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Catalina Betancur Velez
Providence College

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**Indigenous Movements in Colombia: Redefining Their Notion of Citizenship
Through Social Demonstrations, Representative Groups,
and Constitutional and Legal Reforms**

Catalina Betancur Velez
Fall 2021

The 2018 Colombian Census estimated that the indigenous population is made up of 1,905,617 indigenous people, comprising 4.4% of the total population. Indigenous groups have been present in Colombia since before the Spanish Colonization and still exist today. These minority groups, however, have been plagued with forced displacement and dispossession of territory as a result of prolonged domestic armed conflicts. In 2018, however, the census also recorded that there were 115 native indigenous pueblos, a marked increase from the 2005 census that reported 93. This was concluded to be an effect of the new ethnic recognitions and the redistribution of pueblos in borders with Venezuela and Ecuador. The three departments in Colombia that house 58.1% of the total indigenous population are La Guajira, Cauca, and Nariño, which are rich in natural resources and biodiversity. As indigenous groups become more present in current social and political conversations, there have been partial improvements and advancements of promises made by the government. However, the Colombian government and ethnic majorities still fall short of the guarantees and the assurance of indigenous citizenship. The notion of citizenship implies that a person is guaranteed protection by their government. While Indigenous groups are engaging in relevant discussions, they are in a constant defensive state as they attempt to persevere in a social climate that denies them citizenship. They have obtained small victories demonstrated by their gradual progress, by increasing awareness and establishing their presence. *In this essay, I will explore how indigenous peoples have redefined the concept of citizenship and the roles of indigenous populations in Colombia?* This question is prominent in contemporary conversations regarding the rights of indigenous peoples' rights, especially in Latin America, where these minority groups have been oppressed and marginalized since before their countries obtained independence. *I propose that through the means of resilient social demonstrations, the establishment of representative groups, and the push for*

Constitutional and legal reforms, Indigenous people in Colombia have established a multi-dimensional definition of citizenship that explicitly identifies the social and political implications that come with having citizenship status, especially as a member of minority and historically marginalized groups.

Donna Lee Van Cott (2010) explores the subject of indigenous people's politics in Latin America by suggesting other types of methodology and perspectives that should be incorporated in the research in order to expand and deepen the knowledge in the field. She suggests that "interpretive and postmodern approaches seek to reveal the meanings of indigenous political actions in order to enhance our understanding of key concepts such as representation, citizenship, state formation and domination. They also explore how indigenous movements construct identities and political meanings" (394). It is important that research regarding indigenous politics considers the complexity of what it means to be a citizen whose identity does not align with the norms of the country, which therefore means that the established laws and systems are inapplicable or ignorant to their rights and needs. Interpretive and postmodern methods are effective in approaching this because they enable the exploration of the definition of citizenship developed by indigenous movements. The scholar later writes that in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, where successful parties formed, "decentralization, easier access to ballot registration, reserved seats and quotas for indigenous candidates, and the creation of new electoral districts in rural areas came together in ways that enabled indigenous parties to maintain registration and compete in districts where they had a chance of attracting indigenous voters" (395). The indigenous movements have been able to obtain these victories in the political scene through perseverance and advocacy. This has been more effective than in other countries such as Argentina and Peru, where indigenous groups have remained unable to perforate the exclusive

political scene. Van Cott also writes that “we need to know more about the political impact of indigenous movements operating under adverse conditions” (400). She calls the reader’s attention to indigenous movements in Colombia and Venezuela, where indigenous people have been direct targets of hate crimes and suffered repercussions of violent ongoing political and social unrest.

In order to understand why indigenous people have continued to persevere through so many centuries of suffering and oppression in the pursuit of recognized citizenship, one must look back at how they have been treated since the colonial period. These groups have struggled to establish their identity and citizenship because of the hostile and oppressive climate that surrounds them. Chang and Rodriguez (2021) write about the complexity of the colonial period: “in the early 19th century... Indigenous and Black peoples found themselves negotiating against *both* independence and loyalty to Spain. As historian Marcela Echeverri [author of *Indian and Slave Royalists in the Age of Revolution*] shows, marginalized groups on the Colombian Pacific coast advocated powerfully for their interests by negotiating between both groups and acquiring guarantees in exchange for their support.” Bolivar’s rhetoric of national identity—which attempted to “erase racial identities” by declaring all races equal in light of the revolution – further marginalized indigenous groups and excluded them from the fight for independence. During this period, indigenous people and afro-descendants were torn between fighting for independence or remaining loyal to Spain. This ambiguity led revolutionaries to dismiss them as non-allies, which therefore often resulted in mass killings and abuses. Later on, after independence, Colombia underwent a period of “conservative homogeny.” This term, introduced by Maria Teresa Findji (1992), refers to “the glorification of a prototypical figure – namely, the Colombian mestizo, corresponding to the Roman Catholic Spanish-speaker that the concordat

