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A taste for ecology: class, coloniality, and the rise of a Bolivian urban environmental movement

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ABSTRACT

Since at least the mid-20th century, social movements have been key actors in Bolivian society, causing governments to fall and redrawing the cartographies of power. Recently, a new movement emerged, a middle-class movement that articulated its demands in harsh opposition to the government of former President Evo Morales: an urban environmental movement. In its rhetoric, Morales was un burro (a donkey) and un ignorante (an ignorant man) steering the country towards ecological collapse. Subsequently, the movement played a key role in the social protests that led to Morales's fall in November 2019. In this paper, I aim to understand why this movement emerged and mobilized during the Morales administration and how colonially conditioned relations of power and contradictory images of the indigenous Other are articulated in this process. I argue that the emergence and mobilization of the movement ought to be understood in relation to: (1) the politically conditioned forms for legitimate political opposition; and (2) the challenge to coloniality implied by the coming to power of subalternized subjects. When the borders of seemingly fixed categories and spaces are blurred, the privileged develop novel ways of making social distinctions. One such way, I argue, is to display a 'taste for ecology.'

KEYWORDS

Bolivia; coloniality of power; distinction; environmentalism; social movements; taste

Introduction

Defying the searing November sun and police repression, thousands of protesters occupied the streets of central La Paz. The street protests had grown with every passing day since the general elections of 20 October 2019, denouncing electoral fraud and demanding that President Evo Morales resign and call for new elections. The right-wing political opposition orchestrated the initial mobilizations, but the protesting lines were soon filled with a heterodox conglomerate of actors who articulated their accusations of electoral fraud or, for different reasons, their disapproval of the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo, or Movement toward Socialism) government. There were indigenous activists who claimed Evo had turned the indigenous struggle into a multiculturalist smokescreen for neoliberal extractivism; there were other civil society actors – mainly but not exclusively non-indigenous upper and middle-class people – who saw the protests as a glimmer of light

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at the end of the tunnel after almost 14 years of *'narcocomunismo'* and 'Indian rule,' the so-called *'pitas'*.¹ And then, partly overlapping with the *pitas*, there were environmental activists with raised fists, heated outcries, and homemade placards. Environmental activists had been protesting the government for some years and their mobilizations reached a peak when roaring wildfires consumed the lowland region of la Chiquitanía a couple of months prior to the 2019 elections. Their message had been clear throughout these years of mobilizations: President Evo Morales was *un burro* (a donkey), *un ignorante* (an ignorant man), *un bruto* (a brute) steering the country toward ecological collapse. In social media, he had been portrayed as *un indio de mierda* (a shitty Indian): 'Only a shitty Indian could think of destroying our biodiversity this way. He doesn't even respect the rights of indigenous people.'²

On 10 November 2019, Evo Morales was forced to resign, rightwing political forces with an anti-indigenous rhetoric took hold of power, and Jeanine Áñez was proclaimed president.

Since at least the mid-20th century, social movements have been key actors in Bolivian society, transforming state policy, causing governments to fall, and redrawing the cartographies of power (Burman 2014, 2015; García, Chávez, and Costas 2010). Reflecting the severe inequalities that characterize Bolivian society, they have organized around either class, ethnicity, or, more recently, gender/sexuality. More recently though, a new movement has been formed on a national scale, a movement that claims to mobilize beyond the concerns of ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and class but *is* characterized by middle-class hegemony, and articulated its demands in harsh opposition to the MAS government: an urban environmental movement. The aim of this paper is to understand *why* this movement emerged and mobilized at this specific moment in time and *how* colonially conditioned relations of power and seemingly contradictory images of the indigenous Other are articulated in this process. Why is Evo Morales a donkey and a shitty Indian for wanting to build a highway and a nuclear plant? Apart from rather disparate non-governmental organization (NGO) activities in the name of 'sustainable development,' why didn't a powerful and coherently articulated national urban environmental movement emerge to oppose the neoliberal regimes of the 1990s and the early 2000s, when transnational extractivist corporations were invited to wreak havoc on Bolivian ecosystems? Moreover, why did the urban environmental movement not protest the disastrous environmental politics of the Áñez government (November 2019 to November 2020) as vociferously as they did during the Morales administration?

Classic social movement literature (e.g. Jenkins 1983; Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994; McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Slater 1985; Turner and Killian 1957) tends to point to four main factors that explain the rise and successful mobilization of social movements³: (1) 'strains' that provoke mobilization; (2) access to the resources that are necessary for mobilization; (3) the political opportunity to mobilize; (4) the existence of a collective political identity. I argue in this paper, however, that while these factors may be helpful to think with, they do not explain in any exhaustive way neither the dynamics at work in the mobilization of this new Bolivian environmental movement nor why it emerged at this specific moment in time. Instead, I suggest, the emergence and mobilization of the movement ought to be understood in relation to: (1) the politically conditioned forms for legitimate political opposition (in other words, political opposition took the form of a social movement since this was the most legitimate form of political practice

in the political context of a government that claimed to be a 'government of the social movements,' and an environmental discourse was used as a conduit for channeling a wide-ranging critique of governmental politics); and (2) the coloniality of power that has characterized Bolivian political life since 1825, and the reactions of the more privileged when faced with what some experienced as the inversion of colonially conditioned relations of power. Drawing on the work of Sarah Kollnig (2018, 2020), I suggest that when the borders of seemingly fixed categories and spaces are blurred, when *indios* tread the halls of power and occupy new spaces, novel ways of making social distinctions emerge. One novel way for the more privileged to make social distinctions, I argue, is to display 'environmental awareness,' or, as it were, a 'taste for ecology.'

This does not imply that all environmental mobilizations in Bolivia are instrumental to the reproduction of social inequalities and racism, but rather that environmental activism, no matter how 'genuine' its environmental cause, inevitably will be entangled in larger political contexts of power, class, and coloniality. The subject matter of this paper is exactly this: the emergence of an urban environmental movement within such contexts of power, class, and coloniality.⁴

The paper is based on many years of ethnographic fieldwork in the Bolivian Andes, starting in 2000. For the specific topic of the Bolivian urban environmental movement, ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted intermittently between 2011 and 2019. My ethnographic interest in the environmental movement began when I participated in the march for TIPNIS in August 2011, and I have carried out 16 interviews with people engaged in the Bolivian urban environmental movement, all of whom have a higher education background, live in the more affluent central or southern parts of La Paz and do not identify as being 'indigenous.' Their ages ranged from 24 to 56 and some of them worked in NGOs, others worked intermittently as consultants to international development agencies, and yet others were university students. I have attended a large number of seminars, rallies, and workshops organized by different organizations and platforms of the environmental movement between 2011 and 2019, and I have scrutinized documents, manifests, and different online fora for material. Moreover, over the years I have conducted hundreds of interviews with indigenous activists and governmental officials.

Social movements in Bolivia

To the external observer, Bolivian society might seem hopelessly chaotic. Nevertheless, beneath the disorderly surface there is an extraordinarily organized society. The worker and the pensioner, the indigenous and the small-scale farmer, the market woman and the student, the shoeshine boy and the newsvendor – everyone is part of organized collectives with the capacity to defend group interests and mobilize political dissent. These organized collectives are part of and constitute social movements: there is the labor movement, the indigenous movement, the *campesino* ('peasant') movement, the feminist/women's movement, and so on. Many organized collectives are part of more than one movement; they are activated and mobilize as part of one or the other movement depending on the political situation of the moment and whether shared grounds and agendas can be identified or carved out in relation to the other collectives taking part in the mobilization. Likewise, it is often impossible to establish where one movement ends and another begins; movements overlap, their networks interconnect, their borders – if it

makes sense to speak of such – are permeable and spongy. Yet, or perhaps therefore, many of the most thoroughgoing transformations of 20th and 21st centuries in Bolivian society can be attributed to social movements (though not necessarily identified as such at the time of their mobilization): the indigenous educational initiatives of the 1920s and '30s, the National Revolution and the Agrarian and Educational Reforms of the 1950s, the return to democracy in the early 1980s, putting indigenous affairs on the political agenda in the 1990s, the coming to power of Evo Morales and MAS in 2006, the writing of the new political constitution and the founding of the Plurinational State in 2009, to mention but a few.

