Ethnography of the State in Plurinational Bolivia: Indigenous Knowledge, Clientelism and Decolonizing Bureaucracy

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Abstract: This chapter introduces an ethnographic approach to studying state formation, policy making and bureaucracy. The ethnography of the state does not commit to any specific normative judgment of what the state is or should be; instead, it denaturalizes liberal expectations of its form and content by examining its actual operations, representations and meanings through the lens of people's experiences and practices. To illustrate how it works and the kind of data and knowledge it produces, this chapter focuses on the case of decolonizing state bureaucracy in Bolivia during Evo Morales' first presidency (2006–2009). It explains what it was like to conduct ethnographic research among Bolivian state officials at a time when they were attempting to transform state institutional discourses and practices through Indigenous knowledge and expertise, as manifested in the notion of Vivir Bien (living well). By documenting the difficulties in translating Indigenous knowledge into technical expertise, this chapter sheds light on the internal discrepancies and contradictions marking processes of change as they materialize in state ministries and institutions. Making visible how issues such as clientelism operate in the lives of state officials, it helps to make better sense of the institutional fragilities of state formation processes in the Global South.

Key words: Indigenous Knowledge, Indigenous Expertise, Vivir Bien, Clientelism, Decolonization, Ethnography of the State

1 Introduction

> Vivir Bien has guided everything. Everything was inspired by that concept. Vivir Bien continues in the rhetoric, but we have put a lot of focus on the economy. We have lacked the social and cultural aspects of Vivir Bien: reduction of violence, promotion of peace and resolution of conflicts. Old developmentalist [*desarrollista*] and industrializing discourse based on economic growth has won... Ideological struggles are about the control of discourse; not only about the

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> control of the state. There is a struggle for the construction of the discourse of development. (Interview 30.8.2018)

The above excerpt, illustrating the contradictions between state policy and practice, is drawn from an interview in 2018 with a former minister of the state on the latest developments in the contested process of decolonizing the state in Bolivia.[2] This began in 2006 with peasant activist and union leader Evo Morales' election as the first Indigenous president (2006–2019) of this impoverished and landlocked South American country, whose majority population is distributed among its many Indigenous peoples. In 2008–2009, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork exploring the contested emergence, meanings and use of the notion of Vivir Bien (Spanish-language term for 'living well') in policy making and state transformation processes involving ministers, public servants, development experts and Indigenous activists in the capital of Bolivia, La Paz. This was for the purpose of my doctoral dissertation in the field of development studies (Ranta 2014a; see also, Ranta 2018a). I had also previously lived and worked in La Paz, Cochabamba and various Indigenous communities in 2001 and 2002. During that time, I had become familiar with the Quechua concept of Sumak Kawsay, or 'good life', circulating in Indigenous communities, networks and NGOs. Many scholars consider the Amazonian Kichwa in Ecuador the pioneers in its elaboration (Alonso González and Macías Vázquez 2015; Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán 2015). For them, it meant fertile lands and the control of ancestral knowledge over lands, territories and the Indigenous lived world (Radcliffe 2012, p. 242).[3] When the conceptualization of Vivir Bien appeared in the title and key contents of Bolivia's national development policy framework in 2006, I wanted to find out how and why a grassroots Indigenous concept depicting Indigenous struggles for land, territory and self-determination transnationally across the Andes had made its way into Bolivian state policy discourses. Moreover, what would decolonizing bureaucracy with Indigenous knowledge look like in practice?

In this chapter, in order to illustrate how the ethnography of the state works, I present how I planned and performed my ethnographic research among Bolivian state officials at a time when they were attempting to decolonize state bureaucracy through the application of

[2] Although the person is a public figure, I have opted to protect their identity due to their contested political position in a volatile situation.

[3] I have described the origins of the terminology in more detail in Ranta (2020a). In Ecuador, the notion is typically spelled Buen Vivir when adopted to state policy and legislation. The Buen Vivir term is also more widely used in transnational activism than its Bolivian variant.

