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FROM DOMITILA TO “LOS RELOCALIZADOS”: TESTIMONY AND MARGINALITY IN BOLIVIA

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Recent studies on the politics of postmodernism accentuate the fact that throughout this century, first in the discourse of anthropology, sociology and psychoanalysis, marginality became a focus of the interest through which Western cultures discovered the “marginal” to be no longer peripheral but central to all thought¹. Very much linked to this problematic, this paper deals with two significant examples of contemporary Bolivian popular culture and social behavior. With these examples, I question the role played by the oppressed and the underdeveloped in shaping up a new identity, as well as their ability to “decolonize” a life-world linked to the repressive institutionalized mechanisms that the dominant groups have traditionally imposed on everyday life.²

My study will contend that, as far as the writing of the marginal is concerned, testimonies such as the one written by Domitila Chungara, a woman of the Bolivian mines, bear an internal connection to a liberating communicative action that is conceptualized and organized around the media-steered system of language. Furthermore, this essay motivates the belief that any attempt to alter communicative action qua dimension of symbolic reproduction by the intrusion of the exchange values of money will produce pathological effects. These effects find expression, for example, in the most recent social movements of the resettled working force — “los relocalizados” — that followed the abrupt shut down, in 1985, of the once powerful nationalized Bolivian mines. By touching the example of the “relocalizados”; I wish to prove that as soon as the monetarization and the exchange relations of the economic replace symbols as well as other language steered systems of human structuring, and penetrate those spheres of the life-world which are responsible for cultural transmission, socialization and the formation of personal identity, then protest becomes a simple withdrawal of motivation and legitimation, unable to connect collec-

tively shared background convictions with the horizon within which individuals and social groups communicate with one another and seek to reach understanding. With the preliminary remarks, I now turn to Domitila Chungara and her powerful *Si me permiten hablar...*³

In sharp contrast with other literary manifestations of official culture, Domitila's testimony of her struggle for survival at every step of her life, is about the formation of collective identity. She clearly states from the beginning that:

La historia que voy a relatar, no quiero en ningún momento que la interpreten solamente como un problema personal. Porque pienso que mi vida está relacionada con mi pueblo (p. 6).

Here, the performatives "voy a relatar", "yo no quiero" and "pienso" are elements of speech acts that manifestly link their illocutionary force to propositional contents marked by the validity claim of "lo popular". In this way, Domitila deliberately equates the situation of the narrator with that of the collectivity, thus proving that testimony is a strictly egalitarian cultural form. Indeed, the "I" of the enunciation evokes in absentia that popular "we" with which class consciousness is built. As we will see later in this paper, Domitila's notion of collective identity formation does not rely on the metalogical absence of an "ancestral reconciliation", but rather on a cultural and political practice necessary for future survival:

...Por eso digo que no quiero hacer nomás una historia personal. Quiero hablar de mi pueblo... y aportar un granito de arena con la esperanza de que nuestra experiencia sirva de alguna manera para la generación futura, para la gente nueva (p. 13).

When she says that she wishes to speak about her people, Domitila puts to work all her constructive efforts in the consolidation of a community of subjects in dialogue. This communicative action, constructed in everyday life, seeks to strengthen a life-world in which speaking and listening may be intersubjectively related. Domitila is constantly interpolating her interlocutor through the use of shifters such as "¿no?"; "¿no es cierto?"; "mire"; "¿Ud. me entiende?", thus making the communicative competence rely not so much in the ordinary "hearing" we inadvertently do, but in the "listening" we might do more powerful as well.⁴ In effect, if we simply hear words, but do not listen to one another, our actions are likely to be reactionary in the extreme. If we listen so we may respond with sensitivity and care, our actions may be freeing, fighting ideological distortions, enhancing life rather than generating only "feedback". *Si me permiten hablar...* is also inviting us to listen in a clearly active way; reminding us not to give up our being in a moral world. Here, we are not confronted to a decentered and plural "ethic", but with a call to vision, to ask questions of human possibilities.

As a communicative action of participation, Domitila's testimony is eminently political. *Si me permiten hablar...* participates in the belief that language is deeply tied to practice and action, because only through language do we have a meaningful world of which we are intelligible, moral members. In a world where persons do not listen to one another, there may be decision, force, oppression, brute politics, but there can be no collective social or political life. So too in its efforts to work and organize with one another, this testimony requires the ability to listen as a political necessity. Without listening, and not simply hearing, we cannot have a shared, critical, and evolving political life together. In listening we may still better understand and explain the systematic distortions of communication with which we are faced, our misunderstandings of who we are and may yet be; we may act to nurture dialogue and criticism and make presence possible.