between the church and the state helped to shape” (113). This principle was foundational to Colombian society excluded anyone who did not fit into this homogeneity from protection under the law and from citizenship. Similar to Bolivar’s language, the phrases, “we are not Indians” and “we are all equal” also furthered ignorance and the lack of acknowledgement of races in Colombia. Findji also explains that in the 1970s, indigenous groups were dismissed and belittled as “not a part of contemporary Colombia.” When the Indigenous Assembly met in 1970, the media and the rest of the population were, as Findji describes, “surprised.” She adds that “in the national imagination, the Indians – living evidence of the colonial situation – existed only as those who had disappeared, those who were about to disappear, or those who were ultimately doomed to disappear” (113). The failure to recognize an essential demographic was detrimental to the identity and image of the indigenous population. This ignorance, however, flipped, and sentiments towards indigenous groups between the 80s and the 90s grew to be performative with the goal of obtaining political advantages. Jean E. Jackson (2019) writes about the multiculturalism that plagued Colombia’s indigenous movements in the political sector: “concerns about identity, culture, and authenticity grew apace. Government agencies and international NGOs increasingly identified traditional authorities and their communities as appropriate targets for development projects” (140). Indigenous identities became objectives for political advancement, which pushed authentic identity away and welcomed performative and ineffective ‘solutions’ to the clash of the weakly established indigenous identity with the Colombian norms and systems. The complexity of these identities grew because “Indigenous *politiqueros* were often the enemy. Indigenous NGOs were the enemy if they were corrupt or unresponsive to the needs of indigenous communities” (141). Internal divisions between the indigenous groups pulled the movements away from defining their citizenship. Oppression and

confusion, which led to an inability to establish an identity, has prevented indigenous groups from defining themselves as citizens of Colombia and from demanding their rights as lawful members of society.

This understanding of historical context then leads to the question that asks, what does an ethnic group need in order to become legitimate citizens extending beyond the laws and into society? Citizenship requires three guaranteed rights: the right to establish and explore an identity, the right to social and political representation, and land ownership and sovereignty. Arturo Escobar (2008) touches upon these while exploring the concept of Afro-descendant citizenship. As these minority groups share similar histories of oppression and have not been recognized as social citizens in Colombia, they share sentiments towards the pursuit of citizenship. Escobar begins each chapter with a poem or phrase by an activist. Each quote speaks to the importance of the key rights that are essential to citizenship. I propose that the first right which must accompany the notion of citizenship is the right to establish an identity and to define collective rights. A PNC activist in Tumaco is quoted saying, “It is not us who will save culture, it is culture who will save us” (200). This phrase speaks directly to the roots of an ethnic group’s shared identity: culture. The traditions and rituals that have been passed down through generations are what maintain these indigenous groups’ unity. The culture is the essence of these groups that must be allowed to be practiced in order to guarantee full citizenship. The second right of citizenship is social and political representation. Escobar quotes, “Development plans inspired by this principle [the affirmation of being] should result in the strengthening of people’s capacity for decision making, creativity, solidarity, mutual respect, the valuation of their own culture, dignity, and consciousness of their rights and knowledge” (156). In order to assure someone of their citizenship in a country, their understanding of the value of their identity must

be promoted, and they should be encouraged to explore their role in society. This can be obtained through political representation that demonstrates to these citizens that their identity is recognized and promoted by their representatives in power. Lastly, the rights to ownership and authority over land and sovereignty are required for citizenship. According to another activist, Jaime Rivas, “Esta tierra es nuestra / La hemos fundado con dolor y sangre / Es lecho de nuestros sueños libres / Cuna de nuestros anhelos / Y tumba de nuestros viejos / Aquí el agua tiene sabor a nosotros” (27). Indigenous groups have an exceptional relationship to the land they live on, as it is the same land that also gave life to their ancestors. The land is a physical representation of the history, culture, and significance of these groups. Citizenship, especially for indigenous peoples, requires the authority and full ownership of land and territory.

In the past 60 years, indigenous movements have pursued these three components of citizenship in Colombia and have been able to define these in a matter pertinent to their identity. They have developed a multi-dimensional and unique definition of citizenship that addresses these aforementioned components as a result of three strategies: social demonstrations, a trial and error of representative groups, and constitutional and legal reforms.