Indigenous knowledge and expertise. In the first section, I explain what doing state ethnography means and meant in my own particular case, while the second sheds light on Vivir Bien as state policy and its contradictions. The third and fourth sections introduce the concrete findings of my research through ethnographic description and explanation: the third focuses on the difficulties in translating Indigenous knowledge into the technical expertise needed by state officials in their daily routines, and the fourth describes the motivations, hesitations and oppositional activities of public servants when faced with new decolonizing approaches that disrupted their earlier ways of working. These sections also highlight the continuities in—and probably even the intensifying of—clientelism, which, with Lazar (2008), I define in this chapter as a popular political strategy involving MAS voters and leaders (ultimately Morales himself), with the goal of gaining benefits like employment through patron-client relations. Making visible how clientelism operates in the lives of state officials, this chapter aims for a better understanding of the institutional fragilities of state formation processes in the Global South.

Throughout the sections, I concentrate on describing encounters between discursive aspects of the notion of Vivir Bien and the institutional and structural aspects of the state as manifested in people's everyday practices and experiences of state institutions. Indeed, intimate representations of contradictions and ruptures in everyday bureaucratic practices became my main object of ethnographic scrutiny. Using ethnographic examples, I shed light on the practical aspects of the challenging task of incorporating the notion of Vivir Bien into bureaucratic routines. Ultimately, I show that in practice the process of decolonizing state bureaucracy using Indigenous knowledge was a complicated and contradictory process in which different kinds of hopes, needs and interests met and collided in multiple, and sometimes unexpected, ways.

2 Doing Ethnography of the State

Traditionally, the target of anthropological research was strictly confined to non-state societies such as kin-based collectives, ethnic groups and Indigenous communities, while the study of state formation and policy making were considered to belong to the sphere of

political scientists, management scholars, political sociologists and so forth (Das and Poole 2004; Sharma and Gupta 2006). In an article discussing relationships between social anthropology and development studies, anthropologist James Ferguson (1997, p. 161) suggested sarcastically that anthropologists focus on the "description and comparison of societies as little contaminated by development as possible".[4] Gupta and Ferguson (1997, p. 13) refer to this as the "hierarchy of purity of field sites": those that are most appreciated ethnographically have typically been rural, face-to-face communities that are arguably "untouched" by outside forces, such as the apparatus of development and state bureaucracy. Yet Das and Poole (2004, p. 5 5) have argued that despite anthropology's disciplinary disinterest in state formation, it has been "in many unacknowledged ways, about the state—even when its subjects were constituted as excluded from, or opposed to, the forms of administrative rationality, political order, and authority consigned to the state".

Launching the idea of 'studying up', Laura Nader (1972) insisted as early as the 1970s that, in addition to local communities, ethnographers should also study elites, corporations and state institutions. Furthermore, since the late 1980s, the world has dramatically changed with economic globalization, mobile technologies, migrations and the proliferation of other transnational phenomena, and new methodological orientations like multi-sited ethnography have been developed to respond to this situation (Marcus 1995). Today, so-called anthropology and ethnography of the state are commonly accepted and much needed subfields of anthropological scholarship and other related academic fields (Das and Poole 2004; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Trouillot 2003).

By contrast to political science or political sociology, ethnography of the state does not commit to specific normative judgments of what the state is supposed to be. It denaturalizes liberal expectations of its form and content, and rather examines its actual practices, representations and meanings as they are experienced. What ethnographic examination can bring to the study of states is the understanding that the state is not a given, fixed entity but a complex set of everyday practices, discourses, institutions and structures constructed by a diversity of actors. Ethnographic study, as Sharma and Gupta (2005, p. 8) have suggested, can "bring together the ideological and material aspects of state construction, [providing

[4] For a summary about the different phases in the anthropological study of development, see Gould and Ranta (2018).

understanding of] how 'the state' comes into being, how 'it' is differentiated from other institutional forms, and what effects this construction has on the operation and diffusion of power throughout society". Its starting point is the idea, presented by Trouillot (2003, p. 89), that "the state is a set of practices and processes and the effects they produce as much as a way to look at them [which is why] we need to track down these practices, processes, and effects".

Applying an ethnographic approach to studying the state in a context of complete transformation—the pursuit of decolonization, in this case—was a challenging task, yet also a response to the changing circumstances of Indigenous peoples in Bolivia. When representatives of social movements, Indigenous organizations and peasant unions were nominated as ministers and public servants, the methodological choices of academics who worked with them had to be shaped by the situation. We had to follow them to the corridors of state power. In contemporary Bolivia, Indigenous peoples are no longer fixed in a singular site, territory or community, if they ever were.

