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***Invisible Realities:
Internal Markets and Subaltern
Identities in Contemporary Bolivia***

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1. ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES: AN ESSAY ON TWO BOLIVIAN “SOCIOLOGISTS OF THE IMAGE”

The first methodological anchorage of the idea of alternative *histories*, is that its sole enunciation sends us to the plurality of meanings that history can have, according to who are the subjects that “make” it, narrate it or suffer it. In modern Bolivian culture, this plurality of meanings has manifested itself in diverse non-written formats, including the oral testimony, drawings, paintings, photography and cinema. In a multicultural postcolonial society such as Bolivia, with an indigenous population of more than 60%, where the great majority speak qhichwa, aymara, guarani or besero – along with many other languages – images have played a crucial role in intercultural communication, not as a one-way process, such as with the religious iconographies used by the Church for the purpose of conversion of the Indians to Catholicism, but also as a means of self-expression and denunciation of colonialism by the Indian elite. In fact, in the Andean region there is a long tradition of social theatre, painting, weaving and other forms of visual communication, exemplarily represented by the work of the qhichwa speaking chronicler Waman Puma de Ayala and his famous “letter to the King of Spain” (Guamán Poma [1613] 1988), a one-thousand-page document with hundreds of drawings in which he exposed the grievances of Indians and the abuses of the Spaniards, in a colonial situation that he conceived as “the world upside down”.

In this essay, I want to do a retrospective analysis of the use of visual media in twentieth and nineteenth century Bolivia, through the films and paintings of two authors: the filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés and the painter-traveller-politician Melchor María Mercado, in search of an understanding of their complex paths of narration and representation, which in turn are marked by the social history of their times. I propose to conceptualize their work as a sort of “sociology of the image”, since they do not offer us a copy or *analogon* of “reality” (cf. Barthes 1995), but rather an interpretation of society in its conflictive and motley heterogeneity. With a distance of almost a century between both of them, they represent visual “readings” of the social realities they witnessed,

in which the gestures and the words of the people represented speak of the non-synchronous nature of society and of the diverse horizons of memory and identity that permeate the social actions and encounters of their collective subjects. Both Sanjinés and Mercado started from oral sources, engaging in non-conventional forms of ethnographic research. Unlike Sanjinés, who did so in the “age of mechanical reproduction” (Benjamin 1978) and whose films circulated widely both nationally and internationally, Mercado’s only surviving work, the *Album de Paisajes, Tipos Humanos y Costumbres de Bolivia (1841-1869)* was never published during his lifetime. In terms of the impact that these works had on their contemporaries, comparison seems impossible, but the relevance of looking at both of them from a sociological point of view, stems from the fact that ethnography, imagery and orality were integrated in their films and paintings, into a comprehensive interpretation of society, perfectly valid until the present times.

Both authors were members of the mestizo-creole lettered elite, Mercado in nineteenth century Sucre (then the capital of Bolivia) and Sanjinés in twentieth century La Paz (the present seat of the executive and legislative powers). Yet, their iconographic discourse focuses in the agency and collective actions of indigenous and *cholo* (mix blooded or acculturated Indian) populations, protagonists of the histories that are narrated in their work. In the films by Sanjinés, one can see the traces of a highly political, engaged “participant observation” in the struggle against dictatorships during the decades of 1960-1980,¹ and his use of previous formats – oral testimony, photography, documentary film – was crucial in his reconstruction and theorization of Bolivian society as one in which colonial forms of domination are still pervasive and shape the daily lives of the people. These ideas will be presented in a more elaborate form years later, in his film *La nación clandestina* (1989). In Melchor María Mercado’s *Album (1841-1869)*, the experience of confinement and deportation to distant borderlands of the country allows him to express a view of his country that would have been impossible to find in the short

¹ Such as in the films “El Coraje de un Pueblo” (1979) and “Banderas del Amanecer” (1983).

sighted urban cultural spaces. In his allegories, Mercado will reflect upon the fragile nature of political power in the young Republic, in so far as its foundations are a hypocritical and segregated society, where a few would have power, property and authority, while the majority would have to just work hard and obey.

THE TESTIMONIAL CYCLE IN THE FILMS BY JORGE SANJINÉS

Our interest in non-written sources started back in the 1970s, when we were living a sort of collective silence during the dictatorship of Cnl. Banzer (1971-1978). It was a time in which one could speak with relatively more freedom in the codified metaphorical narrative forms of the aymara or qhichwa languages, where oral interviews were the key to confront the massive informational distortions and censorship by the government. A couple of books came out then and had a great impact: the documented research on the “Massacre del Valle” (January 1974 in the valleys of Cochabamba), and the autobiography of Domitila Chungara, *Si Me Permiten Hablar* (Let Me Speak), mediated and signed by Moema Viezzer, circulated widely and helped the public acquire knowledge and consciousness of the repressive actions of the government and their vast political implications (see Comisión de Justicia y Paz 1975 and Viezzer 1976). In spite of the authorial mediation of both books, they let one hear the immediacy and reality of subaltern voices, who were witnesses or direct protagonists of a critical moment in Bolivian history. They were peculiar voices, grounded in locally circumscribed experiences. Domitila’s testimony speaks to us from the stand point of a housewife who leaves in the capitalist heart of the state, the nationalized Bolivian tin mining sector. The documentation on the Massacre of 1974, speaks at us from the injured or dead bodies of its victims. An extraordinary set of photographs and oral or written documents, reveal what the official sources wanted to hide. The government acknowledged only 13 dead, 10 wounded and 21 incarcerated, and all of them were accused of being “foreign extremists”. The Commission for Justice and Peace, a Human Rights office linked to the Catholic Church, calculated at least 80 dead persons and

more than 100 wounded; all of them were qhichwa speaking peasants of the communities of Tolata, Epizana and Melga that were shot from the tanks and trucks sent by the government to dialogue with the peasants and “pacify” the protest (cf. Rivera [1984] 2003).

Domitila Chungara and many other popular leaders, as well as the dead peasants of Cochabamba, reappear in many of the films by Jorge Sanjinés. The memorable photographs that appeared in *La Masacre del Valle* can be seen, as a *mise en scene*, in the first sequences of *La nación clandestina*, transmitting that sense of horror and impotence that exhales the history of dictatorships in our country, by showing the dead being carried by anonymous fellow Indians. The solidarity of this gesture can also be interpreted as a dispute for the historical truth: by rescuing the corpses, the dead in the massacre can be not only mourned and buried by their families, but also counted by the communities and human rights organizations. In the case of Domitila, the film *El coraje del pueblo* (The Courage of the People, 1971) is based in her testimonial reconstruction of the situation lived in the state owned tin mines during the dictatorship of Gral. Barrientos (1964-1969) in form of a socio-drama in which the massacre of San Juan (24 June 1965) is re-enacted by the survivors and families of the victims. They revive in front of the camera, the brutal repression suffered during the night of San Juan and the subsequent episodes of state violence and workers’ resistance, which culminated in the support by fractions of mining union leaders to the guerrilla led by Che Guevara in 1967. Nevertheless, Domitila and the housewives of the “Housewives Committee” challenge – through their words and their actions – the masculine vision of the miners’ social identity, imbuing it with the mark of humanity and dignity, as a struggle for physical and cultural survival. The iconographic version of Sanjinés is a reconstruction – through his own authorial voice – of the collective memory of these diverse segments of the mining towns, as it came into being through the opposition to the dictatorships of Barrientos and Banzer. The plural meanings of history are recreated through a counterpoint between masculine and feminine voices, mining and peasant voices, which will not be integrated in the linear,

progressive course of history, remaining for us as threads of an unfinished fabric that the spectator will continue weaving.