Not surprisingly, then, the scholarly literature on Bolivian social movements is quite comprehensive (e.g. Burman 2014, 2015; Canessa 2000; García, Chávez, and Costas 2010; Grisaffi 2017; Hurtado 1986; Pape 2009; Portugal and Macusaya 2016; Powęska 2013; Rivera [1984] 2003; Sturtevant 2018; Ticona 2010). Nevertheless, very little has been written on the emergent Bolivian environmental movement (see however Burman 2017; Fabricant 2013; Hindery 2013; Kaijser 2014; Perreault and Valdivia 2010; moreover, a valuable assessment of some of its initial dynamics is found in Zimmerer 2004).

What, then, is a social movement? Doherty and Doyle remind us that the 'concept of social movement is an analytical construct, not a description of a given empirical phenomenon' (2006, 702). Indeed, it is an analytical construct that helps scholars understand certain sociopolitical occurrences, but to those who engage in social movement activism, it is also a source of identity, an experienced political force, and, as it were, a collective body. A young indigenous activist in the city of El Alto explained to me the significance of being part of a broader movement like this:

If I'm alone with my *indianista* ideas, what can I do? I can shout to the winds, but no one will hear me. The *indianista* movement is strong, we have roots going back to the 1960s, or even back to 1781 when Tupaj Katari and Bartolina Sisa rebelled and made the Spaniards experience what it means to be hungry. We can do that again. We are a tremendous force. Being part of this movement has made it clear to me what I really am: not Bolivian, but *indio*.

There are probably as many notions of what a social movement is as there are social movement activists and scholars. Rather than succinct definitions, however, social movement literature often provides a list of criteria that characterize social movements (see, e.g., Doherty and Doyle 2006, 702–703). Some of the criteria most frequently included on such lists are the following:

- 1) Social movement participants share some kind of common identity; they identify with each other, with the movement, and with its cause. In this paper, the concept of identity is discussed from a Bourdieusian perspective in terms of habitus, taste, and cultural capital (developed below).
- 2) A social movement can be organized in many ways; nevertheless, it is an organized collective that persists over time. It is not a mere spontaneous reaction.
- 3) Social movements tend to have a more or less explicit network character.
- 4) Social movements are based on active participation and mobilization. This distinguishes them from most membership organizations.
- 5) Social movements are a collective articulation of a will to change; they mobilize political dissent and engage in contentious politics.

In the Bolivian context, it is not always easy to establish whether a collective is a social movement or a social movement organization (an organization that together with other organizations constitute a social movement); it depends on the context, it is an issue of scale (see, e.g., Diani and Bison 2004). Sometimes, a large organization such as the *campesino* union CSUTCB (Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia) can act as a movement – the organization in itself *is* then the *campesino* movement. Sometimes it mobilizes as part of a larger but often vaguely defined indigenous movement, sometimes as part of a larger labor movement, since it is organizationally affiliated with the national labor union COB (Central Obrera Boliviana). Moreover, within the CSUTCB we find the *cocalero* (coca growers) union – out of which Evo Morales emerged as an irrefutable leader in the 1990s – which is often referred to as a *cocalero* movement. Thus, under certain circumstances, *cocaleros* mobilize as a movement from within a social movement organization.

Likewise, it can be hard to grasp what is a movement and what is an ideology. *El indianismo* and *el katarismo* are often described as two different radical anticolonial ideologies for indigenous emancipation. As such, they imbue organizations, social movements, and political parties. Nevertheless, sometimes actors who embrace these ideologies act as *movements* (see quote above), and it then makes sense to speak of an *indianista* movement and a *katarista* movement (see, e.g., Hurtado 1986), sometimes even an *indianista-katarista* movement (see, e.g., Portugal and Macusaya 2016).

Thus, the Bolivian landscape of social movements is a complex one (see García, Chávez, and Costas 2010; Pape 2009; Sturtevant 2018). This complexity is due to the vital role social movements have played, and still play, in Bolivian political life and the more or less organic growth of movements during the 20th and early 21st centuries. In order to understand why social movements came to be of such vital significance, though, we must understand the colonial and racist barriers surrounding formal political participation since the founding of the republic in 1825. In other words, we must understand what Aníbal Quijano (1998, 2007) calls ‘the coloniality of power.’ Quijano coined the concept in order to describe how colonial structures of political and cultural domination established racialized social categories to organize labor and the execution of power. Thus, as *indios* and *afrobolivianos* were ‘naturally’ associated with physical labor and with being governed, the white-mestizo population was ‘inherently’ apt for intellectual labor and for governing. Whiteness bestowed power, and power inferred whiteness. Still today, race and class are intrinsically and intimately interlinked in Bolivian society.

Since the founding of the republic, the walls of coloniality were raised around the exercise of formal state power, excluding racialized subjects. While the indigenous population were formally included into the new ‘mestizo nation’ as citizens with the right to vote and be elected after the National Revolution in 1952, their inclusion was a conditioned one, their citizenship of a second class, and it would take until 2005 for a person of indigenous origin to be elected president. This is a consequence as well as an example of the coloniality of power. Subalternized subjects had to search for other ways of voicing their concerns and projecting their political will outside of formal state institutions. Social movement mobilization thus emerged as one of few available channels for protest and resistance.

Hence, Bolivian political life in the second half of the 20th century was characterized by consecutive waves of social mobilizations around anything from labor rights and

democracy, to protests against the privatization of mines and the violent U.S.-instigated eradication of coca leaf plantations. The mobilizations peaked in 2000–2005, when broad coalitions of social movements mobilized against the intensified neoliberalization of the country, making one president flee to the U.S. and another resign, redrawing the cartography of power, and setting the stage for the changes that were on the horizon. Interestingly, explicit indigenous identities became increasingly important in these mobilizations (Burman 2014, 2020; Canessa 2007). The *indianista-katarista* activism of the 1970s and onwards had born fruit: social injustice was increasingly analyzed at the *intersections* of class and ethnicity/race, and indigeneity emerged as a legitimizing factor in political life. Evo Morales and MAS knew how to capitalize on this and won a landslide victory in the 2005 elections. The implications for Bolivian political life would be immense.

A new political landscape opened up. To a certain extent at least, the walls of coloniality that had been raised around formal political power were torn down. *Un indio* was *presidente*. The government that was installed in January 2006 was not only supposedly an indigenous one, but also *un gobierno de los movimientos sociales*, a social movements government. Against this backdrop of decades of social movement struggles, the combined indigenous and social movement character of the government bestowed it with a long-term dosage of political legitimacy (Burman 2016, Ch. 8, 2020; Canessa 2007, 2014; Postero 2017).⁵

Social movements, indigeneity, and environmentalism in the halls of power

When Evo Morales was sworn in as president, on 22 January 2006, he thanked God and Pachamama⁶ for his electoral victory. Soon thereafter, he began articulating a radical critique of the extractivism and consumption patterns of the industrialized North. He brought his critique to the UN General Assembly and to climate change summits and soon emerged as an iconic Mother Earth defender in the eyes of the international environmental movement.

Thus, we have here not only an image of a social movement government and an indigenous president, but also the image of an environmentalist president. In order to understand the context in which the urban Bolivian environmental movement emerged, let us briefly scrutinize the significance and implications of these three images and their respective correspondence to social and political reality, starting with the notion of a social movement government.