In order to grasp what was going on in this highly complex and mobile field, I chose to use various ethnographic techniques of investigation, the crucial ones being policy analysis, participant observation and interviews.[5] These allowed me to follow diverse discourses, documents and perceptions of Vivir Bien, ethnographically tracing the characteristics of its appearance in diverse social settings. In terms of policy analysis, the main document I examined was the National Development Plan (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo: Bolivia digna, soberana, productiva, y democrática para Vivir Bien 2006–2011), which provided Bolivian ministries with an overall framework for their sectoral policies and bureaucratic practice. Another important document was the new Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, approved in January 2009. In 2010, Morales' regime launched yet another governmental program (Rumbo a una Bolivia Líder: 2010–2015 Programa de Gobierno), which provided further evidence with which to support my fieldwork observations.[6]

At the same time, I tracked the notion across the everyday practices of public servants, consultants and state bureaucracy more generally. Consequently, the second method for

[5] The description of the methodology appears more fully in my unpublished doctoral dissertation (Ranta 2014a, 34–43).
[6] Since that time, various other development policy documents have been launched.

gathering data was participant observation. I had an opportunity to observe the functioning of state bureaucracy closely and to become acquainted with political and policy-making actors in a highly volatile political situation. Although I moved back and forth between ministries, development agencies, universities, social movements and other actors, I most closely observed the internal functioning of the Ministry of Planning, an entity responsible for elaborating and monitoring state policy making. My initial encounter with one of the ministers was greatly enhanced by my earlier work experiences and contacts within the field of development cooperation, but a personal link between one of the vice-ministers and an Indigenous NGO in which I had earlier volunteered was a crucial factor in establishing confidential relationships and in facilitating my access to the ministry. I was able to visit the premises regularly and observe both pre-scheduled and spontaneous meetings, as well as some internal staff meetings where the notion of Vivir Bien was discussed. With time, I started to meet public servants and consultants outside the office and working hours: in restaurants, bars, parks and their homes. I was also invited to participate in, and to observe, policy events where the notion of Vivir Bien was being operationalized into state practice.

In the context of state bureaucracy, there was the difficulty of not being constantly present in the lives of the people I studied. In traditional, often small and rural ethnographic settings, participant observation of everyday practices is facilitated by the compact size of the location where people operate. Within the state apparatus, it is difficult, or even impossible, to linger in the ministries, and ministers, public servants and consultants all go in different directions after working hours. This led to my complementing participant observation with the systematic use of interviews. Although ethnographers have tended to prioritize spontaneous conversations and participation in everyday life in order to interfere as little as possible in the data (Wolcott 2005, p. 155), pre-solicited visits and interviews are a more practical way to conduct research in modern bureaucracies than hanging around in the institutions. My tactic was to use reflexive, semi-structured, in-depth interviews as much as possible, meaning that many were closer to conversations than formal interviews. Furthermore, I had the chance to collect the life histories of a few key interlocutors, while I also used projective techniques such as asking questions related to the future of the interviewed individual and the institution or group they were representing. An obvious benefit arising from the social characteristics of my field site was that in bureaucratic situations there is no restriction on making notes. Indeed, documenting and recording interviews is encouraged as a “natural” part of bureaucratic practices. Interviews were also observational events. Pre-solicited meetings with

various kinds of officials and experts gave me the opportunity to enter ministry premises and observe bureaucrats in action, which otherwise would have been difficult to accomplish.

In the following sections, I describe some of these premises, events and encounters to illustrate the kind of data that emerged from the ethnography of the state in a context where policy makers had chosen to decolonize bureaucracy. First, however, I explain what Vivir Bien as state policy meant and the discrepancies between this and state practice.