In *Banderas del amanecer* (1983), a feature length documentary film, Sanjinés gathers new live voices coming from this “clandestine Nation”, that he will theorize later in the film of the same title. It is a sort of “epics of Democracy”, in which the diverse and conflictive articulation of the past is related to a complex cognitive map that ends up challenging the inevitability of death. The braveness and courage of the multitudes in *Banderas...* follows the historical cycle dealt with in *El Coraje...* This theme – the death and burial of the past – will come back in a clearer form in *La Nación Clandestina*, a fictional film that constitutes a deep reflection on the nature of historical time. In this film, Sanjinés offers us a vision of the past “not as something dead, devoid of functions of renovation” but as a “reversible fact”, that is, “a past that can be future” (Mamani, 1992), through the itinerary of his main character, Sebastian Mamani, in his trip back to his community, narrated in parallel with the remembrance of his past life. Through successive flash backs, Sebastian goes back from the city to his community, walking with his mask of Danzante hanged from his shoulders and looking backwards. This same mask will serve him to perform the deadly ritual dance that will finally help him reintegrate the community – from which he was expelled for his treacherous and corrupted actions in the city. In this trip, the protagonist takes us from the hectic and violent atmosphere that he lives in the city, towards his community and family, while at the same time he reconstructs the past events that led him to take the decision of dying. Here, memory is not an act of nostalgia or longing, but an awakening and liberation from the alienation of his life in the city (after a long period in which he denied his Indian origins and changed his name). The aymara proverb *qhip nayr uñtasis sarnaqapxañani*² expresses this radically different

² This is a very complex conceptual construction based in the metaphorical play between *nayra* = eye, and *qhipa* = back, that invert the meaning of what is “back” and “in front”. This aymara proverb can be roughly translated as “Looking back and forward (to the future-past) we can walk into the present-future”, although the more subtle meanings are lost in the translation.

perception of historical time, in which the image of walking Sebastian with a mask looking back, condensates the proverb in a very precise and eloquent way. Paradoxically, this rebirth and recovery of consciousness he experiences in the process of coming back, will end up in a frantic dance in which he will die as a human self-sacrifice, reordering time and restoring the cycle of collective life. The sociological interpretation of Sanjinés on historical time in the Andes thus challenges the linear ideal of progress sponsored by official historians, be it in their liberal-oligarchic or in their nationalist version (see for example Moreno 1973, Fellman Velarde 1970). By showing us the de-centered experience of oppressed Indian communities in contemporary Bolivia, the films by Jorge Sanjinés reveal the traces of an undigested colonial past, and the “moments of danger” lived by the indigenous communities that struggle to project their centuries-old traditions into viable paths for the future, while at the same time being permanently threatened by official history and by repression to die and be erased from history (cfr. Benjamin 1970).

Para recibir el canto de los pájaros (To Receive the Song of the Birds, 1995) is an allegory, a genre that has not been much favoured by modern Bolivian filmmakers. It is more typical of the ritual dramas of theatre-dance in the Andes. In this sense it is a very original film, although it has provoked a lot of criticism and controversy in Bolivia, perhaps because it tries to reflect upon the subtle forms of racism that pervade the daily lives of the mestizo-creole intellectual elite. The film paints a cruel portrait of the double standards of a filming team, who is working among the indigenous communities of Charazani – the land of the famous healers, the Kallawayas – reconstructing the epics of Spanish Conquest and the defeat and murder of the Inka, while at the same time behaving like conquistadores and showing the same prejudices, symbolic violence and internalized racism that their filmmaking pretends to criticize.

The allegoric and symbolic treatment of the argument was also present in *La Nación Clandestina* (The Clandestine Nation, 1989), particularly in a sub-plot in which a student, running away from the police, tries to seek shelter and clothing in the countryside, among a family of aymara speaking peasants. Unable to

communicate with them, the leftist student who purportedly was fighting for their liberation is finally shot dead shortly after he utters his frustration with the typical racist expression: “these damned, stupid Indians”. The fact that he is dressed in rags and desperately asks for clothing to disguise and protect himself, adds to the allegory, since the aymara word for the oppressor white minority is *q’ara*, which literally means “naked”.

In *To Receive the Song of the Birds*, this allegorical treatment is enhanced through a series of sub-plots that portray the mistrust and segregation within an apparently homogeneous community – a filmmaking crew – and the prejudices and open racism towards the community members who are working as extras or just receiving them as guests in their lands. The perceptive and ideological gap between subject and object, fiction and reality, male and female, elite city dwellers and indigenous peasants and the more subtle confrontation between cholo and white members of the film crew are treated as a sort of game of mirrors in which each situation parallels and metaphors the others, as a powerful depiction of the colonial framework that makes cultural deafness a mark of the inability to communicate. As in the eighteenth century ritual drama of the Death of Atawallpa, where part of the action is carried through a dialogue of mutually incomprehensible languages, or in some of the drawings by Waman Puma (see below), the total absence of communication and the deceitful nature of translation are a key to the understanding of Sanjinés’ films, as well as an enduring feature of colonial and postcolonial Bolivia. The originality of Sanjinés in *To Receive the Song of the Birds* resides in the fact that he deals with the issue by self-critically addressing the invasive act of filmmaking and the technological and cultural gaps between filmmakers and their subjects. In so doing, he renounces to the usual voluntaristic and idyllic vision of mutual cooperation and compromise with common goals, which is part of the rhetoric of progressive intellectuals towards the indigenous populations they seek to represent. The plot intertwines two historical moments: one imaginary, in which the drama of conquest is re-enacted and fictionalized, and the other “real”, the time lived by the filmmakers attempting to exploit the powerful landscapes and emblematic

Indian-ness of the community they chose as a location for their film. Through this mixing of times, the film crew is confronted with their inability to respectfully deal and understand the cultural values of the community, and Sanjinés addresses the gap of communication typical of a colonial situation. The fragile mirror of citizenship and equality among apparently homogeneous subjects is then shattered into pieces. This is a modern version of a situation that Waman Puma de Ayala already posed in one of the drawings of his seventeenth century work *La Nueva Cronica*, where the Spanish conqueror Candia dialogues with Inka Atawallpa, who asks: *Kay quritachu mikhunki* (Do you eat this gold?) and receives as an answer: “Yes, we eat this gold”.

Here the basic features of the colonial relationship are symbolically and succinctly exposed. Sanjinés develops this theme even further, showing the internalization of this cultural misunderstanding in the common sense of the mestizo elite, which turns against itself and paralyzes its actions. Thus, the long history of colonial in communication is not overcome but reinforced, blocking the possibility of intercultural of mutual confidence and pacific coexistence. In a moment of crisis, the Indian Other becomes – in the eyes of the filmmakers – a potentially dangerous enemy, a ghost that stands up in silence and blocks the possibility of creative actions, be it filmmaking or just listening to the songs of birds. This is a powerful metaphor of the alienating nature of western cultural dominance over the territory of indigenous peasants and over their ways of communicating with nature; it is also a metaphor of their moral critique of the colonial order, still so alive and pervasive in modern Bolivia. Such a despairing version of Bolivian contemporary life is connected with a long tradition of writers and artists that perceived the painful psychic disruption of the colonial experience as a form of social silence.