There have been three outstanding organized social demonstrations that have been critical junctures to the redefinition of the citizenship of indigenous groups. The first occurred in July 1973 in Silvia, Cauca. Findji writes that 4,000 indigenous people marched and mobilized themselves to the point where the whites and mestizos that had “humiliated” them were “fearful”. This powerful demonstration then led to various rallies three months later where the following messages were expressed: “We belong to the Earth,” “We demand our rights,” and “We are legitimate Americans.” The assertive language of the aforementioned statements was significant for the development of the movements and identity, as it established their presence

and clearly vocalized their demands. Furthermore, these rallies were important as indigenous groups finally began to speak on their own behalf and vocalize their own demands. The 1973 rallies occurred to work towards the first component of citizenship. Indigenous people rallied and presented a message that defined their identity and advocated for their collective rights. Another monumental social demonstration occurred in August of 1996, again in Cauca. Jackson writes that during this rally, 3,000 members of pueblos and campesinos blocked the Pan-American highway, which forced the government to yield. One week later, two decrees were signed that “upheld the fundamental rights of Colombian indigenous people.” I will expand upon the details of these decrees in a later section of the essay. However, the decrees redefined citizenship in that they pursued the second component of citizenship. The result of these protests led to social and political representation in tangible legislative decrees. In 2012 and 2013 came another set of demonstrations called “las Mingas,” more specifically, “Las Mingas de Liberación de la Madre Tierra (2012) y por la Defensa del Territorio (2013)”. These two mobilizations advocated for the third component of citizenship: land ownership and autonomy. These defensive movements were essential in the redefining of the citizenship of indigenous groups, as they demanded the establishment of an identity, social and political representation, and land ownership and sovereignty.

The next method of redefining the notion of citizenship was the trial and error of the effectiveness of representative groups. When the movements finally obtained a group to represent them in political settings, they were given the Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria (INCORA). However, this group quickly became problematic as Findji explains, “it became evident that INCORA’s sense of the community did not coincide with the community’s own sense of it” (120). Though this was a major setback, it was helpful in the definition of

citizenship because the indigenous groups were able to recognize what entities they did not want as representatives and what they wanted in terms of land ownership. Findji then continues to say that “INCORA implemented the system of ‘reserves’ (*reservas*). The reserves were demarcated territories provisionally allocated to a given community, but, unlike *resguardos*, they belonged to the nation and not to the community. In other words, the state did not recognize any indigenous territoriality” (120). This policy completely took the indigenous groups’ autonomy away and left them without ownership of their territory. After more demonstrations and demands, however, came the Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC). On their website, they explain that they are “una entidad de derecho propio de los indígenas colombianos con competencias legítimas, para realizar procesos de concertación entre los Pueblos indígenas, sus autoridades y organizaciones... además, con facultades para generar políticas que fortalezcan el reconocimiento de la autonomía y el cumplimiento de los Derechos y de los Pueblos Indígenas en la Nación.” The ONIC acts as a liaison between indigenous people, their authorities, and their organizations. They also work to further establish the autonomy of indigenous groups and defend their rights and that of their pueblos. After learning that a government-run organization was not representative of the group’s needs and what they needed as citizens, they evolved to establish more effective and better-connected organizations. The most influential organization that has come from social movements has been the Movimiento de Autoridades Indígenas de Colombia (AICO). On their website, they define themselves as an “organización indígena y un partido político colombiano, que defiende los derechos de los pueblos indígenas y propone un modelo alternativo para la Sociedad colombiana y las relaciones internacionales.” It is important to note that AICO identifies and is recognized as a political party, as this means that they officially nominate candidates and are actively engaged in conversations regarding decisions about policy.

The latter two organizations serve to demonstrate the products of the redefinition of the notion of citizenship of indigenous groups. INCORA is useful to understand the resilience of the movement but also to understand how they had to revise their redefinition of citizenship, especially in relation to their ownership of land.

The most tangible results of both social demonstrations and representative organizations have been the Constitutional and legal reforms that have occurred. These have served to explicitly define the position of indigenous groups as citizens covered by the law. Most influentially, the 1991 revision of the Constitution, as a response to urgent demands, expanded the language and principles of the document to acknowledge the rights of indigenous people that are ensured by the state. Specifically, Article 171 outlines that “there will be an additional two (2) senators in a special national constituency for indigenous communities”. This is double-sided, because on one hand it ensures the representation of indigenous people in the senate. However, the population of indigenous people as of 2018 has increased to 4.4%. In 1991, this was significant progress obtained by the movements, but it is disappointing to see that there is outdated and unproportionate representation of indigenous people in the senate. Article 286 states that “departments, districts, municipalities, and indigenous reservations are territorial entities.” Article 287, which states that “territorial entities enjoy autonomy for the management of their interests within the limits of the Constitution and the law”, ensured constitutionally the right to autonomy and proved a significant advancement. It is also important to note the limitations that came with indigenous territories to be recognized as territorial entities. Article 329 explains that “the configuration of the indigenous (Indian) territorial entities will be drawn subject to the provisions of the Organic Law of Territorial Planning, and their delimitation will be affected by the national government with the participation of the representatives of the