3 The New Policy and its Contradictions

The key aim of the notion of Vivir Bien at the level of state policy was to challenge dominant Western development paradigms and to find locally grounded solutions to questions of poverty, intersecting inequalities and multiple marginalizations. Gudynas (2011), one of the leading scholars on Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien, has argued that, by rejecting the prime objective of economic growth as development, the approach represented an ecological and communal alternative to Western modernity, knowledge claims and Eurocentric political thought. The search for alternatives coincided with the so-called Pink Tide, the emergence all over Latin America of left-wing governments opting for post-neoliberal politics of rebuilding the state (Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012). In postcolonial contexts, state institutions and structures have been thoroughly shaped by colonial histories and the continuation of neocolonial relations in the forms of structural adjustments, capital flight, trade and aid, all on unfavorable and often unequal terms. Despite vibrant Indigenous movements and resistance actions, the Bolivian state bureaucracy has tended to exclude Indigenous peoples from its operations, if not as legitimizers of a pact between political parties or as subservient clients to a patron (Albó 2008). Racism, discrimination against and oppression of Indigenous peoples by the nation-state is deeply rooted in Bolivian colonial and republican history (Nuñez del Prado 2015, p. 205); hence, the motivation for decolonizing the state bureaucracy.

Bolivian policy documents portrayed Vivir Bien as a culturally and ecologically sustainable, harmonious and communal way of life typical of Andean and Amazonian Indigenous people

(República de Bolivia 2007).[7] Its use in state policy would, it was suggested, help to eliminate colonial inequalities and exclusions, revitalize Indigenous self-determination and regain Bolivia's national sovereignty vis-à-vis transnational governance (ibid.). As such, its potential as a civilizational alternative to multiple contemporary crises of modernity—climate change, fossil fuel dependency, global extractivism, intersectional exclusions—raised high hopes amongst many activists and scholars worldwide (Chuji, Rengifo and Gudynas 2019).

However, much of the anticipation for radical change concerning Morales's presidency and government in the name of Vivir Bien was misplaced, as the excerpt from the former minister of the state presented at the introduction of this chapter aptly captured. Having been sacked—in his own words—due to internal power struggles in which ministers were intimidated and dismissed if considered a danger to the prevailing presidential discourse, the ex-minister's view clearly apprehends the difficulties of translating Indigenous knowledge into state practice. There is increasing agreement among Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien scholars that its conceptual introduction into state policies has failed to produce closure to problems associated with the idea of development (Radcliffe 2015, p. 861). In terms of the economy and environment, the key contradictions that clash with the environmental values of Vivir Bien have been the intensification of unsustainable agrarian extractivism (McKay 2017) and extractivist conflicts between Amazonian Indigenous groups and the government in Indigenous territories and national parks (McNeish 2013; Ranta 2016a). Bolivian scholars and activists have further criticized the process of change for its resulting concentration of power and weakening of democracy (Komadina 2019; Rojas 2019; Zuazo 2012). Many also indicate that it betrayed much of its commitment to Indigenous self-determination, autonomies and plurinationalism by strengthening the centralized and extractivist state apparatus (Choque 2014; Mamani 2017; Nuñez del Prado 2015). Despite legislative advances, racism and discrimination continue to be present in state institutions (Ranta 2018b, pp. 379–80).

The internal discrepancies and contradictions of the process of change were already becoming visible during my first period of fieldwork within state ministries and institutions

[7] The 2015 national development plan presented similar ideas (Ministerio de Planificación al Desarrollo 2015).

in 2008–2009 on which I focus in this chapter.[8] In fact, to some extent the methodology of ethnography of the state utilized for my data collection and analysis helps to make sense of the violent rupture in 2019, when Morales' fourteen years in political power ended in a massive urban uprising against his political party's (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS) alleged electoral fraud. Violent conflict followed, and MAS's key political figures, including Morales, went into exile. Representatives of the old political and economic elite returned to power and new populist right-wing politicians emerged. As the MAS regained state power in October 2020, reflexivity and self-criticism about the grievances of state operations became crucial for promoting reconciliation, peace and justice in a context of deep polarization, latent hatred and grave disillusionment (Iturralde et al. 2020; Ranta 2020b). In the following sections, I go back to the early stages of the process of change and illustrate some of its contradictions through the description of specific ethnographic encounters in which diverging hopes, needs and interests were negotiated.