Contrasting what we will see in the last part of the paper as the problematic of the "relocalizados", Domitila Chungara's text is not the "aesthetization of the object" but a testimonial of incorporation of the human body in a deep political struggle for survival. Let me now briefly explore this other important aspect of testimony.

When Domitila speaks of hunger strikes, she is not evoking a passive, anorexic experience, but the vivifying possibility of undernourishment. Thus, hunger strikes become an integral part of a poetics of non-violence that makes use of the human body in order to build up solidarity. This is again a new experience of communicative action, free from ideological distortions, that gives expressive, almost theatrical use to corporal materiality, and celebrates life by showing that undernourishment can defy morally and spiritually those who are responsible for the fragmentation of society. As Domitila reveals, hunger strikes allow the ethical and personal to become public and collective. They are a public act of vengeance, of individual and social resistance: "Yo me declaré en huelga de hambre. Ya no comía para vengar la muerte de mis hijos..." (p. 41). A way to punish and defy the powerful, hunger strikes show the ritual of human beings that must create and exhibit, in the midst of repression, their own dignity, and give symbolic use to their human bodies. That is why Domitila's text can be considered an effectively contestatory testimonial of incorporation and embodiment.

Si me permiten hablar... has undoubtable socio-political significance because it enriches the experience of liberation movements. It can then be said that testimony is an "effect of veracity" that cannot be confused with fiction because it narrates the everyday life of the Bolivian miner through speech acts that recover orality and with it the possibility of inaugurating a true popular communication, free of ideological distortions inherent to bureaucratic authoritarianism. Domitila's testimony wishes to construe a "proletarian sphere"⁵ — a transgress of the public and private spheres of bourgeois culture — so as to install the deep understanding and alliance of a unified popular front. That this

endeavor has only remained as an unfulfilled utopia of a society radically changed by the late 1970 political and economical developments, is precisely what will lead us to understand the "relocalizados" as an impoverished material and symbolic expression of class consciousness.

In the late 1970's, Bolivia, like a number of other Latin American countries, began a transition from a *de facto* authoritarian regime to a formalized democratic system. Simultaneously, Bolivia, again like other Latin American republics, began to experience severe economic strain with a foreign debt of \$3.5 billion, extremely high for a country of some six million inhabitants. And like other countries, Bolivia came under increasing pressure from external funding sources to deal with the crisis. The problem, of course, was how to establish a popularly based mode of open democratic rule even while imposing a set of antipopular austerity policies. Although this dilemma developed to its full complexity under the populist Siles-UPD government, between 1982 and 1985, what comes after the chaotic populist alliance under Siles, is probably the most significant modification in the structure of an essentially state capitalist system of political economy. Under the ever-skillful Paz Estenssoro, Siles' successor, the neo-liberal New Economic Policy introduced in 1985, represents the culmination of the shift adjusted to the current severe economic crisis, and breaks definitively with any notion of compatibility between populist redistribution and capitalist development. In addition, this new policy also represents a substantial change on how the state moves its ideological structures of signification in order to dominate and legitimate the interests of powerful sectorial groups like the Confederation of Private Entrepreneurs. Paz's neo-liberalism has been able to break away with more than thirty years of "revolutionary nationalism" as main and hegemonic ideology, and to replace it with a free-market logic addressed to the modernization of the economy and to the enhancement of private enterprise.⁶

If it is clear that the Paz administration has had real success in stabilizing the economy, it is also true that his New Economic Policy has created some fearsome social costs. First, there has been a sharp decline in living standards, especially among the popular sectors and dependent middle classes. The drop in living standards has been driven by declining real wages and a sharp upturn in unemployment. Second, and crucial to what follows next, is the almost exclusive attempt to conceive of the economy, economic action, and money as cases of more general principles linked to the strategic pursuit of interests. Indeed, the New Economic Policy represented a movement to a freer and more open economy. As part of the move the government projected a decentralization of state enterprises and sell-offs to private investors. Most important was the restructuration of the state mining corporation (COMIBOL) created by the revolutionary regime of 1952, and the dismissal of mine workers. Not coincidentally the program to restructure COMIBOL has severely weakened the mine workers federation (FSTMB), the central organization of Bolivian

workers (COB), and in effect the entire labor left. Due to massive firings in the state mining corporation, the FSTMB has lost total power, becoming a committee for the unemployed. This, as we shall see next, has also affected the class consciousness of the working force. If mineworkers have traditionally taken money as a means of exchange, what happens when they perceive it as an end in itself?; what effect will this dramatic change have on the highly abstracted constructions of their everyday experience?