Indeed, several representatives from social movements served as ministers, senators, and members of congress during the 14 years of MAS government. In his inauguration speech, Evo Morales addressed the social movements and asked them to be there to correct him when he would make mistakes. During the 2008 political turmoil when right-wing politicians, businessmen, and large landowners in the Bolivian lowlands managed to mobilize large protests against the government and, to some, a civil war was at the horizon, the social movements that had supported Evo in the electoral campaign took to the streets to show their support and thereby secure the continuation of the Morales administration. This seemingly unconditional support from the social movements was institutionalized when the Pacto de Unidad (Pact of Unity), a group of large social movements organizations such as CSUTCB, CONAMAQ (National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu; Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu), CIDOB (Confederation

of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia; Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia), and COB (Bolivian Workers' Union; Central Obrera Boliviana, initially created in 2004 (Postero 2017, 47), swore loyalty to the so-called *proceso de cambio* (the process of change) headed by President Evo Morales.

Not everyone recognizes this as a social movement government, though. There are those (e.g. Rivera 2014) who argue that the Pacto de Unidad was a governmental move to subsume and co-opt social movements into the state apparatus as a way to defang and control them. Organizations that voiced critical opinions regarding the Morales administration, such as the indigenous umbrella organizations CONAMAQ and CIDOB, were undermined by governmental agents and divided in two in 2013, one section supporting and being supported by the government and another opposed by and opposing the government. The latter was especially critical of the government's environmental politics and its policies on indigenous territorial rights. Thus, to mobilize as a social movement was not without risk in the political climate that characterized the Morales administration. Nevertheless, while conventional NGOs appeared in governmental discourse as associated with the privileged classes and the international development industry and thus as the very essence of illegitimate influence, a social movement was portrayed as something else: it was, and to a large extent still is, a legitimate political actor in Bolivian society. Being indigenous was another potential source of political legitimacy.

The indigenous character of the MAS government, as emphasized in official rhetoric since 2006, is clearly exaggerated. Little more than a handful of the ministers who passed through the government during these 14 years would probably be identified by a broader public as being indigenous, but they were never a majority. Nevertheless, it seems the emblematic indigeneity of the president was so strong that it rubbed off, as it were, on non-indigenous ministers; they attained a portion of 'figurative indigeneity' – and thereby political legitimacy – by their association with the indigenous president. Far from everyone subscribed to Evo's indigeneity, though. To some, he was nothing but an acculturated coca farmer. To question the indigeneity of the president this way was to question his political legitimacy and the legitimacy of the entire administration.

Nevertheless, applauded and praised by the international environmental movement at the UN climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009, Evo Morales appeared as not only the indigenous president, but also the environmentalist president. Faced with the disastrous (lack of) results at the Copenhagen summit, Evo decided to invite 'the peoples and social movements of the world' to an alternative climate change summit: The World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, celebrated in Tiquipaya in 2010. The same year, the Ley Marco de Madre Tierra y Desarrollo Integral para Vivir Bien (the Framing Law of Mother Earth and Integral Development to Live Well) was passed in congress. Evo was now at the peak of his environmentalist prominence.

One year later, things had changed radically. At the 17th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP 17) in Durban in 2011, Evo Morales went from being a climate justice hero of the South, to being accused by Bolivian indigenous delegates of being 'the enemy of Mother Earth.' As of today, he has not been able to reestablish his image as an environmentalist icon. One of the reasons for this was the TIPNIS conflict in 2011.

Until 2011, the Morales administration had been a generator of hopes and promises to many Bolivians, not only to the less privileged (who experienced improved living

conditions as a result of important social and economic reforms implemented by the government combined with high rates of economic growth due to high prices on oil and fossil gas on the world market), but also to many environmentally concerned urban middle-class people. A 30-year-old environmental activist from the wealthier parts of La Paz told me, in 2015, of his experience in Tiwanaku on 21 January 2006, when Evo Morales was installed in a creatively staged indigenous ceremony as ‘the indigenous president’ and ‘the president of the indigenous peoples’:

I was there in Tiwanaku. There was so much hope ... Finally, I thought, we would have a president who would put the environment first. But I was wrong, so wrong. It took me several years to realize that it was all a con, but finally, with TIPNIS, I had no illusions left. It was clear that Evo was just an ignorant *cocalero*, after all.

Indeed, the environmental conflict surrounding the construction of a highway right through the heart of the national park and indigenous territory TIPNIS (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécure) was in many ways a defining moment (Burman 2014; Kaijser 2014; McNeish 2013; Postero 2017, Ch., 5). On one side of the conflict were the government and *cocalero* communities, large parts of the *campesino* union (CSUTCB), and some indigenous communities of TIPNIS who wanted the highway to be built. On the other side were a majority of the indigenous communities of TIPNIS, the two largest indigenous umbrella organizations, CIDOB and CONAMAQ, and a budding urban environmental movement, pointing to state violation of indigenous territorial rights and the potential disastrous environmental effects of the projected highway.

On the one hand, due to police brutality, a denigrating governmental rhetoric against the protesters (who marched for 66 days from the lowlands to the city of La Paz), and a blatant continuity with extractivist and developmentalist policies of previous regimes, the government lost what was left of its environmental halo; it was faced by an indigenous opposition and went through one of its worst legitimacy crisis (Burman 2014; Kaijser 2014; McNeish 2013). The fact that Evo saluted Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro as a ‘brother’ with whom he shares the same ‘vision of *la patria grande*’ on 1 January 2019 did not improve the situation. Nor did the disastrous wildfires that consumed enormous areas of the Chiquitania region in 2019, caused or at least aggravated by governmental policies of deforestation, extension of the agricultural frontiers, and settled agreements with powerful agroindustries of the lowlands.⁷ However, the TIPNIS conflict brought together otherwise disparate initiatives, organizations, and struggles in interesting new constellations and alliances. Moreover, a more coherent *urban* articulation of environmental concerns emerged. Thus, after the TIPNIS conflict, I would argue, it is possible to speak of the existence of a national urban environmental movement.

An environmental movement

Obviously, environmental initiatives, projects, and concerns existed in Bolivia long before the TIPNIS conflict. I remember, for instance, planting trees and preparing composts on the Andean countryside with my Aymara colleagues in a *katarista* NGO back in 2001. Sustainable development was on the agenda of every international development agency since the early 1990s, and NGOs and networks all over the country, such as FOBOMADE (Foro Boliviano sobre Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo), LIDEMA (Liga de Defensa del Medio

Ambiente), PROBIOMA (Productividad Biosfera Medio Ambiente), CEJIS (Centro de Estudios Jurídicos e Investigación Social), and Fundación Tierra, worked with waste management, reforestation, erosion control, and organic agriculture, while lobbying for environmental protection legislation. Likewise, indigenous and rural communities have mobilized for decades against the felling of their forests and the contamination of their soils and waters due to mining or oil and gas exploitation. Nevertheless, as a national movement with a strictly environmentalist agenda, as political opposition, as a significant political force, as a perceptible presence on the streets, and as an organized representation of Bolivian civil society in international environmental fora, the urban environmental movement is a rather new phenomenon.

What I speak of here as an urban environmental movement is a conglomerate of organizations, networks, communities, and individuals, involving anything from vegan permaculturalists and urban gardening practitioners to conservationists and members of national environmental and climate change associations participating in international climate change conferences.⁸ It is a heterogeneous movement also in an ideological/political sense, involving anything from conservatives and liberals to eco-Marxists and anarchists. Does it, then, even make sense to speak of it in terms of one movement? I have posed that question to a number of environmental activists, and some of them actually deny that there is such a thing as a Bolivian environmental movement. An activist in her 40s answered as such: 'What movement? We are a group of middle-class professionals who are concerned about the environment. Everyone else seems happy with this government.'