4 Translating Indigenous Knowledge into Technical Expertise

I start by describing an internal Ministry of Planning event in 2008 when well-known Aymara scholar-activist Simon Yampara tutored ministry officials on the meaning of the Vivir Bien term. Many recognize Yampara as one of the pioneers of the Aymara concept Suma Qamaña (Burman 2017, p. 156; Gudynas 2011, p. 444) which, in addition to Sumak Kawsay, served as the inspirational basis for the Spanish-language Vivir Bien terminology. For Yampara, Suma Qamaña represented the Aymara way of life and their reciprocal relationship with the living earth. However, according to Yampara, colonialism under the Incas and the Spanish, and the neocolonial practices of the Bolivian nation-state, transnational companies and development cooperation, had shattered the balance and reciprocity between individuals, communities and their biophysical environments in the Andes. Consequently, he argued, Indigenous peoples can no longer attain the conditions for living a good life. To rectify the situation, he suggested, Indigenous peoples must revitalize

[8] I have since collected qualitative data in La Paz in 2018 and early 2020. I write about my data collection, reflexivity, positionality and research ethics of the ethnography of the state in more detail in Ranta (2014b) and Ranta (2016b).

their own sustainable ways of life, strengthen their self-determination and claim sovereignty over Indigenous lands and territories. Indeed, cherishing Indigenous knowledge became one of the core ideological elements in the attempt to transform the Bolivian nation-state into a plurinational state consisting of Indigenous territorial autonomies (Ranta-Owusu 2010).

The staff of the ministry consisted of urban middle-class officials who drafted its general guidelines, as well as consultants who, in turn, supported other ministries in mainstreaming these policies. Officers in collared shirts and high heels, and young consultants casually dressed in hoodies packed into a small glass-walled meeting room separated from the large open space of a building dating back to the colonial era. The senior program director responsible for implementing the government program opened the event by saying that the purpose of the meeting was to learn from Indigenous experts such as Yampara how "living well" perspectives could be incorporated into the daily work of ministries. In the past, there had been talk of development plans, development goals and development projects, he explained; now, in addition to the new jargon, officials should learn new—more communal and ecological—ways of working based on the grassroots experiences of many Bolivian Indigenous peoples instead of universal statistics, analyses, models and indicators. The program director said that his personal interest would be in learning how officers could create concrete tools, such as monitoring and evaluation indicators, based on this new concept. Apologetically, he told Yampara that because the daily routines of ministries are based on "Western culture", they need to be able to quantify the realization of their plans. Despite the new policy, Bolivia's development should also be comparable to other countries in the world, where indicators such as the GDP measure the well-being of its citizens.

The senior program director clearly hoped that Yampara would act as a "translator" between state bureaucrats and Indigenous communities, as British development anthropologists Lewis and Mosse (2006) call people in such positions. Instead of officials directly operating with the Aymara, Quechua, Guarani, Chiquitano, Mojeños and other Bolivian Indigenous people, he expected Yampara to mold Indigenous knowledge into a technical form appropriate to the needs of state institutions. These expectations had antecedents. During the 1990s, the notion of Indigenous knowledge had gained currency among development practitioners, alongside the rise of alternative development approaches, ethno-development and the proliferation of Indigenous rights (Laurie et al. 2005). The World Bank, in collaboration with such UN agencies as the UNDP, UNESCO and WHO, launched an international Indigenous

knowledge initiative, which aimed to apply it in "the development process and establish partnerships with NGOs and local communities" (Green 1999, p. 20). It defined Indigenous knowledge as being "embedded in community practices, institutions, relationships and rituals" and as being "part of everyday life" (ibid.). This transnational process led to the professionalization of Indigenous expertise that served development purposes (Brysk 2000).

Yampara, on the other hand, did not intend to adapt easily to the wishes of state officials. He shifted his gaze slowly from one attendant to another in an embarrassing silence. In the end, he stated accusingly that it seemed to him that the organizers of the event did not take it seriously. "If this was a meeting to be taken seriously," he said, "coca leaves would be distributed to each participant. We would share coca-leaves with each other as a sign of reciprocity and we would chew coca together as a sign of respect towards our ancestors and ancient Andean civilizations. Only after that we would talk." The young consultants sighed and looked at each other with smiles. Yampara's straightforward and slightly aggressive approach seemed to impress them. Perhaps no other commodity has as many conflicting symbolic meanings in the Andes as coca leaves, which crystallize almost all the greatest upheavals in Bolivian history, from the sacred rituals of the Incas to the alleviation of hunger and fatigue of miners in the Andean High Plateau mines. While they symbolize the reciprocity of Indigenous peoples, they are also linked to the operations of coca farmers in the global drug trade, to the aggressive U.S. anti-cocaine policy and even the political rise of Morales as the coca union leader. Thus, Yampara's introduction placed Bolivia's painful and complex history, shaped by modernity, capitalism and colonial continuities, on the table.