MELCHOR MARÍA MERCADO OR THE
NARRATIVE OF A POSSIBLE NATION

One needs to go back one century to deal with the second of our “sociologists of the image”, Melchor María Mercado, through his

only surviving work, the *Album de Paisajes y Tipos Humanos de Bolivia (1841-1869)* (Album of Landscapes and Human Types of Bolivia), published in 1983. Mercado painted his pictures during his long deportations, as a political prisoner, to far away corners of the Bolivian territory. Bolivia had reached the status of an independent country only in 1825, when he was still a schoolboy, and the institutions and social organization of the country were largely moulded by the colonial system.

His paintings are sensitive to the colonial social stratification of the new republic, which built clear cut ethnic frontiers between different strata of the population. The indigenous majority was the only tax payer population of the early Republic (up to the mid twentieth century) and the legacy of the colonial tribute system was left intact. Liberal historians depict the nineteenth century as one of depression, economic crisis and enslavement of Indian populations, only overcome with the growth of the export economy by the end of the century. Yet, Mercado's portrait of the popular world of the nineteenth century shows vibrant internal market routes and an array of economic and symbolic exchanges, in which both men and women engage actively, taking entrepreneurial roles as dealers of maize beer, staple crops and other rural-urban trade items. Contemporary research by historians of the nineteenth century has confirmed that the triumph of the export economic sector was actually a time of deepened oppression over indigenous populations, whereas the previous decades of "depression" and crisis of the export economy promoted increased opportunities for petty commerce, the growth of internal markets and an intense mercantile activity and economic participation by indigenous and cholo populations (cf. Mitre 1986), just as conveyed vividly by the paintings of Melchor María Mercado. Moreover, whereas written sources tend to consider only men as economically active (as tribute payers, workers or merchants), Mercado's markets and trading routes are full of women, sometimes as leaders of commercial teams and not only as street vendors or as accompanying members in male groups.

In the nineteenth century, as well as in the colonial period, the main internal routes of commerce were connected to the

mining centers of La Paz and Potosí. Contemporary historians and writers have dealt with the spatial organization of long distance markets and the centrality of mines as the heart of a vast system of exchanges (see for example Larson 1992, Tandeter 1992, Mitre 1986) that was formed during the sixteen century, the first century of colonial rule. Yet the iconography of Mercado goes beyond the economics of mining as a leading force in the organization of a regional market. In depicting the idea of these “centers” he actually draws inspiration from the ideas of centrality, power and sacredness present in the indigenous Andean world: La Paz and Potosí are shown as economic forces governed by the centrality of mountains (mount Illimani in La Paz and Sumaq Urqu in Potosí) as in the indigenous worldview, these are conceived as sacred sites of power, and one can hardly recognize La Paz and Potosí as cities, but rather, the paintings depict them as sorts of natural sanctuaries, where mountains organize the space and the social life of the inhabitants in the center of the commercial routes to which the motley traveling crews are headed.

The gestures and costumes of the characters and “human types” depicted in the Album also give a wealth of information on ethnic frontiers and labels, as well as on the proliferation of mixed types and border crossings that the market allows for. There is a motley heterogeneity in the market places, where diverse social strata meet and interact. But in it one can also see distinctions: of power, wealth and social category. The commercial circuit of La Paz, more racially segmented and oligarchic, is clearly demarcated through conventions of dress and other emblems of social hierarchy, which seem to regulate the extent and direction of commercial and social exchange. It seems, once more, that women cross the ethnic borders more easily than men, who are rigidly attached to their social category, expressed in compulsory dress codes that distinguish “Indian” from “Cholo”, “Mestizo” and “Caballero” (gentleman), according to their status as obliged or exempted from tribute obligations. Such distinctions and labels are also applied to women, but in their case the similarities and imitative behavior are evident. Contemporary studies of dress and its influence in the formation of what Rossana Barragán (1992)

terms as the “third republic” (the “Mestizo republic” in between the “Republic of Spaniards” and the “Republic of Indians” sanctioned by early Spanish colonial law) have developed further the idea of women as ethnic border-crossers in the urban and mercantile circuits of early nineteenth century Bolivia, a situation that seems to have been reversed in contemporary times, where the emblematic *chola* dress worn by aymara and qhichwa women is a marker of subaltern indigenous ethnicity, whereas men tend to uniformly use the western suit-and-hat that became hegemonic in the early twentieth century (cfr. Berger 1980). In this respect, Mercado’s paintings offer a valuable source for understanding the quotidian life of rural and urban Bolivia, revealing features that hardly appear in written documents.

As in the case of Jorge Sanjinés, Mercado is fond of allegory when it is time to represent more abstract concepts and opinions about society. While in the more ethnographic pictures, women and their mercantile activity represent the pluralism and cultural autonomy of civil society in its popular strata, in the opposite pole, the masculine political society is portrayed as retrograde and authoritarian towards the indigenous working classes. This is depicted as a “World Upside Down”, such as in a painting where oxen are manipulating a yoke to which a couple of humans are attached. The idea of a World Upside Down evokes again the seventeenth century painter-writer Waman Puma de Ayala, one of the earliest sociologists of the image in the Andes (cf. Poma de Ayala 1988), and seems to be a deep-rooted idea that expresses the catastrophic impact that conquest and colonization had upon the Indian populations.

The Album covers a variety of regions and themes that cannot be dealt with in this essay, ranging from the ethnography of trade and markets, a variety of popular festivities, the life in the missions of the Amazon region and a long series of paintings of churches and architecture, to the allegories of corruption in the church and the judiciary, as well as the idea of a society that is a world upside down. One might venture interpreting the whole Album as an attempt to represent, at the same time, the material and cultural foundations of a possible Nation, and the limits

imposed to this project by the colonial legacy and the political and juridical institutions that shape and organize social life. In this sense, Mercado works against the grain of contemporary historiography, which represent the nineteenth century as a moment of economic and cultural stagnation, only to be redeemed by the action of the “superior races”. Such is the point of view of the nineteenth century historian Gabriel René Moreno (cf. [1888] 1973), for whom the Indian population of Bolivia was the biggest obstacle in the country’s road towards progress and civilization. But this view, anachronistic as it might seem, has been remodelled and revived by modern historians of the 1952 revolution, such as José Fellman Velarde, who thinks of Bolivian society as a conglomerate of essentialist race-class identities, which under the leadership of a metaphysical “middle class” will finally leave the dark realm of prehistory to become fully human and modern – i.e. western – leaving behind the barbarous pre-capitalist, Indian past. Mercado defies these perceptions beforehand, showing the paradoxes of colonial domination, its double standards and contradictions, by means of social satire and allegory.

