the concept of “individualism within the group,” whereby the group manages to “synchronize the interests of the different individuals through reciprocal help or common enterprise, in which in the last instance particular interests are unified through common institutional matrix.” If individualism within the group has always existed in Aymara communities, then what is new about these tensions in indigenous social movements of the twenty-first century?

Ana Tsing (2005: 4) uses the term “friction” as a central metaphor for the diverse and complex social interactions that characterize contemporary struggles in the Indonesian rain forest. It encapsulates “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference”:

Friction is never unconditional or effortless. It suggests that difference doesn't just slow things down. A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. In both cases, it is friction that produces movement, action, effect.

This idea of friction proves central to movement building in the Bolivian context: communal land title and ownership versus older ways of buying and selling land, utopian visions of collective production alongside individual desires and needs, and alternative forms of sustainability that rub up against quick and easy industrial methods such as increased pesticide use. These and other tensions serve as a source of energy for reinventing MST politics in relationship to dynamic economic, political, and regional contexts. As one movement

intellectual once said to me (Ademar Valda Vargas, interview, April 20, 2007), “The Landless Peasant Movement continues to fight to obtain land in the east because of these constant tensions that rub up against one another. It is in the moments of friction that we can see the richness of landless politics. After all, it’s that tension that keeps the movement alive.” Instead of romanticizing the ayllu as a model for popular coalition building, scholarship should now focus on this friction, recognizing it as critical to the shaping of new forms of peasant politics in the Morales era.

## NOTES

1. Owning land that does not serve a socioeconomic function is illegal under the Bolivian constitution.

2. Paz-Hurtado is in the business of exporting sunflower and soy oil. His family first acquired large areas of agricultural land in the mid-twentieth century. He owned 14,350 hectares of land in 1954 and cultivated only 1 percent of it. Now he owns 76,000 hectares of land from five separate grants in Obispo Santiesteban, and much of it has been sitting idle as a form of speculative capital.

3. While the movement is not affiliated with a particular political party, MST intellectuals have worked alongside members from the Morales administration to rethink agrarian laws. Leaders such as Pablo Mamani (the national president of the MST) drafted the proposal for the Community Redirection of Agrarian Reform Law. The new law had four pillars: land (expropriation and return to the peasants of all land that has no socioeconomic function), the distribution of tractors to the landless, the creation of an agricultural and rural bank to reduce interest rates for small-scale producers from 20 percent to about 6 percent, and the development of foreign markets for eco-products and long-term sustainability projects (Urioste, 2007).

4. The activist ayllu represents a departure from an earlier generation’s self-definition, which was based much more directly on forms of livelihood such as the ability to handle ox and plow or the ownership of a truck. As cultural heritage, indigenous identity is now something that can be claimed or reclaimed by a rapidly growing public of indigenous-descended popular and urban social sectors (Albro, 2005).

5. Andean peoples have always used historical memory as a political strategy for opposing hegemonic forces. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (1990: 102-103) points out that for Andean peoples, political forms of resistance were always closely linked to the defense of both a symbolic order and a cultural worldview, which took shape as the enactment of ritual practices and ancestral customs and provided moral force and legitimacy to challenges to the colonial order.

6. This legislative reform was the result of the sustained efforts of grassroots organizations to draw attention to inequality in landownership. In 1990, 600 indigenous people from the lowland state of Beni marched 800 kilometers to the highlands to demand recognition. This dramatic march was covered by the media and achieved public awareness for Bolivia’s lowland peoples as citizens seeking property rights. A similar march in 1996 led to the passage of the INRA law.

7. These local structures are built into a pyramidal hierarchy of local, regional, and departmental union organizations. Many of them emerged from the land reforms after the 1952 Revolution and now make periodic demands on the state (Gustafson, 2002).

8. Douglas Hertzler (2008) reports on the problems incurred by communities when poor peasants are offered money by large landowners. Peasant unions repeatedly pressured members not to sell to buyers not approved by the community but could do little to prevent such exchange. Thus communities were often bought out piecemeal by neighboring large farms, and the fabric of the community was destroyed.

9. Sánchez de Lozada secretly signed a contract in 2003 to export Bolivia’s gas through Chile to the United States. This sparked massive uprisings in El Alto that came to be known as the gas wars.

10. Highland Aymara organizations such as the Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyo (National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyo—CONAMAQ) and the Taller de Historia Oral Andina (Andean Oral History Project—THOA) have focused on the revival of

the ayllu as a space of political-territorial autonomy. They have greatly influenced migrant political organizations such as the MST-Bolivia by employing a discourse of shared “indigenous” history as a key to building broad-based coalitions across national territory. THOA has hosted several conferences in the lowlands in which organizations such as the Confederación Sindical de Colonizadores de Bolivia (Bolivian Syndicalist Confederation of Colonizers—CSCB) and the MST have borrowed from highland political strategies of resistance.

11. Members discuss, debate, and eventually reach consensus regarding potential leaders of the respective commissions. The five organizers are brought to the front of the room and, through a show of hands, elected to their posts. No one can hold a post for more than a year.

12. Coca chewing is always a part of MST meetings. Some members suggested that it symbolizes a history of highland resistance to capitalism, but coca has a more practical significance in that it allows people to withstand 10 to 12 hours of debate and negotiation without food because it kills hunger pains. It also serves as a stimulant, allowing members to remain alert.

13. This idea came from the Via Campesina proposal in 1996. Via Campesina defined food sovereignty as the right to produce food on one’s own land, an issue at the heart of the proposal’s alternative model of agricultural development. Food is a basic need, a source of nutrition first and an item of trade secondarily. Via supporters advocate a fundamental shift in who defines and determines the purposes of knowledge, research, technology, science, and production related to food (Desmarais, 2002).

14. For more on the ayllu as imagined by Indianists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Arguedas (1909), Castro Pozo (1924), Mariátegui (1971 [1929]), Castro Aquézolo (1976), and Salmon (1977). For more on the ayllu as imagined by twentieth-century anthropologists, see Brush (1977), Orlove (1977), Bastien (1978), Isbell (1978), Arnold (1988), and Allen (1998).

15. The same mixed strategies are used not only in organizing production and work groups but also in implementing farming techniques. In some cases MST organizers use modern equipment and the latest innovations in feeding and handling livestock, while in others they place emphasis on rotating crops, building up soil, diversifying crops, and controlling pests naturally.

16. As of 1994, the Bolivian government had assigned 185 logging areas, covering almost 21 million hectares, to 173 timber companies. Until recently the Bolivian forestry service was responsible for ensuring that timber companies complied with forestry regulations and followed management plans. In reality, however, its principal concern was with collecting timber royalties, and it did little to encourage sustainable forest management. Corruption and illegal logging were widespread (see Quiroga, 1996).

17. Under the government of Evo Morales, all land must be titled as “community property.” This meeting took place before these reforms had been put into place, when campesinos were used to holding individual title and selling land to survive.

18. Funded by the European Union, the CEJIS, a private human rights and development organization, provides legal assistance to lowland indigenous groups and the MST, helping them file petitions for land rights and provide the necessary support for settlement.

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