Basically dependent on labor market and the buying and selling of their labor power, the Bolivian mineworkers have always been a collectivity acutely aware that economy is what sets societies in motion. Indeed, they have genuine knowledge that commodities and exchange-values regulate the outside world. Yet, despite this, to their minds money as an end in itself has never been as important as the natural purpose of exchange, the more abundant satisfaction of wants. From this point of view, it is not money per se that they, as a collectivity, have traditionally demanded but the possibility to grow within an economy of use-values and want satisfactions. That is why their economic reivindications have constantly expressed the need to have well stocked and supplied “pulperías”, or grocery stores, keeping the function of money as closer to its barren form as possible. Thus, it is through the satisfaction of needs that money attempts to re-establish some sort of equilibrium to an otherwise economically fertile yet divided and unjust world. Hence, use-values, as well as money as a neutral mediator of exchange and as a factor of equilibrium, are all aspects intrinsically related and necessary to one another. They all give balance to what otherwise would remain an asymmetrical relation between the economic system and the life-world context. And, as we shall see immediately, this enduring quality of everyday materiality based on the production of use-values reproduces itself in symbols erroneously considered by recent studies as bizarre and irrational responses to a system based on exploitation and the production of exchange-values. Let us see this more carefully.

Michael Taussig’s anthropological study of the Bolivian mines (1980) relies on the fact that the transformation of the peasant mode of production generates conflict, suffering, and alienation, all of which concretize in the devil figure. Taussig believes that as Bolivian peasants were proletarianized, their rituals changed: the incorporeal mother earth spirit, “la pachamama”, was replaced by the devil, “el tío”, a virile and unpredictable figure. Unlike the “pachamama”, the devil is represented in idol form and requires frequent ritual libations. If in agrarian rituals, peasants engage in balanced reciprocity with the “pachamama”; in mining rituals, peasants are simple intermediaries between the devil and the owners of the mine.

Though impressive and intellectually stimulating, Taussig’s interpretation of the devil belief system as a representation of alienation is problematic. In effect, review essays of Taussig’s interpretation (Godoy, 1985) point out that the Bolivian mining industry had been undergoing, way before its 1985

restructuration, a process of involution: longer hours, more pirate work, less machinery and more reliance on peasants. This reversion to precapitalist modes of production suggests that, contrary to Taussig's claims, Bolivian miners had been shifting back and forth between precapitalist and capitalist relations of production with much less conflict, stress and agony than Taussig assumes. Furthermore, this integration of precapitalist and capitalist modes of production in Bolivian mining helps explain why miners, though living in a world dominated by exchange-values, seek the more natural purpose of exchange, the satisfaction of wants. It also explains the transformation of materiality into symbols that are misinterpreted by the conviction that a cataclysmatic break occurs once peasants become miners. The "tío" can be interpreted not as a cultural and symbolic representation of alienation, but as a social otherness through which production is sustained and wholeness is restored.

When Mauss (1967) examined the functions of gifts in ancient societies, he emphasized the obligatoriness of giving and receiving them. That is, gifts, far from being voluntarily exchanged, symbolize an instinctive and impulsive form of action over which people have no control. Gift exchanges with the "tío" as spirit owner of the mines ratify these beliefs. They ensure the smooth flow of production, which in the last instance is aimed at having the "pulperías" well supplied. By giving the "tío" cigarettes and alcohol, miners ensure that the "tío" will reciprocate with vast quantities of mineral. This flow does not mean that the ambivalence of the "tío" will not be present. He can still harm as much as help. But ritual gift exchange can channel this ambivalence into a favorable outcome where symmetry is restored. Indeed, the form instituted by the gift is that of the medium, which here, in the case of the "tío", functions as a measure that evaluates the "division of labor" according to the preexisting and sacred symmetry. To accept the gift without returning it is to desequilibrate a relationship and do violence to the concept of measure itself. In the gift we recognize again what appears to be a basic social force in which symmetry or wholeness continually tries to reconstitute itself against the equally continuous force of differentiation.