After a short pause, Yampara began criticizing the use of the Spanish term Vivir Bien by the state administration, claiming that its application was too superficial. "The notion of living well is just words on paper," he noted. According to Yampara, the National Development Plan (2006–2011) reflected the "monocultural logics" of Western bureaucracies, although it should rather be based on the logics of plural Andean worldviews. Yampara declined to obey the program director's wish that he outline concrete tools, stating that the Spanish term Vivir Bien should correspond to the philosophy of Andean cosmological conviviality (*cosmo-convivencia andina*), with the notion of Suma Qamaña being the Andean paradigm of life. "Suma Qamaña is life," he said, continuing that life cannot be measured by quantitative measures alone. Yampara thus made a distinction between how Indigenous activists and state ministries understood and used Indigenous terminology.

After the meeting, I discussed its content with three young consultants in their office space. One of them, with a background in left-wing student movements, suggested that, in their opinion, many Indigenous scholars, Yampara included, present overly idealistic images of Indigenous knowledge. By contrast, another consultant, originating from a highland Aymara community, said that they could recognize the ideas of Suma Qamaña from their own experiences at home. The third consultant, also of Aymara background, commented that they had great sympathies for Indigenous intellectuals, such as Yampara, feeling that their ideas, were responses to centuries of dominance by "Western universalist views of knowledge". What was important, they said, was that Yampara was showing that Indigenous communities have positive features, such as reciprocity and harmony, principles that each of us should cherish. The consultant with the left-wing background noted that, nonetheless and despite good intentions, as technical advisors and consultants they were in trouble because they were supposed to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into viable planning mechanisms and they had no idea how to do it. Yampara's presentation had not given them technical tools, yet these young consultants at the Ministry of Development were in charge of generating guidelines for the implementation of the notion of Vivir Bien throughout state institutions.[9]

5 Middle Class Fragility and Clientelism

In addition to the young consultants recruited by Morales' ministers, many state officials had worked for their respective ministries for a long time, under various governments. Morales' government constituted a clear ideological rupture with the earlier regimes, which had followed structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and poverty reduction programs with the support of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other development donors (Kohl and Farthing 2006; Ranta-Owusu 2008). From the mid-1980s return to electoral democracy until Morales' election, Bolivian political parties from left to right had collaborated in a variety of political pacts that supported the dictates of transnational neoliberal governance. In contrast to the nationalized economy and corporatist politics launched by Bolivia's nationalist revolution in 1952, neoliberal politicians opened up the

[9] I discuss this event in more detail in Ranta 2018a.

economy for foreign investments, initiated a process of decentralization and aimed at modernizing the state. The nationalist revolution, on the other hand, had aimed at building a developmental, unified nation-state through universal suffrage, land reform and the nationalization of industries, mainly mining (Gray Molina 2003). At the same time, it created a massive network of state patronage involving public works, state contracts, land, development projects, political positions and technical jobs, through which patrons channeled state resources to their supporters and militants (ibid., p. 350).[10] In the initial stages of the revolution, the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) party and worker's unions formed this kind of corporatist and clientelistic relationship. Throughout the military rule of the 1960s and 1970s, a similar arrangement developed between the military and peasant unions. By the late 1990s, neoliberal reforms had withered away state resources through privatization and decentralization, which seriously weakened opportunities to create patronage networks (Gray Molina 2003, p. 351).

Although the SAPs reduced the number of state employees considerably, especially in mines and other industries, between 1996 and 2005 the number of state officials increased in senior professional, directorial and technical positions (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2007, p. 271), markedly surpassing the number of state-provided working-class jobs (ibid., p. 262). There were also increasing attempts to institutionalize and professionalize the public service career path. At the time of Morales' election, a World Bank report celebrated Bolivia's neoliberal administrative reforms by noting that they had clearly diminished the constant turnover of professionals with every change in political regime, and, in general, the informality of state operations (Mosqueira y Azul del Villar 2006). It noted that during the early 2000s, approximately 25 per cent of public servants entered their professional career through the formal public service career path, based on their professional merits rather than political affiliations (ibid., p. 486). Most of them stayed in their positions despite regime changes (ibid.).