The allegories of Melchor María Mercado, as dark as those of Jorge Sanjinés, reflect a deeply pessimistic view of Bolivian society, particularly of the dominant Westernized elites: the Church as a nest of corruption, the judiciary as the realm of ambition and lust, the world upside down where the roles of worker and animal are exchanged. This adds up to a lucid diagnose of the deep gaps between society as a set of norms that express a social contract between dominant and dominated classes, within a framework of formal equality and citizenship, and a set of social practices that reproduce inequality, authoritarianism and injustice on a day to day basis. Deliberately, Mercado introduces a “montage effect”, so as to introduce sharp contrasts between successive sequences and themes. The “political nation” and the “real nation” (as were defined by the Colombian populist leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, cfr. Rivera 1982) are separated by an abyss: the former is exclusive, patriarchal and parasitical; the latter is a flourishing and motley heterogeneous site of interethnic exchanges, miscegenation and productive and cultural creativity.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF
ORAL AND ICONOGRAPHIC SOURCES

In this essay, I have been attempting to address what Homi Bhabha calls the “fragmented narratives of the nation” (Bhabha 1990). In a postcolonial society such as Bolivia, the images of a desirable and possible modern nation are crossed by divisive forces such as ethnicity and colonial domination that lie underneath the apparent equality provided by the market, the citizenship model and democracy. These divisions, unacknowledged by the ruling elites, or at the most recognized as cultural ornaments in a hegemonic westernized model of society, emerge clearly to the surface, whenever subaltern voices can be heard or represented. Film and painting are, in this sense, more capable of going behind the surface of those consoling images, insofar as they express moments and segments of an unconquered past, which has remained rebel to the integrating and totalizing discourse of written, linear social science and its grand narratives. That is why, rather than looking at these documents as “sources” that can serve as a mere illustration of more general ideas and interpretations of society –such as those typically formulated by the liberal, nationalist or Marxist social scientist- I propose to understand them as interpretive pieces in and of themselves, permeated by authorial voices that not only depict or mirror a given reality, but reflect upon it, interpret and theorize it, and provide us with a truly sociological view of the organization, values and forces that shape society. Whereas the written word of social scientific thought tends to tame the past – by making it transparent or intelligible – oral and written sources point to the irreducibility of human experience, to the cracks and crevices of the normative realm, pointing to the way things are, rather than how they should be. Whereas the written word and the conceptual framework of mainstream social science tends to obliterate the subaltern voices and integrate them in a monologic narrative of progress and modernization, the pictorial or audiovisual image re-enacts the forces that shaped society while at the same time organizing the chaotic and the motley into descriptions which could be termed

“deep” and illuminating. Rather than ornaments, interferences or noises, the presence of the subaltern, Indian workers and peasants, in the case of Sanjinés and Mercado, becomes a practical criticism to the underlying forces of colonialism, racism and patriarchal oppression, long before these concepts were dealt with by the modern social sciences.

For example, after the 1952 revolution, when the homogeneity of society conforming to Western standards of social behaviour became hegemonic, the official language was purged from the word “Indian”, which was substituted by the more innocuous term “peasant”. In this fashion – where words were used to conceal reality rather than to name it – the colonial problem and the persistence of racism were unacknowledged, erased from public debate and from the social sciences and the press. It was not a social scientist, but a filmmaker – Jorge Sanjinés – who was the first to expose the day to day interactions of the racist western elite and the Indian worker or peasant, showing us that Indians existed, that colonialism was alive and kept unchanged, in spite of a radically redistributive agrarian reform, universal vote and other democratizing measures, in his films *Ukhamau* (1966) or *Yawar Mallku* (1969). This unveiling of the colonial nature of Bolivian society allows previously silenced subject to speak up and reveal an untamed past, that remained heterogeneous to the integrating and totalizing discourse of the State. The conflictive and critical voices of subaltern subjects and Indian social actors are thus erased in the dominant common sense, affecting the very production of sources and historical accounts, as well as their interpretation by the historian or social scientists. The dominant image that emerges is moulded by the progressive and linear evolutionist interpretation of Western rationality, where these voices are perceived as anachronisms, interferences or obstacles to the ideal of a homogeneous, modern, westernized society. Thus, for example, Indians are perceived as alien to the market, static and changeless, attached to irrational traditions which are just mechanic repetitions of an incomprehensible past. As Mercado’s paintings eloquently show, the agency of indigenous subjects included an active participation in internal

market circuits that became stagnant only when the oligarchic model of a raw material export economy became dominant.

On the other hand, the testimonial voice of Domitila and the photographs of the Massacre of 1974, reconstructed in the films by Jorge Sanjinés, reveal the existence of a plurality of subjects and subaltern voices, nurtured in the Indian aymara and qhichwa culture, with their diverse conceptions on historical time. In spite of the fact that the overall interpretation of both authors is radically pessimistic, revealing the impossibility of an endogenous change within the mestizo-criollo elite, they articulate and expose the basis of other, more authentic and plural nation, of other hetero-geneous modernity, which has been termed “our modernity” by Partha Chatterjee for the case of India (Chatterjee 1997). The “here and now” of both authors is deeply engaged with history and politics, through the social interactions with the landscape, a landscape that can not be easily tamed or controlled but by the patient centuries-old human action in opening up productive spaces, roads, and ceremonial sites. This legacy is not exoticized but fully integrated into the social arena, through the metaphor of walking groups that traverse vast open landscapes, a common feature in both Mercado’s paintings and Sanjinés films.

It is the observers of these works who will ultimately find in them the foundation for a new sense of belonging to a possible Nation that is plural and open-ended, recognizing in its diversity, not an obstacle but a potentially rich source of modernity in difference, capable of overcoming the successive defeats and blockades that modern history has witnessed, which might be able to overcome the defeats and impossibilities of autonomous development that modern history has reiteratively exposed. The immediacy and force of images, the allegoric and metaphoric sense of their composition and montage, are part of a game of meanings given to the past, not as what is given, finished and dead, but a past-as-future (as the aymara proverb expresses), a source of renewal and moral critique of what is given, of oppression and western domination as the inevitable outcome of progress and modernization.

In Sanjinés' version, the testimony of Domitila speaks to us from the standpoint of a double de-centred existential position: as a woman and as a member of an oppressed class, marked by ethnic qhichwa or aymara origins: the territorial communities of miners in the nationalized mining centres of Potosi. On the other hand, characters such as Sebastian reveal the painful contradictions of rural-urban migration and westernization, with its traces of denial and cultural shame. For both of them, history has contradictory meanings, oscillating between defeat and hope of liberation, between the possibilities of life and death, as if in themselves, the fragments of the nation were contradictorily reunited. Their lives represent a sort of practical criticism to the homogenizing, male centred, rationalistic view of society and history, that pervades official discourse but also hegemonic social science narratives.

In Mercado's Album, the montage of plates and the thematic sequences in which it is organized, allow us to imagine a motley heterogeneous society, far more diverse than any of the conventional written sources reports. The daily lives of maize-beer traders, muleteers or petty merchants – many of them female – have left scarce documentary evidence, and what is available is usually misleading. For example, the Spanish colonial sources were completely blind to the agency and economic participation of women in marketplaces along the routes connecting Lima to Potosi (*tambos*), since the Spanish chroniclers just could not imagine what these women were doing in the *tambos*, except selling their own bodies. Mercado represents what he saw in the muleteer routes leading to La Paz and Potosi, challenging what would become the official history by the populist historians of the MNR: that before the revolution (1952), Indian and peasant societies were completely stagnant, pre-mercantile and incapable of social change. What one sees in the Album is exactly the opposite, a multiplicity of strata within the subaltern groups of society, speaks of changes not only in economic practices, but in dress, consumption patterns and forms of intercultural exchange and interaction. While historians of the revolution such as Fellman Velarde portray backward multitudes attached to age old, unchanging “traditions”, passively guided by enlightened leaders,

Mercado reveals the social mobility of the popular strata, its many crafts and economic practices, communicating with the larger society through the language of mercantile exchange, but at the same time reproducing the caste-like stratification – based on tributary status – established in colonial times. An alternative vision of modernity is at work in the Album, with all its contradictions, institutional barriers and imposed hierarchies.