We can now perhaps see that the "tío" is just a way of expressing the complex function of the other in social organization, for this symbol is premised on the paradoxical principle of sharing an essentially indivisible and permanent whole. Sharing or division introduced by the capitalist economy is the potential destruction of the whole; the "tío", the precapitalist force that lies behind gift exchange, is the force that seeks to preserve the whole. And it is the necessity to balance this tension that above everything else constitutes the nub of formal organization.

But formal organization, like all conscious and rational social arrangements, entail the participation and communication of people in time and space. In my view, this is precisely the central feature of Domitila Chungara's *Si me permiten hablar...*: the capacity to turn away from any form of belief system that

draws communication back to a supposed prior state of wholeness unconstrained by time and space. If the “tfo” can exist only in certain privilege states of suspension (just as the “magical” or the “sacred” in region), the fact that it is void of social intersubjectivity suggests that the structural presence of a metalogical absence should leave the organization of the social world to the more tangible and immediate reality of people and things. And it is here again that Domitila’s testimony plays an urgent and important role in creating symbols that may be representative not just for one group or social class but for the wider progressive sectors of society as well. Consequently, and viewed from the theory of communicative competence, Domitila’s testimony is a good example of how to put into practice the constitutive schemes of speech acts as actions steered towards understanding, deeply at odds with the other strategic forms of manipulations and distortion that we will now explore.

Contrasting Domitila’s efforts to introduce rationality through linguistic structures of signification, we could say that strategic actions such as the ones shown by the New Economic Policy introduced in 1985, have fearsome social costs because they reinforce the uncoupling between the economic system and the life-world context of social integration. In simple terms, this means an increase in social inequality, wholesale economic exploitation and marginalization of dependent classes. Furthermore, and in sharp contrast with the rationality introduced by speech acts, the functions of exploitation fulfilled by the ruling classes in the systemic nexus of material reproduction will be kept through new structure of “claim and redemption” where the “code” of money as an end in itself will sharply reduce the rationally motivated consensus — an agreement based on the convincing forces of reason — to a simple “empirically motivated” interaction regulated by money. And this, I think is important to the impoverishment of mine worker’s class consciousness. As with the “relocalizados”, we will see that the social crisis created by the closing of the nationalized mines has meant the loss of meaning, security, and identity normally afforded by culture, as well as the resurgence of nihilism, alienation and neurosis. How then do we account for this social pathology?

Interactions where money is taken as an end in itself, make individuals and social groups anchor their behavior in situations where consensus and the recognition of claims to validity are less important for the coordination of action than the strategic pursuit of their egocentric interests. Thus, severe confrontations are likely to be ever present. In Bolivia, this situation has ruled out the possibility that labor and government may reach some form of an agreement based on rational consensus. On the contrary, strikes and stoppages have made it impossible to reach a lasting solution to the growing problems of unemployed mineworkers. Since 1987, the government was forced to raise wages and yield to demands for higher compensation packages. Government compensation programs, however, have not abated social tensions. Indeed, in May 1987, 120 unemployed mineworkers and their families, commonly referred to as “relocali-

zados”, set up tents in the Alto region, which surrounds the La Paz international airport. Two years later, in April 1989, twenty of some three hundred “relocalizados” that occupied the grounds of the University of La Paz, decided to “crucify” themselves in the gates and flagpoles of the University, using their human bodies to reinforce their economic demands: “Nosotros no hemos venido a pedir limosna sino justicia en la nivelación de nuestras liquidaciones”. As “liquidación”, money is now entering the realm of exchange-value. And this change in the coordination of action through the use of monetary resources will have deep consequences in how world-life will now be perceived. Let us explore this critical situation in more detail.