From this short quote, two interesting things can be distilled: 1) a denial of the existence of a Bolivian environmental movement; and 2) a distinction between the educated middle class, supposedly characterized by ecological awareness, and 'everyone else.' Let us discuss both these issues, starting with the former.

Identifying as an environmental movement, and thereby as a social movement, was a double-edged sword for middle-class environmentalists during the Morales administration. On the one hand, being a social movement was a potential source of political legitimacy. On the other hand, social movements are primarily associated with 'the masses' – workers, indigenous people, *campesinos* – from whom middle-class subjects tend to distinguish themselves. To explicitly self-identify as a social movement, then, is not an obvious choice. Likewise, not everyone in Bolivian society would identify '*los medioambientalistas*' as a social movement. An anthropology student in her mid-20s from the city of El Alto told me about her doubts in this regard: 'That's not a social movement. What roots do they have? They are not from the barrios, nor from the communities. What legitimacy do they have?'

Considering the list of criteria that characterize social movements presented above, however, I would argue that for analytical reasons it *does* make sense to speak of a Bolivian urban environmental movement: (1) There is some kind of common identity in the movement, not necessarily a specific common *political* identity beyond that of being in opposition to Morales's presidency, but, as will be discussed in greater detail below, an identity based on certain features and practices that could be discussed in Bourdieusian terms of habitus, taste, and cultural capital – something distinct from 'the masses' and their representative in power for 14 years, Evo Morales. (2) The organizations and individuals that make up the movement have manifested a certain persistence over

time, at least since the TIPNIS conflict. (3) The movement displays a certain network character, visible not least in its social media activities. The organizations and individuals involved interconnect and interrelate in many interesting ways, participating in each other's activities, co-organizing events, and sharing information. Moreover, activists are connected to global environmental actors and platforms, not least in the North, which gives them a certain 'Western' cultural capital. (4) The movement is characterized by active participation and mobilization. (5) The movement articulates a will to change. On the one hand, there is a consistent will to transform national environmental politics, even though it has been articulated much less vociferously since Evo Morales was forced to resign. On the other hand, for many years the movement displayed a general oppositional will to change government and was subsequently one key actor in the social protests that led to Morales's fall.

For analytical reasons, therefore, it *does* make sense to speak in terms of an urban environmental movement.

The second issue distilled from the quote above is just as interesting or even more so. Supposedly, environmental concerns characterize one specific social group, the educated middle class. This is a notion I have run into on several occasions when attending environmentalist meetings and workshops in La Paz and when interviewing activists. As manifested in the following quotes from two female activists in their 40s and 30s, respectively, at a climate change meeting in the well-off neighborhood of Sopocachi, 'the rest' of society is simply seen as ignorant or, during the Morales administration, all too advantaged by extractivist and developmentalist state policies to oppose them (see Burman 2017, 923).

In the mining villages, the schools are empty. The kids will become mineworkers anyway. Mineworkers are not interested in the environment, what interests them is money. Coca farmers cut down forest to earn money, they're happy and don't do anything. And the workers, they earn well and are happy with the government's politics. That's why it's so difficult to get these sectors to work with us. What we have is a middle class that is active in discussing these issues.

People in the villages⁹ have no idea about climate change. They live in the deepest ignorance regarding these issues. How is it possible that they don't have the slightest idea about climate change and the environment?

Here she is using 'people in the villages' as a mere euphemism for 'indigenous people' or 'peasants.' Rather than being accurate reflections of reality, these quotes are examples of 'environmental blame displacement' (Burman 2017), a process by which privileged actors who tend to have a large environmental impact displace the responsibility for environmental degradation and climate change onto less privileged (and supposedly less knowledgeable) actors who tend to have smaller environmental impact. It is a multiscale process, which can be detected on a global scale when the North displaces the responsibility for environmental degradation and climate change onto the South, and on local, regional, and national scales when more privileged actors discursively relieve themselves of responsibility and displace it onto less privileged actors. What is of central concern for the argument developed in this paper, however, is that environmental activists use their environmental concern to make social distinctions, a key component in the explanation of the emergence of the movement, which is developed below.

Having established that there is a Bolivian urban environmental movement, and that it portrays its environmental concern as a middle-class business, it is necessary to *analytically* distinguish this movement of urban middle-class organizations and national platforms and institutes from the subaltern grassroots organizations and *campesino* and indigenous communities involved in environmental conflicts. They are, I argue, two different categories of collectives who mobilize in different ways in relation to ‘the environment.’ While the former dominate what I identify as the Bolivian urban environmental movement, the latter are primarily involved in resource-based and territorial struggles and mobilizations that go far beyond any strict environmentalist agenda and in which middle-class environmentalists tend to play little or no part. The latter, then, is more in line with the Latin American ‘*ecologismo popular*’ identified by Martínez-Alier, Sejenovich, and Baud (2015, 58), but is not exhausted by such a term either and would need to be thoroughly analyzed in a separate paper. Though excessively dichotomous and simplistic, the distinction I suggest here is a handy broad-brush technique for accentuating differences and power asymmetries that otherwise risk getting lost in the fuzzy and ambiguous real world of infinite complexity. When I use the concept ‘middle class’ it is, on the one hand, for empirical reasons; my interlocutors expressed their own class belonging and identity in terms of being middle class, a social category that has also long served as an ethnic marker in Bolivian society, i.e. ‘non-indigenous.’ On the other hand, I use the concept for analytical reasons, in order to make visible certain social processes and power relations. Nevertheless, while holding on to such a distinction between the two mobilizing collectives for analytical purposes, it must be recognized that interesting alliances are occasionally made between them; individuals sometimes partake in the activities of organizations of both categories; sometimes their respective agendas coincide, sometimes only apparently so (see Fabricant’s 2013 work on the Bolivian Platform for Climate Change; cf. Conklin and Graham 1995).

All of this was manifest in the TIPNIS conflict. As I accompanied CONAMAQ during their first days of marching from the lowland town of Trinidad to La Paz in August 2011, I was far from being the only non-indigenous participant in the protesting lines. Non-indigenous activists and advisors accompanied many of the indigenous organizations, and there were entire blocks of non-indigenous environmental protestors representing their own organizations, networks, and platforms.

The two categories of mobilizing collectives identified above – the urban middle-class collective and the indigenous/*campesino* collective – need each other, for legitimacy and for being able to voice their concerns, respectively (Burman 2017). Hence, intricate and seemingly contradictory strategic alliances are sometimes established, in which subjectivities on both sides are molded, enacted, and enhanced according to people’s ideas about what people in the other collective expect from them.¹⁰ In the repertoire of roles to play in this serious game of subjectivities and legitimacy, you find anything from ‘the ecologically noble indigene’ to ‘the well-educated urban expert.’ Again, the TIPNIS conflict is an example. While some of the indigenous political legitimacy of the indigenous/*campesino* collective can rub off onto middle-class activists, the fora, platforms, and international networks developed by the urban middle-class collective are valuable spaces and conduits for the indigenous/*campesino* collective to articulate their claims beyond the proximate local sphere of specific environmental, resource-based, and territorial conflicts.

There is, however, a significant power imbalance between the two categories of mobilizing collectives, an imbalance that risks going under the radar if no analytical distinction is made between them. When I speak of a Bolivian urban environmental movement, I speak of a movement characterized by middle-class hegemony. If environmentalism is defined in narrow terms – and not as a transversal dimension of broader struggles concerning social justice, decolonization, and territorial control – then this is the environmental movement, an urban movement of the educated middle class. In the city of La Paz, it is constituted by a core of some 30–40 spokespersons and leading activists of different organizations, a rather tight network of a couple of hundred active participants and a looser network of several thousand sympathizers who are potential active participants in case of mobilizations related to dramatic environmental occurrences, such as the 2019 Chiquitania wildfires. Similar cores and networks are present in other major cities such as Santa Cruz and Cochabamba. They organize seminars and rallies, often related to topical national environmental issues and conflicts; they partake in national debate and share information profusely on social media; they network with international environmental movements and participate in international fora of different kinds. And, not least, they mobilize radical political opposition.