In (post)colonial societies such as Bolivia, the question of sources has deep theoretical and political implications. As never before, official historiography and liberal sociology has been harshly criticized. The possibility of an “objective” knowledge of a multicultural society, where the vast majority of the population speak languages other than Spanish – in which all official sources are written – and behave according to cultural standards and frameworks that are radically opposed to those of the dominant Western minority, has put an end to the pretentious idea of objectivity by the social sciences, and has given room to a series of fragmented visions of society, that have not yet been capable of synthesis as a unique, other, alternative vision of the country’s social history. Actually, it is in this plurality and diversity where the potential of non-written sources resides, in a non-synchronous society such as Bolivia (Bloch 1971).

In this reflection on oral and visual sources I have attempted to analyze the work of two sociologists of the image that have represented and theorized on the nature of Bolivian society from the stand point of the subaltern Indian populations, recreating a past that is still alive and resilient to the homogenizing forces of Westernization. The type of knowledge produced by these authors blurs the distinction between art and the social sciences, and demands a trans-disciplinary approach that might help us to explain the contradictions and biases of the process of modernization, as well as its interrupted and inconclusive nature. This approach might help us not only to better understand the past, but also to “imagine a community-Nation” that overcomes the destiny of collective anonymity that has been imposed by the western national model to the great majority of a people (cf. Anderson 1991). Imagine a future community in which the motley heterogeneity of

the country contributes to overcome the colonial legacy and build a democratic system in which diversity is fully expressed and coexistence is possible in less violent and exclusionary terms.

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2. A QUASI-LEGAL COMMODITY IN THE ANDES: COCA-LEAF CONSUMPTION IN NORTHWESTERN ARGENTINA

In La Quiaca there aren't Argentinean or Bolivian Indians.
There are, simply, Indians (Jaime Molins, 1916).

Coca leaves have been produced, circulated and consumed in the Andes for several thousand years.¹ Soon after the Spanish conquest of the Inka state in 1532, and overcoming the initial attempts by the *conquistadores* to satanize and ban the trade, coca leaves became in fact, along with minted silver and Andean textiles, grains and tubers, one of the key commodities of the trade circuitry called the *trajin*,² thus an early sign of the “modernity” of the Andean colonial and postcolonial markets. The silver mining center of Potosi (in today's Bolivia) was at the heart of this system, attracting labour and produce from a vast regional space (from Quito, in today's Ecuador to Tucumán, in today's Argentina) not only to work at its industrial complex of refining and minting silver, but to participate actively in the circulation of money (the “general equivalent”, produced in Potosi) that, through its movement, transformed and reconstructed the local economies and productive units in the Andean region, in what has been seen as a complex and multifarious process of “adaptive resistance” through mercantilization (cf. Stern 1987).

The liberalizing and progressive aspects of this market have been not only overlooked by researchers but also historically

¹ The earliest radiocarbonic date was established in the Valdivia Culture (southwestern Ecuador) in around 2100 BC (i.e. almost 4000 years old) by the finding of representations and implements for coca chewing, such as decorated lime pots, statuettes showing the bulging cheek of a chewer (cf. Plowman 1986, in Paccini and Franckemont, eds., p. 23). Ironically, it was in Ecuador where colonial satanization of the habit wiped it out by the XVIIIth century (Ruggiero Romano, personal communication, Paris 1979).

² See the thoroughly researched historiography of the *trajin* (local and long-distance trade routes in the hands of aymara or qhichwa speaking elites) during the first two centuries of Spanish colonial rule, by Luis Miguel Glave (1989), particularly what he calls “the production of circulation” referring to the multiple inputs of human labor, knowledge and social skills (not to mention land and pack animals) by native entrepreneurs and communities in the Andes, as exemplified in the coca leaf trade (Ch. II: “La producción de los trajines: coca y mercado interno colonial”).

blocked by successive attempts at State monopoly, fiscal pressure and expropriation of land and resources from the indigenous communities by the colonial, and later republican *criollo* elites. Since the 17th century and up to the agrarian reform of 1953, the coca producing regions of the Yungas of La Paz and Cochabamba were dominated by large haciendas with servile labor, although the trade remained largely in the hands of native and *cholo* (or *mestizo*) entrepreneurs and free communities of the highlands and valleys (Soux 1993).

In fact, during this same period the economic agency of Andean peasants and traders, as well as of native and *cholo* merchant elites established a long-term historical tendency, realized in the materiality of trade as well as in the symbolic and cultural interaction of people-through-commodities (cf. Marx 1946, Appadurai 1988). The intensity and diversity of the demand for indigenous commodities was thus able to open crevices in the rigid caste-like structure of colonial and postcolonial society, in spite of the institutionalized privileges granted to the *conquistadores* and later to their republican *criollo* heirs.

Two events had a profound impact over the long term process of circulation and exchange of coca leaves established in colonial times. First, the independence of Andean nation-states in the early 19th century created a new map of borderlands and fiscal controls over the routes through which commodities reached long-distance consumption centres, suddenly turning internal market exchanges into import-export trade or into contraband. Second, in 1860 a new character entered the scene: cocaine, one among fourteen alkaloids contained in the leaves, was synthesized in Europe and became commercially available worldwide. Soon, it turned into a popular medicinal and recreational drug, so famous that it would provoke heated medical and political debates involving personalities such as Freud, Mantegazza and others, that contributed to create enduring myths on the effects of coca leaves that still have wild followers in the West (cf. Andrews and Salomon, eds. 1975). In the Andean countries the attitudes toward this debate followed divergent paths, revealing the economic interests involved. Thus, while Bolivian *hacendados* and

indigenous entrepreneurs remained largely as suppliers for the regional markets of coca-leaf “chewers”,³ between 1860 and 1950 Peru became the main producer of industrial, legal cocaine for the world market, resisting fiercely, though unsuccessfully, the international drive towards its prohibition (cf. Gootenberg 1999).

Historian Ruggiero Romano (1982) has analysed this transition from legal to illegal and its impact on the coca-leaf economy, in terms of two “false equations”: from *good coca* = *good cocaine*, to *bad cocaine* = *bad coca*. The latter became the official position of the United Nations after the publication in 1950 of the results of the *Commission of Enquiry on the Coca Leaf* based on a bibliographical discussion and a series of interviews in Peru and Bolivia (mainly with the white medical and entrepreneurial establishment) presented during the twelfth period of sessions in New York (ONU, 1950). The conceptual framework of this enquiry was provided, among others, by Peruvian scientist Carlos Gutiérrez de Noriega, who in the 1940s claimed to have demonstrated that coca is just a plant carrier of cocaine, and that the coca-leaf chewer is under the permanent toxic influence of this substance.⁴

³ Dry (but fresh) coca leaves are not exactly “chewed”, but gently sucked and kept in the mouth, adding an alkaline substance (in Bolivia, usually ashes from dried and burnt quinoa, sweet potato or other plant stalks) to promote the absorption of the leaf’s components through the mucous membranes of the mouth. In Bolivia, this form of consumption is called *akhulliku* or *pijjchu*, and the verb has been hispanized as *akhullikar* or *pijjhear*. In Peru it is called *chajjchar* and in Argentina *coquear*; all these terms imply something different from “chewing”. The absence, in English, of a proper term, has forced me to continue using “coca chewing” to mean *akhulliku* or *coqueo*, but I will go back to these terms when the context of the sentence allows for it.