Though effective they may have been in controlling hyperinflation, the mechanisms of economic stabilization introduced by the neo-liberal State have increasingly detached themselves from the communicative structures through which social integration and symbolic reproduction are achieved. This decoupling of economic system and life-world is marked not only by the emergence of non-linguistic means for the coordination of action (money and power), but also, in the context of a process of selective rationalization in which the development of the instrumental domains of material reproduction — I am thinking here of the secretly put together broad-based economic plan which Paz Estenssoro launched by executive fiat as decree law 21060 — proceeds far in advance of the communicative rationalization of the life-world, by the subordination of the life-world to the needs of the system of material reproduction. What has happened in Bolivia is a decoupling between economic measures and social integration. Indeed, the manner in which the New Economic Policy was formulated revealed that in economic policy Paz Estenssoro had designed a practical method of authoritarian decision making within the formal democratic system. Furthermore, through the new monetary policies and the free-market ideology, the delinguistified steering media of the system of material reproduction increasingly intruded the previously linguistically organized life-world of civil society, and ultimately disrupted the process of symbolic reproduction. The “relocalizados” is just a case in hand of how the delinguistification of action provoked by economic experts, blocked civil society from attaining the resources that social actors routinely draw for the discursive redemption of their validity claims. My point here is that the delinguistification of action media for purposes of achieving economic measures decoupled from processes of social integration produces pathological results. And the “relocalizados” show these results through a neurotic defunction of personality that the State can manipulate quite comfortably.

The “relocalizados” may be seen as a form of “écriture” plagued with ambiguity and contradiction. They are part and parcel of an aesthetic that writes off the marginal by immersing it into the abject. Indeed, when these unemployed mineworkers “crucify” themselves to the gates and flagpoles of the University, their human bodies no longer symbolize the solidarity and the

vivifying possibility of the working class, but, quite to the contrary, a neurotic defense that freezes the patterns of communication. There is here a repression of the symbolic where the human body regresses into the imaginary, a lacanian metaphor of the pre-verbal; (better yet “delinguisticized”) in which we are confronted with a loss of signification. In this way, like delinguistified steering media, the “crucifixion” of the “relocalizados”, in similar ways as the repression of language, is now the abject, the grotesque, unrepresentability of the working class that has ceased to refer. Hence the displacement to a meaningless situation that is no longer vivifying and enriching, but replaced with the suicidal: “un lanzarse al vacío por lo aburrido de la vida”. What we see is a neurotic deformation of personality, a contradictory and empty enactment of the Christian symbol.

Finally, as a delinguistified steering media, crucifixion cannot be taken here as a symbol of revolutionary consciousness, nor can it be seen as one of the most important panoply of “popular weapons” that provide the point of departure for a radical questioning of the marginal and of the oppressed. To the contrary, the “relocalizados” reduce the praxis of liberation to suicide, an illusory form of vengeance with which the aggressor suffers little or no punishment at all. Indeed, delinguistification penetrates the life-world in such a way that it becomes transformed into a manipulated environment. It is then easily understandable that the same political forces involved in the colonization of the life-world and in the distortion of communication may now be ready to meet, demagogically and in times of political campaigning, the economic demands of the unemployed.

When reviewing Domitila’s testimony, we spoke of marginality as a “practical poetics” in which the “self is ‘practiced’” in solidarity with others struggling for survival. It has been our intention to prove that this poetics of “defense” and “active non-violence” is openly contrarrested by the “relocalizados”, a diminished neurotic expression of working class consciousness. Thus the necessity to open up again a communicative experience free of the compulsive distortions of instrumental reason. Will this be possible? For the time being, it remains an unfulfilled utopia; as a drop of discursive terrorism with which the prevailing rationality of official culture cannot be challenged.

NOTES

- 1 See among others, George Yúdice's "Marginality and the ethics of survival", in *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*, ed. Andrew Ross. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) pp. 214-231.
- 2 I follow in this paper Habermas' approach to communicative action. See his book: *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 2, translated by Thomas McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).
- 3 Quotations come from *Si me permiten hablar...* (México, Siglo XXI, 1977).
- 4 An interesting approach to the notions of "hearing" and "listening" can be found in John Forester's "Listening: The social policy of everyday life. (Critical theory and hermeneutics in practice)", *Social Praxis*. 7-3/4 (1980), pp. 219-232.
- 5 For the study of proletarian public spheres, see: Eberhard Knodler-Bunte, "The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organization: An Analysis of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's "The Public Sphere and Experience", *New German Critique*, 4 (Winter 1975), pp. 51-75.
- 6 See René Antonio Mayorga's "La democracia en Bolivia: ¿consolidación o desestabilización? *Pensamiento iberoamericano* 14 (julio-diciembre 1988), pp. 21-45

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