While little such mobilization was noticeable after Morales was forced to resign in November 2019, protests were all the more profuse during his presidency (and only time will tell how the movement will relate to the new MAS government of Luis Arce and David Choquehuanca, as president and vice president, respectively). At a press conference at the Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos (The Permanent Assembly of Human Rights) in La Paz in January 2019 regarding the TIPNIS conflict and organized in collaboration with key persons of the environmental movement, President Evo Morales was called a dictator on repeated occasions and the participants were urged to engage in radical civil resistance, with the electoral campaign on the horizon.

While environmental activists in La Paz have told me that the environmental movement mobilizes beyond class, gender, and ethnicity, since environmental issues involve everyone on equal terms, the movement *is* primarily a middle-class movement. The activists tend to meet in the wealthier parts of La Paz, in Sopocachi and Zona Sur, sometimes in fashionable ‘cultural cafés,’ sometimes at prestigious cultural institutions. These are places frequented by people who are *culto*, that is, educated people with a certain cultural capital who know how to distinguish the sophisticated from the vulgar, people with ‘good taste’ (see, e.g., Kollnig 2018). Certainly, other, more subaltern, actors are sometimes present, but they tend to be seated in the audience listening to urban activists rather than being invited as speakers. The general frame and agenda, then, tend to be set by a more privileged group who reproduces powerful discourses of sustainability and resilience, adaptation and mitigation, while suppressing other discourses, knowledges, and realities.

Thus, a scientific idiom of biodiversity and ecosystem services – associated with ‘modernity’ and ‘Western-ness,’ though sometimes peppered with disembodied indigenous concepts such as Pachamama – is operational in making social distinctions. Moreover, such seemingly insignificant things as the words used to talk about social and political agency manifest difference. Whereas to the urban middle-class collective of mobilization – attuned as it is to the discourse of the international development industry –, *la sociedad civil* (civil society) is the main agent of change, the *campesino*/indigenous collective of

mobilization tends to talk in terms of *el pueblo* (the people), *los pueblos* (the peoples, referring to the indigenous peoples), *las comunidades* (the rural communities) or *los movimientos* (the movements). There is an interesting difference here, a difference that turns into a social distinction, as expressed to me in the words of an indigenous Aymara leader who participated in a climate change workshop in Sopocachi in 2015 (see Burman 2017, 930): 'I don't know what they mean by "*sociedad civil*." I don't even know if they include us in it. And still, if they do, I don't want to be included on their terms.'

Interestingly, for quite some time in the 2010s, a couple of the more prominent voices of the urban environmental movement of La Paz, especially in relation to climate change, belonged to foreign scientist-activists. In the eyes of some, this probably bestowed international scientific legitimacy and an air of 'Western' sophistication to the movement. In the eyes of others – among them the MAS government –, however, the presence of *gringos* within the movement only further exposed that this was not a people's movement, but rather an expression of a 'colonial, elitist environmentalism,' as Vice President Álvaro García Linera called it (La Razón 2017).

Thus, I have described the movement, its social composition, and its agents, though by all means quite sketchily. But the question still remains: Why did these actors come together as a movement at this specific moment in time? Let us turn to the classical social movement literature for potential answers.

Explaining its emergence

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, classic social movement literature points to four main factors that explain the rise and successful mobilization of social movements: 1) 'strains' that provoke mobilization; 2) access to the resources that are necessary for mobilization; 3) the political opportunity to mobilize; and 4) the existence of a collective political identity. Let us scrutinize these factors one by one to see whether they can explain the rise and mobilization of the movement.

Strains

The first factor is 'strains' and the argument goes as follows: Social movements emerge as reactions to certain problems or injustices; these may be social, economic, political, or environmental (Tilly and Wood 2008). Environmental problems, for instance, give rise to environmental movements. This strand of reasoning has met criticism. While it is clear that social movements must be understood in relation to that which they oppose and the struggles in which they engage, a simplistic application of this notion of causality is problematic, since it would result in the claim that, for instance, wherever there is environmental degradation, environmental movements would appear, or that wherever there is racism, antiracist movements would emerge. This is simply not the case.

The Bolivian political context during Morales's presidency was indeed characterized by environmental strains that could explain the rise of an environmental movement. The former government combined a rhetoric of the Rights of Mother Earth with a realpolitik involving a severe rate of deforestation, reinvigorated extractivism, the construction of a highway through a hotspot of biodiversity, and plans for a nuclear plant and large hydroelectric power stations, which gave rise to serious environmental conflicts (Burman

2014, 2017; Kaijser 2014; Marston and Kennemore 2019; McNeish 2013; Postero 2017) around which the environmental movement mobilized.

However, there was no lack of environmental strains in the 1980s, 1990s, or early 2000s either. In the 1980s, a prolonged drought caused the death of tens of thousands of livestock in the Andes and forced small-scale farming families to migrate to poor peripheral neighborhoods in urban areas. While *campesino* and indigenous organizations and other civil society organizations mobilized to support affected rural communities, no environmental movement emerged. In the 1990s, neoliberal regimes sold out the country's natural resources to transnational corporations; oil spills became routine, rivers and groundwater were polluted by mining activities, hotspots of biodiversity and indigenous territories were degraded and deforested. While labor unions, a number of NGOs, and *campesino* and indigenous organizations protested against the general neoliberalization of the country and its environmental consequences, and while environmental issues have been central to many indigenous mobilizations for territorial rights since the 1990s (Benavides 2019), no national environmental movement similar to the one that emerged in the 2010s took form to address these environmental strains. The indigenous mobilizations of the 1990s and early 2000s (one of which is especially worth mentioning: the 1990 indigenous March for Territory and Dignity) were not organized by any environmental movement; they were rather complex phenomena that combined territorial, political, and cultural claims against a backdrop of historical injustices and anticolonial struggles, and which therefore went far beyond any single-topic focus on 'the environment.' Consequently, environmentally concerned, urban, non-indigenous, middle-class subjects were rather marginal to the development of these mobilizations.

One potential explanation as to why no environmental movement emerged to address the environmental problems of the 1980s and 1990s would be that environmentalism as such emerged in the North in the 1960s, in the wake of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, and subsequently spread throughout the world. It would seem that it reached Bolivia in the 2010s. As many have argued (e.g. Martínez-Alier 2002), however, this is a problematic explanation, not primarily because of its simplistic notion of diffusionist causality, but rather because of its narrow notion of environmentalism and its blatant Eurocentrism, which ignores and fundamentally misrepresents the struggles of subalternized communities in the South.

Regardless of that debate, *environmental* 'strains' do not seem to be a decisive factor in the emergence of the Bolivian urban environmental movement. Could one, then, think of other strains than purely environmental ones, that might explain the emergence of the urban environmental movement? Could it be that the 'strains' experienced by the middle class are primarily of a social and political nature, rather than an ecological one? An environmental activist and student at one of the private universities in La Paz in his late 20s seems to point in this direction in this quote from an interview conducted at a café in downtown La Paz in January 2019:

I'm critical of Evo and the MAS government for many reasons, not only because of their environmental policies. I mean, they have divided the country. If you're not indigenous, you're out of the question. No wonder people have turned their backs on the government.

Could a feeling of being politically and culturally sidelined in the 14-year-long process of constructing a new plurinational *patria* be such a strain? A feeling of being subjected to

the 'dictatorial' demeanors of 'the masses' and their *presidente indígena*? If so, why did *social* and *political* strains give rise to an *environmental* movement? I return to these questions below.