⁴ This is known as a “pharmacocentric phallacy”, and is characteristic of the approach by bio-medical science to all natural plant remedies, not only coca leaves (personal communication, Paul Gootenberg). More recently, the “ecgonine hypothesis” (Burchard 1978) has emerged to counteract the long lasting cocaine hypothesis (see for example, Saenz 1938 and Morales 1990), stating that in the metabolic process of *coqueo* the main alkaloid involved is not cocaine but ecgonine, which is crucial for the metabolism of glucose, but eighty times less toxic than the former. If personal testimonies could serve any purpose in this debate among scientists (most of whom probably have never seen a real life coca leaf) let me state, as an habitual chewer for the last 25 years, that I find the stimulating effects of *akhulliku* milder than those of coffee.

The debates that took place around this issue will not be dealt with here (see my book *Las Fronteras de la Coca*, 2003), but they can help us to understand the divergent “life histories” of coca as a commodity in both countries, i.e. the cultural patterns of value and meaning that underlie its production, circulation and consumption, and the changes thereof through time (Appadurai 1988: 12-13). Thus, while the dominant position in Peru was to defend the modern, industrial production of cocaine, rejecting the chewing habit as a dirty, unhealthy and backward indigenous tradition (Gootenberg 2002) the Bolivian elite, particularly the *hacendados* of the Yungas region, well aware of the commercial value, long distance market circuits and transcultural consumption patterns of coca leaves, had been involved for decades in a campaign to defend the habit, stressing their digestive, stimulating and nutritional values, as well as their potential for universal consumption (cf. for example, Fernández 1932 and Lema 1997).

Events in the fifties would put an end to the involvement of the Bolivian elite in the defence of coca-leaf production: the social revolution of 1952, led by the MNR (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario), and the agrarian reform initiated in 1953 transformed the economy of coca producing regions into a landscape of small *cocales* (coca fields, ranging from one sixth to one hectare), in the hands of aymara and qhichwa speaking peasant families. The MNR, a party of elite leadership and popular constituency, took up with missionary zeal the task to “civilize Indians” and eliminate traditions of sociality that were thought to be exclusive to them (Rivera 1993a & b). A myth that was widely shared by both national and international observers (and which is still used today in the debate against coca leaves by Bolivian and US government officials) is that they are used as a substitute for food, and that their consumption is linked to conditions of deprivation and hard labour. But it is common knowledge among chewers (and the study by Carter and Mamani demonstrated this through a detailed national survey in rural and mining areas) that coca leaves are consumed after meals, due to their digestive properties, but otherwise, just as coffee and cigarettes are used around the world.

The recreational and medicinal consumption of the leaves and their use as an antacid and as a mild stimulant to prevent drowsiness and fatigue or to ease digestion (functions that are specially important at high altitudes) has been overlooked as the basis of the contemporary expansion of the habit, not only among the urban population in Bolivia (which was not included in the survey by Carter and Mamani, 1978)⁵ but in neighbouring countries as well.

Eventually, this entire realm of economic realities became totally eclipsed by what was known as the “cocaine boom”, in the late seventies and eighties, involving Andean peasant migrants, mainly to the lowlands of Cochabamba, in the expansion of the area under cultivation and in the domestic production of cocaine *pasta*, supplied to local mafias (dominated by elite members of the military and the police, as well as by prominent politicians) and to the Colombian transformation industry.⁶ This fact has contributed to the erasure of the other trajectories of the leaf, and

⁵ The study by Carter and Mamani was the basis for the establishment of 12,000 metric tons (dried leaves) in the Yungas of La Paz and in a small area of the lowlands of Cochabamba, as the top limit of the legal coca-leaf crop recognized by the Law 1008 on Coca and Controlled Substances (Republica de Bolivia 1988). This law regulates the production and commercialization of coca leaves for “traditional licit uses”, but only where there is “historical evidence” of these uses (following Art. 14 of the modified version of the UN Single Convention, Viena 1988). The ambiguous legal status of the coca leaf (which is considered *iter criminis* when en route to become cocaine base or hydrochloride) allows for a severe interdictive control of the legal markets, which has actually promoted the diversion of the coca leaf crop to the illicit trade.

⁶ The expansion of the area dedicated to coca cultivation in Cochabamba, and the forced eradication that reduced this area to almost zero in 2000 are processes that will not be dealt with in this paper, but the English speaking reader can consult dozens of papers and books on this issue, mainly attempting to show how the “bad indian” behaves when left on his own economic initiative (a paradigmatic case is the book *Cocaine, White Gold Rush in Peru* by Edmundo Morales, 1990). For more balanced approaches on the Bolivian case, although still unaware of the nature and magnitude of licit markets, see the compilation by Léons and Sanabria 1997 (particularly the introduction by the editors), as well as Painter 1994, Healy 1997 and Laserna 1997. See also *Las Fronteras de la Coca*, Rivera 2003b.

has cast a shadow on the subsisting and expanding legal markets, systematically ignoring the increasing number of people (not only traditional Andean peasants) that chew the leaf as a natural medicine as well as in recreational and work-related contexts.

The War on Drugs is one of America's many irrational wars, and has been sustained ideologically through a contemporary version of the "prose of counter-insurgency" (Guha 1983), that implies an epistemological and political effort on the part of those in power, to primitivize and criminalize *cocalero* producers as well as to deny the existence of modern and licit markets for the coca leaf, which tend to grow following the same transregional circuits as the colonial *trajin*.⁷ In spite of the interdiction efforts, producers, traders and consumers have succeeded in maintaining alive a market for the various brands of "selected" leaves for *akhulliku*, and by so doing, they have managed to limit the official attempt to push the *cocaleros* towards the illegal trade, which justifies military intervention and repression to producers, by means of shifting definitions of areas considered "legal" or "excedentary". These definitions are highly political, as they imply a series of conversions (from aerial photographs to hectares, from hectares to metric tons of dried leaf crop, from the latter to cocaine) based on non-transparent and unreliable methods of calculation (see Rivera 2002 and 2003b). As an analyst has put it: "information is selectively sought and elaborated to justify decisions already made" (Laserna 1997: 210).

In this sense, I will attempt to understand the social and cultural organization of an economic and geographical space where the biography of coca-leaves most ostensibly diverges from the so-called coca-cocaine complex, and where price differentials (among other factors) constitute an economic force that blocks the use of these leaves for industrial purposes (i.e. the selected leaves are too expensive for large scale industries such as Coca-Cola or cocaine). But before entering in the ethnographic core of the paper, I will clarify some aspects related to the original purposes and context of this research.

⁷ See Las Fronteras de la Coca, Rivera 2003b.

EMERGENCY IN THE YUNGAS OF LA PAZ

The historical narrative and “road ethnography” that will follow were prompted by an event that was long before announced but not really believed until it happened. In mid-June 2001, a task force of combined army and police antinarcotics soldiers invaded the core of the “legal coca” region in the Yungas of La Paz, to eradicate the “excedentary” coca crops that were allegedly being cultivated there. After seven days of an impressive mobilization on the part of *cocalero* families, traders, transporters, and townspeople, the *Fuerza de Trabajo Conjunta* (Combined Task Force) had to abandon the region, and the producer organizations forced the government of Gral. Banzer to sign an agreement whereby the Yungas region would be respected, and the restrictive regulations on commercialization would be reformed. The *cocaleros* in the Yungas are well aware of the destination of their coca-leaf crop, and since the late eighties, they have specialized in the production of two types of “selected” coca leaves for long distance consumption markets, which are expanding in and outside the borders of Bolivia.⁸

As Appadurai has shown in his study on the social life of things (1988), one of the issues involved in unequal exchange and in the (neo)colonial price differentials that emerge at different points in the “life history” of indigenous commodities, consists in that trade imbalances involve differential access to knowledge from producer, to trader, to consumer. Through the power and reality effect of images, hundreds of *cocalero* producers in the Yungas were able to see by themselves the various forms of consumption and the different cultural meanings attached to the coca-leaf in places so distant from their small scale local society