At the beginning of his presidency, Evo Morales appeared to be trying to avoid institutional destabilization by arguing strongly for the sustainability of the public service in order to

[10] In Kenya, where I have also investigated political patronage, clientelism coincides closely with ethnicity, the patron and clients being part of the same ethnic group (Ranta 2017). In Bolivia, on the contrary, patrons have traditionally been white, upper-class males, while clients have typically been workers, peasants and Indigenous peoples.

maintain institutional memory and the technical capacity of state institutions. Many public servants with whom I talked seemed to be both proud of the stability of labor conditions and supportive of the new proposals for decolonizing the bureaucracy. I attended many policy events where I observed people's tremendous enthusiasm for reflecting on and jointly designing new ways to build a more inclusive state administration. I participated in sectoral planning workshops organized by the Ministry of Planning for sectoral groups including education, macroeconomics, decentralization and foreign policy, that tried to mainstream the concept of Vivir Bien into their planning and implementation mechanisms. In my presence, most of the public servants taking part in the workshops appeared to be eagerly defending the decolonization process, although, if conducted profoundly, it could have seriously challenged the presence of predominantly white, urban, middle class employees in state institutions by bringing in more Indigenous and Afro-Bolivian professionals.

After one of the workshops, I started to call and make appointments with the public servants involved in order to learn more about their experiences in translating policy ideas into bureaucratic practice. One case in particular led me to question whether the response of public servants to Indigenous ideas was, in fact, as positive as it appeared. I had been trying to make contact with a particular state official whose views had caught my attention at the sectoral workshop. After various refusals made over the phone by their secretary, I finally managed to get them to talk to me. Before I was able to introduce my research interests and motivations, the public servant started a long and apologetic monologue in which they explained why their sector had not yet been able to send their sectoral plan to the Ministry of Development Planning. Then they hung up. The following weekend, while spending free time in a park, I saw them there. Delighted, I approached, but when they saw me, they quickly hid and left. The phone call had confused me, but I was now seriously puzzled.

I decided to call and to meet with another public servant who had acted as a committed promoter of Vivir Bien at the sectoral workshop, generously congratulating the Ministry of Development Planning for its efforts. This time we met at a cafeteria without the presence of political authorities, work colleagues or other public servants. Mentioning my strange encounter with their colleague, I explained my research more clearly, which resulted in a candid burst of criticism about the process of decolonizing bureaucracy. Now, alone with me, the public servant stated that they could not care less about any Indigenous policy change and that at the institution where they worked, the other public servants do not know or care about

the notion of Vivir Bien either. “Daily routines at the office are the same as always”, they said, further explaining the strategy whereby “the concept is just put into the documents but it is not practiced”. They called this strategy “make-up” that hid the fact that there was “zero, or very little, implementation”. They stated that personally their main interest was merely to retain their employment, which is why they acted at official meetings as if they complied with the government’s process of change. It also explained the hesitant attitude of state officials towards me when they did not yet know me well.

Employment in the public sector has been considered desirable by many Bolivians. Unlike in the large informal economy, working for the state has provided stability of jobs, the potential for social benefits and pensions and clearly defined work contracts, working hours and so forth (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2007, p. 271). Therefore, for many of the interviewed state officials, their main motivation to work in the public administration was not primarily ideological, nor based on a motivation to contribute to the MAS’s process of change, but to remain in employment.