Resources

The second factor emphasized when explaining the rise of social movements is 'access to resources' and the argument goes as follows: Social movements do not primarily emerge as a spontaneous reaction to strains. In order to mobilize successfully, they are rather dependent on certain resources, such as infrastructure, organizational structures and skills, and, not least, money (see, e.g., Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977). In contemporary international development policies, there is an increased attention to environmental issues in general and to climate change adaptation and mitigation specifically. Therefore, one might expect that there would be economic resources available to environmental organizations in a country such as Bolivia. However, in line with the Morales administration's emphasis on national sovereignty and state control, the political and economic freedom of action of national and foreign NGOs was restricted, and large international development cooperation agencies such as USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) and IBIS were expelled from the country. Consequently, many activists argue that the economic resources available for civil society initiatives related to environmental issues were actually scarcer in the 2010s than they were in the 1990s. There was, some argue, 'a war on NGOs,' and some of my interlocutors have experienced job loss when NGOs were shut down or lost their funding. Still, the urban environmental movement emerged in the midst of this 'war,' in the 2010s and not in the 1990s.

As noted by Martínez-Alier (2002), Armiero and Sedrez (2014) and others, it has been argued that environmental movements emerge when a certain level of economic prosperity and social wellbeing has been reached in a given society and people therefore have the time to be concerned about the environment. Nevertheless, a similar critique as the one raised against the diffusionist model discussed above has been raised against this model of explanation: 'the environmentalism of the poor' (Martínez-Alier 2002), '*el ecologismo popular*' (Martínez-Alier, Sejenovich, and Baud 2015, 58), and the entire environmental justice movement of communities of color are overlooked in such accounts. Still, though, the Bolivian urban environmental movement is characterized by middle-class hegemony. The middle class has access to social and economic resources. Could this then not explain the rise and the successful mobilization of the movement? Not entirely. The middle class had resources in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s too, but no national urban environmental movement emerged then.

'Resources,' then, do not decisively explain the emergence and mobilization of the Bolivian environmental movement.

Political opportunity

The third factor is 'political opportunity' and the argument goes as follows: Strains and the access to resources are not enough to explain the rise of social movements. Whether a social movement emerges and is successful in mobilizing rather depends on the

opportunities created and offered by the political system (Kriesi et al. 1995; McAdam 1982). Among such opportunities may be informal characteristics of a society such as the presence of values of tolerance, diversity, and equality, but also formal and institutionalized conditions such as free press, freedom of assembly, and a transparent and accountable parliamentary system. As mentioned above, though, the MAS government restricted the opportunities for civil society to organize independently of the state. Moreover, there were indeed political opportunities for an environmentalist movement to emerge in the past as the neoliberal regimes of the 1990s and early 2000s not only allowed but encouraged NGOs to work with 'sustainable development' and local environmental issues. Nevertheless, no national urban environmental movement emerged then. Instead, it emerged during the presidency of Evo Morales, when political conditions seem to have been anything but ideal.

In order to explain the emergence and mobilization of a social movement in a political context characterized by a government that established its political hegemony on being a 'government of the social movements' and by a weak political opposition, we have to go beyond the political opportunity thesis. As the conventional right-wing Bolivian political opposition lost much of its legitimacy after having administered the neoliberalization of the country in the 1980s and '90s and the violent suppression of social protest 2000–2005, one could argue that new forms of political opposition were forced to emerge. One such attempt was the liberal Partido Verde (the Green Party), which tried to capitalize on the environmental mobilizations surrounding the TIPNIS conflict in the 2014 elections, but with no success. Likewise, the traditional, parliamentary Bolivian left was largely swallowed by MAS and was no longer a viable parliamentary option. Thus, from both the right and the left, extra-parliamentary oppositional measures emerged.

One of the most significant such measures was the 21F movement, which demanded that the MAS government respect the results of the referendum held on 21 February 2016, in which a bare majority rejected the governmental proposition to allow presidents in office to be re-elected a second time. The result of the vote would thereby thwart Evo Morales's aspirations for a new term of office starting in 2020. Nevertheless, the president decided to ignore the result and run for president one more time, which led to protests. One could then have expected a political leadership with an electoral vision for the 2019 elections to emerge from the 21F mobilizations.

Nevertheless, internal ideological tensions and power struggles thwarted any such project. Instead, the parliamentary political opposition in the 2019 elections was primarily constituted by old candidates stained by the past neoliberalization of the country and their respective associations with the prime symbols of neoliberal oppression, such as the candidate Carlos Mesa, who was vice president under President Sanchez de Lozada in the early 2000s and later served two years as president. Therefore, the 2019 elections did not exclude extra-parliamentary oppositional mobilization – quite the opposite. In the end, postelection street protests, instigated by right-wing political forces and subsequently supported by the armed forces, forced Morales to resign.

As mentioned above, though, the MAS government co-opted and divided movements and organizations. To mobilize as a social movement was therefore not a risk-free endeavor. Still, it was an efficient way to articulate political opposition in the political context of 2006–2019. Political opposition took on new, extra-parliamentary forms to acquire political legitimacy (social movements in conjunction with nationalist indigeneity

were, after all, the symbolic foundation upon which formal political power rested during Morales's presidency), and environmental issues became a discursive conduit through which political dissent could be articulated.

It would then not be political opportunity as such that explains the rise of the Bolivian environmental movement, but rather the political conditioning of the forms available for legitimate political opposition and the governmentalized casting of the language through which it can be articulated. Could this, then, explain the fact that the environmental movement is dominated by the non-indigenous, educated, urban middle class that turned its back on the Morales administration? Maybe to a certain extent. Nevertheless, something is missing in this model: people of flesh and blood, who move and act, dress and speak, people with aspirations and hopes, who carve out their social selves within given but contested structures of power and coloniality. We therefore turn to a discussion concerning identity, and subsequently to the so-called 'cultural,' 'emotional,' or 'subjective' turn in social movement theory (e.g. Reed 2015), in which authors have emphasized less material aspects of social movements, such as their network structure (Diani and McAdam 2003; Escobar 2007b), the cultural meanings imbuing social mobilization (Gibb 2001; Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Nash 2004), identity formation and the creation of solidarity within movements (Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994), the emotional reasons why people engage in social movements (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001), and how reality is framed and agendas are set through the claims made by social movements (Benford and Snow 2000).

Collective political identity

The fourth factor is, then, 'collective political identity' and the argument goes as follows: Forging a collective political identity is crucial for successful mobilization, while heterogeneous identities obstruct the articulation of a coherent political project (Doyle 2005; Reed 2015). Influenced by theorists of the so-called 'new social movements' (e.g. Habermas 1981; Slater 1985), scholars working on social movements in Latin America (see, e.g., Ejdesgaard, Balslev, and Velázquez 2015; Escobar 2006; Escobar and Alvarez 1992), not least in Bolivia (Burman 2015; García, Chávez, and Costas 2010; Powęska 2013; Rivera [1984] 2003), have emphasized the collective identities around which social movements are forged. In Bolivia, these identities have without exception been based on ethnicity, class, or more recently gender and sexuality. The relative weight given to different social identities and categories in explaining the rise and mobilization of social movements has changed in tandem with social transformations in Bolivian society.

Starting with the nation-building process of the 1950s, social class was emphasized both in political discourse and in scholarly texts as the racialized *indios* were transformed into *campesinos* (mestizo 'peasants') and mobilized as such to claim their rights in the new mestizo nation (Burman 2014; Canessa 2007; García, Chávez, and Costas 2010). In the late 1980s, ethnicity and indigeneity began to replace class belonging in multiculturalist political discourse and scholarly tracts alike, only to emerge as *the* identity around which people mobilize and, likewise, *the* analytical category for understanding social mobilization in Bolivia in the late 1990s.