indigenous communities following the plan of the Commission of territorial Planning”. This allows the government continued control over the territories in an indirect way, where they can redetermine the borders of these territories. This, however, is still a step forward because indigenous groups and territories are still being recognized under the law and given equal treatment as other territorial entities. In January 2010, Colombia adopted Law 1381, which as the Library of Congress explains, “regulates the recognition, promotion, protection, use, preservation, and strengthening of the languages of ethnic groups in Colombia and the linguistic rights of those who speak these languages. The Law specifically identifies languages utilized by Afro-descendant communities and by native aboriginal peoples in certain areas of the country”. This solidifies the indigenous identity, as it not only recognized but also legitimized the languages used by these groups. This relates back to the importance of culture and tradition, as most of these native tongues are only spoken, and therefore the state must enable their preservation. As mentioned before, the 1996 Decrees and Cauca Agreement passed as a response to the demonstrations and demands vocalized in Cauca, were also a significant legal advancement in the movement for indigenous rights and citizenship. Jackson explains that these “established several official bodies: a committee on human rights, a national commission for lands, and a permanent inter-institutional *mesa de concertacion* (consultation roundtable) at which government and indigenous leaders would meet periodically” (134). This was a progressive step in the representation of indigenous groups and assures that there are several people advocating for the indigenous voice in these positions of power. These three tangible constitutional and legal victories are products of an arduous process of civil demonstrations and an amplification of underrepresented voices.

As civil unrest remains present in Colombian society and indigenous peoples continue to be oppressed by other groups, what is to be done to continue emphasizing the presence and citizenship of indigenous people? The answer has been developed by the demonstrations of the past ten years: mobilization through the media. Neyder Salazar Torres (2016) explains that “así se acude a cámaras, grabadoras y recursos digitales tales como plataformas web y redes sociales para potencializar la comunicación política a favor de la Resistencia y la acción popular. El uso de lo digital es clave para visibilizar la realidad social y construir contenidos alternativos” (254-255). Indigenous movements have now tapped into the power of the internet and of the projection of messages and images through multimedia. The scholar writes that this is in efforts to communicate a live reality to people behind the screen. The media is a powerful tool for mobilization because they are able to share almost everything they experience and are able to evoke a compelling sentiment of empathy. Torres adds that “por lo tanto hay una apropiación de estrategias digitales como un componente técnico de la comunicación no solo para visibilizar También para fortalecer el asunto organizativo, ligado a la conciencia política y la acción” (260). Media places a strong, almost inescapable emphasis on the political consciousness and action that individuals must partake in. This effective technique demonstrates how the indigenous movements are keeping up with contemporary times and further emphasizes their relevance in society and proves their citizenship. Cristian Garcia-Villalba and Mayra Alejandra Gutierrez Zamudio (2021) add that “la posibilidad que tienen los indígenas para la creación de páginas *web* y redes sociales, disminuirá la exclusión a la cual han estado históricamente expuestos en la sociedad” (201). Indigenous groups are no longer going to be excluded from important conversations, as they will maintain their exposure in society and continue to advocate for themselves by working within the systems in place.

Van Cott presents arguments of criticism about how there is a lack of critique surrounding indigenous politics. This can be argued, considering the multiculturalist tendencies that have been identified in Colombian indigenous politics. However, this argument should not be used to belittle the efforts exerted by indigenous movements especially as they have managed to redefine the notion of citizenship relative to their developed identity. The engagement with the media demonstrates the movements' ability to adapt to contemporary trends with the goal of further asserting their presence and engagement in social and political movements. In class, we thoroughly discussed the effects that Evo Morales' indigenous politics had on Bolivia. He established an extremely loyal support base by presenting himself as a personalist neoliberal who emphasized the class struggle by highlighting his indigenous identity and serving as the sole defender for indigenous rights. This style of indigenous politics is completely different from that observed in Colombia. There is no Indigenous Neopopulist that divides the social classes by ethnicity, but rather, we find a resilient, ever-growing group of indigenous people who have persevered in defining themselves and their rights as citizens of Colombia. Their movement continues to grow and appear in the media as they expand their outreach and support through the development of web pages, social media sites, etc. Because of their unity, indigenous movements in Colombia have proven themselves to be a powerhouse in Colombian politics, as they further establish themselves and their sovereignty in a system that was designed against them.

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