However, the position of civil servants in Bolivia is – and has always been – fragile. Despite neoliberal attempts to professionalize the public service, and initial governmental goals of securing institutional stability, pressures started to rise in the MAS to employ more people from its own ranks. This became clear in random moments when I happened to be speaking to some minister and witnessed people asking directly for a job in exchange for voting for the MAS. It also emerged in interviews with Indigenous activists and peasant unionists who told me that they did not agree with the president’s decision to allow “neoliberals” to continue to work in the sphere of the state; rather, they felt that they deserved a greater share of jobs and resources as an act of solidarity recognizing the support that they had provided the MAS (see, Komadina 2019, p. 424). The MAS leaders also wanted to strengthen their direct linkages with their support base. The strategy for many public servants fearing for their jobs was to respond politically as if they belonged to the MAS. One of MAS’s vice-ministers was aware of the situation, made apparent when stating to me that “in Bolivia, public servants have membership in all the political parties”. One of the young consultants mentioned earlier in reference to Yampara noted having been “lucky in not having had pressures to affiliate politically in order to get a job”. Nevertheless, although recruited by Morales’ regime, the consultant noted that:

> [T]his government is continuing with the same political practices, such as nepotism and the use of party networks in assigning jobs, as previous governments. It seems that for this government, it is very important that you belong to the MAS if you want to be recruited to the state bureaucracy. Of course, the same happened before too, but it seems that the government is no longer interested in combating this phenomenon. It rather seems to serve them in the process of state transformation to recruit people who are loyal to the party…

Lazar (2004, p. 232) has suggested that party-related public sector jobs in Bolivia that are very important in terms of income generation and employment, cannot be considered solely as gifts from the regime in power to its voters or as a sign of corruption, "rather they are part of citizens' expectations". In weakly institutionalized states like Bolivia, citizens seek individual and collective benefits, such as jobs and public investments (*obras*), from patrons. Clientelism enables them to create at least some kind of direct engagement, albeit brief, with the state. When Morales' political party obtained power, many public servants who had worked for previous governments became active defenders of the new governmental agendas in the public sphere in order to retain their positions in the face of public pressure to open employment in state institutions to previously marginalized peoples. In practice, however, they had mixed views about the process of change, and some even opposed it by rhetorically adapting to policy changes, but in practice continuing with previous ways of working.

6 Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how the methodology of ethnography of the state worked in a context of processes of major state transformation. In Bolivia, the election of Evo Morales as the country's first Indigenous president led to a discursive and ideological change whereby Indigenous knowledge, ideas and expertise gained more prominence in state policy making. The notion of Vivir Bien, which originated in Indigenous grassroots struggles for lands, territories and biocultural rights, became the key policy concept as the MAS regime started a process of decolonizing bureaucracy, whose aim was to make the state more inclusive for Bolivia's majorities: its Indigenous populations.

My ethnographic findings from the period of Morales' first regime demonstrated that the political attempt to reconstruct Indigenous peoples from marginalized and oppressed groups into active agents and governors of the state transformation process through the notion of Vivir Bien was indeed a challenging task. As the case of Yampara's capacity-building session at the Ministry of Planning illustrated, the hopes, needs and interests of Indigenous activists and public servants differed substantially. Development cooperation has supported the growth and professionalization of Indigenous technical expertise since the 1990s, but Yampara showed no interest in this role. Instead, he stressed that Suma Qamaña was a lifestyle and a worldview, a way of being in the world for the Aymara, meanwhile reiterating the primacy of Indigenous peoples' own territories and self-determination.

During my ethnographic fieldwork in state institutions, state officials and public servants were in the process of translating new policy ideas into sectoral plans, program documents, monitoring indicators and other technical instruments. They needed concrete technical tools for their daily operations. Although it appeared, on the surface, that public servants complied with political commands to translate the notion of Vivir Bien into bureaucratic practice, a closer look at their views showed that their responses varied from compliance in order to maintain employment, to quiet resistance visible in the continuation of old bureaucratic practices. In conclusion, there were ruptures between decolonizing discourses and bureaucratic practices that ethnographic methodologies clearly delineated, exposing the internal dynamics and discrepancies in processes of change that might otherwise have remained hidden.

Observation of the complex and contested interactions between Indigenous activists, public servants, consultants and ministers also revealed important issues about the operations of state formation in the Global South. The ethnographic approach enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the complex continuities of clientelism and fragilities of institutionalism as manifested in people's lives and experiences. Battles over resources, meanings and development in countries with deep inequalities and ethnic and class asymmetries are a lived phenomenon. They manifest in the actions, strategies and maneuverings, both of the many who fight for the dissolution of global injustices, but also of those who have become more aware of their middle class fragility in the course of a much needed transformative process towards a more inclusive and redistributive society.

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