⁸ Leaders of COFECAY Dionisio Nuñez and Simón Machaca have estimated that more than a third of the Yungas coca leaf crop goes to the expanding Argentinean market. The research done for the book *Las Fronteras de la Coca* (Rivera 2003b) included the production of two videos *Junio 2001, La Retirada de los Yungas*, and *Viaje a la Frontera del Sur*, and both the book and the videos have been used to introduce the question of the legal markets into the public and political debate, both within and outside the *cocalero* regions.

as Northwestern Argentina. Moreover, if the black legend on coca attributes to the Spanish *conquistadores* the expansion of the chewing habit as a means to supplement food deficits and secure the increased exploitation of forced labor in the mines, the discovery of recreational, modern forms of consumption in Argentina, in which “whites” or mestizos of European descent were actively involved, gave the producers a strong argument in favor of the depenalization of the coca-leaf trade, and its qualification as a modern medicine and natural stimulant, perfectly apt to access export markets. The cognitive gap is related, as we will see below, to the dominant official view that *akhulliku* is a traditional indigenous habit that is being swept away by progress and modernization. The naturality of public consumption, the cultural diversity of consumers and the variety of contexts in which Northern Argentineans of all social backgrounds involve themselves in *coqueo*, had a revealing effect that reached the Bolivian public in a moment when crucial definitions on the fate of the legal coca crop were being taken by the Bolivian government under US political and economic pressures, largely without the participation of peasant organizations (see the complete report on our research by the weekly journal *Pulso*, La Paz, October 26 – November 1, 2001, and the book *Las Fronteras de la Coca*, Rivera 2003b).

The following section will deal with the diverse contexts of consumption found during our trip, as well as with ritual practices that are becoming increasingly popular as “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) in the Argentinean Northwest. We will look at their implications as signals of regional identity, linked to practices and beliefs related to the construed memory of an authentic, indigenous past, but at the same time taking place in the context of modern forms of interaction and sociality.

CROSSING THE BORDER THROUGH VILLAZÓN

“Argentina is becoming like Bolivia”, I said to Félix Barra, as we were travelling down the puna towards the provincial capital of Jujuy, when we came to a long detour of earthen road between Abrapampa and the last crossroad towards the Chilean borderline. We had just faced a series of paradoxes in the border city of La Quiaca.

Crossing the border represented a buoyant illegal business for a series of enterprises on the basis of contraband, unequal exchange, and multiple extortions to migrants, specially from Bolivia and Peru. To begin with, there were moneylenders who gave around US\$100 per day, for ten days, in order to fulfil the ritual requirement of exhibiting the money to testify the condition of “tourist” to the Gendarmería or Argentinean police at the border. Once in the bus that would take them to the inland cities or agricultural areas, the moneylender sent an agent to cash the money. But instead of returning US\$1000, the migrants had to return US\$1300: an interest rate of 30% in a little more than one hour! Ricardo Abduca has called this system of calculated exploitation based on international border legislation (and its violation) a “frontier rent”, a sort of colonial rent that is charged to tourists and to migrants on account of the existence of an international border, but in practice, on the basis of racial and national stereotypes which were the result of a combination of power-knowledge relations. Commercial earnings, illegal exactions, legal constraints and subtle or overt forms of racism created a series of economic opportunities for actors with unequal access to power (such as *gendarmes*, or frontier policemen, vs. smugglers or prospective illegal migrants; see Abduca, ca. 1994: 9-10).

This disparities affected specially the transportation of coca leaves, yet, as one might imagine, here the fact of its high demand and cultural acceptance of the habit, created a special *frontier rent* associated with the current application of the so called anti-drug policies, which paradoxically ban the leave and actually promote the smuggling of its rival commodity, cocaine, which is less conspicuous, low weight and has other political advantages at the border.⁹ Needless to say, neither one nor the other were visibly

⁹ Several informants in the bordertown of Yacuiba, told us that former president Carlos Menem was a habitual consumer of bolivian “cristal”, and that he sent high rank officers to procure it at the border bridge of Pocitos-Salvador Mazza. At one point, they say, the demand by the Buenos Aires elite seems to have been so big, that a full fledged cocaine industry was established in and around Yacuiba. This industry, couldn’t use the selected or taki varieties of the leave due to their high costs, and imported the leaves directly from the Chapare through Santa Cruz (Interviews at the border, August 2001).

transported through the border, and we were not interested in contraband per se, but in the cultural meaning and economic value of the market for coca leaves in natural state as an alternative market for the so called “excedentary” Bolivian crop of the leaves. Thus, although we had seen huge loads of coca *takis* (fifty pound packages) in the terminal at Villazón, as well as in Tupiza, the coca leaf bundles disappeared at the border. Nevertheless, the more we travelled inland, crossing the *puna* or high altitude mountain range north of Jujuy, down the Quebrada de Humahuaca towards the provincial capitals of Salta and Jujuy, the more conspicuous the sale of coca leaves became. The evidence of the forbidden trajectories of the leaf at the border had been left behind, dissolved in the illusion of a free and open market.

JUJUY AND SALTA IN THE MONTH OF THE PACHAMAMA

We arrived in Jujuy in the evening of July 27th, and went touring the streets of this lively capital of the north-western province of the same name. There was a busy street and bar atmosphere in the popular commercial area around the bus terminal, which got quieter as we approached the center of town. Attracted by the lights, we stopped at a great billiard room, full of mostly male customers around a dozen billiard tables. Most of them were ostensibly chewing coca, as they silently played billiards. We were lured in by this atmosphere – totally surprising for Félix – where chewing coca in public didn’t seem to carry any sort of prejudice or social shame. The saloon was quite spacious and had high ceilings with fans and neon lights. The billiard tables were distributed in two adjacent rooms. In groups of two to five, these *jujeño* noctambules were concentrated in the precision of the billiard game, and were chewing coca leaves as the most natural thing in the world. We noted that consumption seemed to be a strictly individual affair. Nobody invited coca to anybody else, and every once in a while, they took some *bica* (sodium bicarbonate) or *lipta* (alkaline substance made from ashes of plants) from special containers and added it to the wad, in order to reinforce the flavour and the strength of the leaves, which were notoriously

held in their cheeks. Nobody “chewed” the leaves but they kept the coca wad (*bolo* or *akusi*) in the mouth for hours, gently turning it around and sucking it.

The images I registered of these noctambule jujeños playing billiards and chewing coca leaves, gave us a first appreciation of a masculine and nocturnal scenario in which the habitual consumption of coca leaves took place. The clients and the bartenders of this saloon, located in the centre of the city, were using coca leaves in a classic form: as a mild stimulant to keep a lucid mind and to avoid drowsiness and fatigue. Although a few of the billiard players were smoking cigarettes, it was mostly the people seated around the tables who were smoking, as well as parsimoniously drinking locally produced alcoholic beverages such as ginebra, beer and wine, or imported ones, such as whisky. When we left, it was past two in the morning. The atmosphere was still lively and the concentration of the billiard players had not diminished. No doubt, many of them would stay up until sunrise.