Hence, studies of Bolivian social movements (García, Chávez, and Costas 2010; Powęska 2013) manifest that quite homogeneous identities based on class, ethnicity, and gender

have been crucial to the emergence of contentious movements and to their persistence over time. Collective identity, it seems, is the glue that holds movements together and creates internal solidarity. Nevertheless, beyond a general opposition to Morales's presidency, the Bolivian urban environmental movement is anything but homogeneous in its political-ideological position, counting liberals, conservatives, anarchists, and Marxists in its ranks. Still, its mobilizations have been quite successful. Thus, something other than a collective *political* identity must be holding the movement together and creating internal solidarity.

I argue that this 'something else' could be fruitfully discussed in terms of a habitus, a cultural capital (not least based on assets of 'Western-ness'), a sense of taste – that is, a class identity in Bourdieusian terms. As Sarah Kollnig (2018) has revealed in her research on middle-class food practices in the city of Cochabamba, being middle class in Bolivia does not merely imply occupying a specific position in a capitalist mode of production, but also, and perhaps more significantly, having a certain cultural capital, being refined, being able to make distinctions and thereby distinguish oneself. Thus, behind the disparate assemblage of different political views in the urban environmental movement, I would argue, is a shared way of moving around in urban space, a way of walking the streets of La Paz, a way of being comfortable in the cultural institutions and cafés of Sopocachi, a way of entering the Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos as if it was your second home, a way of dressing, greeting, and chatting. Such seemingly insignificant things as the way of rolling one's *r*'s in the characteristic way of young people living in the privileged neighborhoods of Zona Sur or Sopocachi, are a way of making distinctions and signaling that one belongs to *this* group – in this case the urban, non-indigenous, educated middle class of La Paz – and not *that*.

Rolling their *r*'s, anarchists, eco-Marxists, liberals, and right-wing conservatives alike perform their distinguished middle-class subjectivity and sense of belonging. Likewise, behind the disparate assemblage of political views within the movement is a more or less shared sense of taste and belonging. Being able to appreciate a Brecht play at the theatre or a Bergman film at the cinema club, to enjoy certain genres of poetry and fiction, to understand and take pleasure in abstract art – these are all displays of a supposed refined taste that are used by the urban, non-indigenous, educated middle-class subject to distinguish itself as such in Bolivian society, not only in relation to the working class, but also to the emergent indigenous or *cholo*¹¹ middle class. This is the coloniality of taste, discussed by Sarah Kollnig (2018, 2020) as a way of making racial and class distinctions based on taste.

Such distinctions become increasingly important for the privileged when the barbwire surrounding privileged social and political life and social categories, which were thought to be unalterable, are severed by the clippers of social, political, and economic reforms and thoroughgoing transformations of society. When privileged urban space – be it shopping malls, cafés, or restaurants – is occupied by the economically empowered Other, money can no longer be used as a means of distinction; taste and cultural capital become increasingly important. When the president is an *indio*, middle-class opposition is articulated as distinction, as Sarah Kollnig (2020, s. 38) demonstrates when rendering one of the many jokes about Evo Morales told by middle-class people in Cochabamba:

He visits the Spanish king, and before they go for dinner, Morales is told that he should always order something less special than the king. As the king orders honey melon with *jamón*, the Spanish cured ham, Morales, so the joke goes, decides to order watermelon with sausage – something less than the king. The punch line is that he doesn't know that watermelon and sausage really do not go together. This is a sign of him not having the cultural capital to appreciate fine food.

As Nick Crossley (2002) and Hanna-Mari Husu (2013), among others, have shown in excellent ways, Bourdieu can be of use for understanding social movements. However, while Husu applies Bourdieu to what she labels 'identity movements,' the movement I scrutinize here is not concerned with explicit 'identity politics.' Still, though, their political activism cannot be understood without analyzing how their identity is performed, construed, and displayed in political practices of social distinction. Hence, I argue, in order to understand the emergence of the urban environmental movement, we need to consider it – not only, but also – as a means of distinction. In other words, alongside the taste for French wine and the fine arts, a taste for ecology and a concern for climate change distinguishes the refined subject from 'the masses' and their (ex-) president. After all, as the activist quoted above states: 'People in the villages have no idea about climate change. [...] How is it possible that they don't have the slightest idea about climate change and the environment?' Again, let me remind you that 'people in the villages' is a mere euphemism for rural indigenous or *campesino* people.

Thus, we have considered four of the factors that classic social movement literature emphasizes when explaining the rise and successful mobilization of social movements. While the first two, 'strains' and 'resources,' by all means need to be taken into account to understand the emergence and mobilization of the Bolivian environmental movement, they do not in any decisive way explain the phenomenon at hand. The latter two, however, – 'political opportunity' and 'political identity' – were of more analytical use. Nevertheless, in the end, it proves necessary to move beyond both of these theses and instead of 'political opportunity' for mobilization discuss the 'political conditioning' of the forms available for legitimate oppositional practices, and instead of 'collective political identity' discuss an identity based on habitus, taste, and cultural capital, an identity characterized by the intertwined operating categories of class and race.

Distinction, then, emerges as a central concept to understand the environmental movement. To conclude this paper, let us therefore explore the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities inherent in the ways 'distinction' is practiced as political opposition, not least in relation to the indigenous Other. Let us, in other words, return to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper: Why is Evo Morales a donkey and a shitty Indian for wanting to build a highway and a nuclear plant? Why were the (non-indigenous) neoliberal regimes of the 1990s and the early 2000s not opposed by a powerful, coherently articulated urban environmental movement when they invited transnational extractivist corporations to wreak havoc on Bolivian ecosystems? Likewise, why did the urban environmental movement not mobilize as vociferously against the disastrous environmental politics of the Añez government as they did against the Morales administration?

Distinction, opposition, and the indigenous other

'The environment' may be a rewarding node around which to organize political opposition. Discussing environmental issues, in certain contexts you may be seen to be speaking, as it were, from a morally higher position than your opponent since you display a certain educated consciousness, a morally elevated awareness. You are not just advocating for specific group interests; you are speaking in the name of *the environment*, the planet, the future of our children, the survival of humanity. Anyone opposing you on these matters can easily be characterized as *un burro*, *un bruto*, *un ignorante*, or, to some, even *un indio de mierda*. As such, 'the environment' is a rewarding bargaining chip to use in the serious game of making social distinctions.

Doing research among middle-class people in the city of Cochabamba, Sarah Kollnig (2018, 2020) identified a Bolivian non-indigenous middle-class predilection for Western modernity, but not just any version of Western modernity, but a refined, educated modernity, *una modernidad culta*. In middle-class eyes, Eco is modern, Eco is Western. In this sense, having abandoned what initially seemed to be an ambitious environmental agenda, the MAS government, personified by President Evo, appeared as neither Eco, nor modern. Evo Morales was rather portrayed as an ignorant, unmodern *cocalero*, without the ecological awareness that characterizes the environmentalized middle-class subject of the 21st century. In middle-class eyes, among the most unmodern of all things is *el indio* who is no longer a real *indio*, the indigenous-no-longer-indigenous. It is in this context that the Facebook quote at the beginning of this paper can make sense: 'Only a shitty Indian could think of destroying our biodiversity in this way. He doesn't even respect the rights of indigenous people.' It is indeed a remarkable quote. An anti-indigenous racist slur is used to criticize the president's lack of respect for indigenous peoples' rights. Nevertheless, in the political context of Bolivia during the 2010s, characterized on the one hand by an unceasing coloniality of power and, on the other hand, by an indigenization of political discourse and legitimacy, it made a sort of sense. By being called a shitty Indian, Evo's 'true' indigeneity was called into question. Evo was identified as an indigenous-no-longer-indigenous subject, and as such he was, to some, *un indio de mierda*, supported by the likewise 'brute masses' of indigenous-no-longer-indigenous subjects. One of the most prominent activists of the environmental movement told me in Sopocachi in 2017 (see Burman 2017, 922):

On the one hand, we have a government that talks about the rights of Mother Earth and Pachamama and about anti-imperialism, but at the same time they are deforesting the Amazon. They say they want development in harmony with Pachamama, and they legitimize it all by saying that they are an indigenous government. But they really don't know what sustainability means. On the other hand, we have poor *campesinos* who have lost the knowledge of cultivating the land in sustainable ways. They are not really indigenous people anymore, because they exploit the land.

Thus, if indigeneity is not a concrete social condition related to specific ethnic identities, collective memories of exploitation, suffering and resistance and a subalternized position in society, but a vague practice of 'cultivating the land in sustainable ways,' then it might be totally coherent to combine racist notions of *un indio de mierda* with romanticized notions of indigeneity (Macusaya 2020). Thus, it might appear reasonable to call the president a shitty Indian for not respecting the rights of indigenous peoples.

Moreover, if this is indigeneity, by supporting the 'ecologically noble' (Kaijser 2014; Redford 1991) indigenous people in TIPNIS in their struggle against the Bolivian state, middle-class environmental activists from Zona Sur can even become figuratively more indigenous than Evo, as some of the indigeneity of the communities of TIPNIS can rub off to them. This 'figurative indigeneity' can only be understood in a context of coloniality in which racism against supposedly indigenous-no-longer-indigenous subjects thrives alongside romanticized notions of indigeneity. This, I would argue, is a continuation of the *indigenismo* of the early 20th century, a racist but simultaneously romanticized and mystical view of indigenous people from above, a philosophical, political, and literary tendency that celebrated the supposedly pure pre-colonial past as much as it mourned the supposed cultural degeneration of contemporary indigenous people, while seeking 'to bring Indians into the nation by disciplining, improving, or assimilating them' (Postero 2017, 8).

In this sense, Evo Morales, with his seemingly boyish dreams of anti-imperialist nuclear plants, extractivism, and highways, is hopelessly left in the 20th century and a vulgar *cholo* modernity, while 'real' indigenous people,¹² if guided wisely by the environmentalized middle class, make up perfect subjects as 'guardians of nature' for a modern post-MAS political project of the 21st century. In this sense, environmental concern is after all not an exclusive middle-class phenomenon; it is also shared by ('real') indigenous people, but then supposedly in an innate, pre-rational way. Chandler and Reid (2018) discuss this romanticized notion of indigeneity in terms of the ascription of resilience and sustainability to indigenous people:

[I]t is a mantra so often repeated by states and other powerful actors worldwide that it has become a governing cliché. It is, however, a powerful and dangerous cliché, for it presents the indigenous as an exemplary neoliberal subject . . .

In relation to such romanticized notions of 'real' indigenes, the depiction of Evo Morales as *un burro*, *un ignorante*, *un bruto*, and *un indio de mierda* was part of a non-indigenous middle-class *oppositional politics as distinction* and *distinction as oppositional politics*. I do not in any way argue that this is the only reason behind the emergence of the urban environmental movement. Neither do I argue that all environmental activism in Bolivia is instrumental to the reproduction of coloniality, racism, and social inequalities. Far from it. Moreover, few environmental activists would have used racist slur to criticize Evo Morales. However, the rise of the movement at this very moment in time, its social composition, its appeal to certain socially accommodated subjects, its dominant discourse and agenda, and its successful mobilization cannot be understood outside of this context. Likewise, the fact that the environmental movement did not protest loudly during the Áñez administration, even though ravaging wildfires consumed the lowlands, would seem to support such an argument, since, to many, the anti-indigenous discourse of this new administration seemed to imply a (temporary) restoration of colonially conditioned social/racial categories and borders.

Then, one question remains: Why were the (non-indigenous) neoliberal regimes of the 1990s and the early 2000s not opposed by a powerful, coherent, urban, middle-class environmental movement when they invited transnational extractivist corporations to wreak havoc on Bolivian ecosystems? One potential, but rather cynical, provocative, and indeed speculative, answer would be: Back then, there was no despicable indigenous-no-

longer-indigenous subject in power from whom to distinguish oneself by alluding to the cultural capital of 'environmental awareness'; social/racial categories and borders were still reasonably, as it were, in place. Hence, there was no need for displaying a taste for ecology.

Still, other, probably more reasonable and maybe more likely, answers would draw attention to the fact that urban, middle-class environmentalist initiatives were rather disparate and isolated in the 1990s and the early 2000s; that it takes time to create fertile networks and develop coherence as a movement; that a global environmentalist discourse has caught much more traction since then, which in turn facilitates the organization and mobilization around 'the environment'; and that the discrepancy between state discourse and realpolitik concerning environmental issues during Morales's presidency was quite spectacular and therefore triggered radical criticism and mobilization around 'the environment.' Be that as it may, it can be concluded that Bolivian urban environmental activism of the 2010s was a device, not *only* for articulating a legitimate criticism of state-endorsed extractivism and developmentalism, but also for making social distinction, and consequently, for reproducing a colonially conditioned social order.

Notes

1. Pointing to the protestors' habit of signaling their rebellion by tying small laces (*pititas*) to poles, fences, and lampposts, Evo Morales said in a mocking and condescending tone that 'tying laces and setting tires [on fire in the streets], two-three people want to start a strike.' The protestors appropriated the concept '*pititas*' and started to talk about themselves and their protest in such terms, and even published a book called *La revolución de las pititas en Bolivia* (Herrera Añez 2020). Currently, to many of Evo Morales's supporters and many other indigenous and working-class activists, to be a *pitita* is synonymous with being, or aiming to be, a '*jailon*,' i.e. a non-indigenous, spoiled, upper- or middle-class person who shows contempt for rural and working-class people.
2. 'Solamente un indio de mierda podría pensar en destruir nuestra biodiversidad de esta manera. Ni respeta los derechos de los pueblos indígenas' (post on Facebook, 10 October 2016).
3. See also the more recent work discussing these factors, e.g. Buechler (2011); Klandermans and Roggeband (2009); Meyer (2006); Nash (2004); Reed (2015).
4. Using the concept 'coloniality,' I refer to that which outlived formal colonialism, or, in other words, the living legacy of colonialism in contemporary societies, ranging from global inequalities and racialized divisions of labor to racist and Eurocentric notions of who is a legitimate political actor and a valid producer of knowledge (see, e.g., Escobar 2007a; Grosfoguel 2011; Quijano 2007).
5. Silvia Rivera describes a similar process of 'mass euphoria' and the bestowal of political legitimacy to the MNR (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement; Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario) after the National Revolution in 1952 (1990, 103).
6. An Andean deity often referred to as Mother Earth.
7. Large parts of the Bolivian lowlands experienced new disastrous wildfires from July to September 2020, but the urban environmental movement did not raise their voices as vociferously as the year before when Evo Morales was still president.
8. Considering the politically sensitive topic, and in order not to expose individuals and individual organizations of the movement under study, I have decided not to name organizations or activists by their names.
9. A mere euphemism for 'indigenous people' or 'peasants.'

10. See, for instance, the indigenous mobilizations against the projected hydroelectric power stations of El Bala and Chepete, around which the urban environmental movement also mobilizes.
11. 'El cholo' tends to be portrayed as the urbanized and supposedly acculturated *indio*, caught in between the indigenous community (to whom he is no longer *jaqi*, a social person) and the mestizo urbanites (to whom his *indio* origin will always shine through and be a persistent rationale for discrimination and exploitation). For an insightful discussion on *la chola*, see Weismantel (2001).
12. Or 'our indigenes' (*nuestros indígenas*), an expression that would need to be explored in a separate paper, but that makes manifest a persistent paternalist attitude towards indigenous people.

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