The interview at the journal *El Pregón* in the morning of Monday 31, as well as the long conversation we had with members of the CTA (Argentinian Central Union of Workers) in the previous afternoon, confirmed the dissemination of the habit of *coqueo* in different contexts, such as the workplace or union meetings. Male and female reporters at the newspaper headquarters used to chew the leaves while working, and they paused for a while in their daily duties to chat with us, after we had been interviewed by a woman journalist, an interview which was to be published with big titles and two photographs in the central pages of the journal. It is worth noting the naturality with which coca leaf chewing was represented in photography. One of the photos showed a woman from the Puna, with her child putting a coca leaf in her mouth, and the other portrayed Félix taking coca leaves from his *ch'uspa* (a hand woven coca leaf bag) and giving them to me.¹⁰ After the interview, as the photographer received the leaves that Félix

¹⁰ *El Pregón*, August 2, 2001, p. 6, “Cocaleros de Bolivia miran con esperanza a Jujuy” (Bolivian Cocaleros have great hopes in Jujuy). The CTA interview and the visit to *El Pregón* have been edited into the video *Las Fronteras de la Coca*.

invited him, he put his hands together in a cup, as is usually done in traditional Andean etiquette. “Do you usually receive the coca leaves like this?” – I asked. “Yes, of course. It is a matter of respect”, he answered. Three other journalists, who were in front of the screens of their computers, took out their bags or boxes for coca leaves, to receive the handfuls invited by Félix. One had recycled an old tobacco box, lining it with a blue plastic bag to keep his leaves fresh. “It is really good, is it from the Yungas?” – he asked Félix. “From Coripata”, he answered proudly. A woman journalist summarized the ambiguities between law and common practice:

I don't know in which law, but there is an article that allows coca leaf chewing, no problem. But what happens? That it is allowed in Salta and Jujuy, but not in the rest of the country. My brother-in-law travels a lot, he goes to Buenos Aires and elsewhere. He wants to die when he goes out of the province because, if they catch him with half a kilo of coca leaves, he goes to jail. Just for carrying coca leaves he can go to jail. To jail!! Because they don't know that there is a little piece, a little article in the law that permits *coqueo* (Collective interview, journal *El Pregón*, 30 July, 2001, see video annex, *Las Fronteras de la Coca*).

This information is actually inaccurate, since Law 23737 is a Federal Law and therefore it has decriminalized coca-leaf possession and consumption throughout the entire country. Yet the ideas of the jujeño journalist reveal a lot about the political economy of the coca-leaf trade, marked by cultural valorizations and perceived obstacles which are enforced by *habitus* more than by actual legal restrictions (cf. Bourdieu 1991a). This is surely the reason why, as one goes further south, prices increase astronomically. A kiosk owner in Jujuy, who worked in one of the busiest streets downtown, said that in Catamarca and Córdoba (cities further south, midway to Buenos Aires) coca leaves cost 70 pesos per kilo (from 70 to US\$40, depending on the exchange rate), which compared to Bolivian prices imply a 500% to 800% price increase.

The intensity, geographical scope and seriousness of the prohibition were object of a series of speculations along our

conversations with various jujeño taxi-drivers, bartenders and store clerks in our walks through the city. During the interview with members of the CTA, journalist Raúl Noro, correspondent of *La Nación* (one of the main journals of Buenos Aires), gave us a postcard where the relevant paragraphs of Federal Law 23737 were printed:

Art. 15: The possession and consumption of coca leaves in natural form, as an habitual practice of *coqueo* or chewing, or as coca leaf tea, will not be regarded as possession or consumption of drugs. Federal Law 23737 was sanctioned on the 21st of September, 1989, approved on the 10th of October, 1989, in application of Art. 70 of the National Constitution and published in the Official Bulletin as of 11 October 1989 (translation mine).

Carrying this postcard, which had been printed by the National Congress in August 1994, the consumers who wished to travel outside the provinces where *coqueo* was a tolerated habit, could use it to support their legal rights as consumers, in case the police would try to arrest them, as the brother-in-law of the journalist of *El Pregón* feared. The information about the law was an important way to cope with long established prejudices and misconceptions about the legal status of coca in Argentina, although for us it also left unanswered the paradox involved in the decriminalization of consumption and possession, while at the same time, the ban on transportation and commercialization of bulk coca leaves through the border was left untouched. It was no secret that the illegal crossing of the border carries a lot of risk of abuse, but it seems to criminalize the Bolivian retailers and wholesalers more than their Argentinean counterparts. When in La Quiaca we even had the chance to see a *gendarme* chewing coca leaves, but we were unable to record his image. People told us that the *gendarmes* stationed at the border receive bribes to let the leaf pass, and that they usually resell the confiscated amounts in the retail stores of the cities and towns further south. I was also told that the *gendarmería* incinerates coca leaves every now and then, with big coverage in the press, as a way to publicly show the zeal of the agents in “enforcing the law” (interview with Zacarías Gutiérrez, La Quiaca, August 7th, 2001). It thus seems that

crossing the border with coca leaves implies special risks for stigmatized populations, such indigenous and mestizo merchants from Bolivia, or jujeño peasants from the Quebrada and the high altitude Puna. Anthropologist Mercedes Costa, a resident in Maymara, a small town in the road to Tilcara, told us that a few years ago a baby had been killed, stabbed in the back bundle (*q'ipi*) of her mother, by a policeman who thought it was a hidden bulk of coca leaves (interview with Mercedes Costa, Maymara, August 3, 2001).

On the night of July 31 we were invited to the restaurant *Manos Jujeñas*, whose owner, “Negra” Cabanas, is a middle-aged woman from La Quiaca, of Bolivian descent. It is one of the best typical restaurants in Jujuy, where one can eat hot stews of a mixed Bolivian-Puneño origin while folk music is being played by the best local performers and groups. That night was special, because it was the eve of the *pachamama* (earth deity) festivities, and the ceremony of the *ch'alla* (offerings and libations) was announced. What followed was a conspicuous representation of the nocturnal modernity of Northern Argentina, a mix of invented traditions, vague memories of a pre-capitalist past, and a host of unrecognized debts to the rural Andean cultures at both sides of the border. The *ch'alla* to the Pachamama (Andean earth deity) consisted in burying food while expressing desires and prayers with beer or wine on a big earthen pot filled with soil. Then everybody offered coca leaves covering the buried food, and offered cigarettes to smoke and share with the Andean gods. Variations of this type of ceremony in honour of the *pachamama* are held throughout Jujuy and Salta during the month of August.

This setting is by no means contradictory to what we saw in Salta, one hour distance by bus from Jujuy. As we were walking through the commercial streets downtown, we were surprised to see painted signs and posters, and even neon signs advertising the leaf. “Don’t tell anybody. Coca, Export Type. Selected, *Despalillada* (Stalked), Common”. The poster also announced candy, beverages and cigarettes. Another big store, called Ke Koka, offered all types of coca leaves at different prices, in packages from one ounce to a quarter kilo, 24 hours a day. In its

logo, the letters E, O and A were designed as coca leaves, with a big luminous display that could be seen from afar, together with a Coca-Cola advertisement. Another sign at the door of a store, said: "Selected Coca leaves. Bolivian Bica" (sodium bicarbonate). Further on, at the San Silvestre store, which had branches in other cities, there was a neon sign with the design of green coca leaves over a blue backdrop with its logo. In all these stores, the product was dispensed in special sealed and printed plastic bags. The Secus and Ke Koka stores had stickers with the store's logo and handsome designs with green coca leaves. The San Silvestre store had their plastic bags printed with its logo and a big coca leaf in the upper corner, and the addresses of its various branches below. It was, no doubt, a wholesale store, which also supplied leaves to other retailers and had importation deals directly at the border, only 6-8 hours away. The fanciest kind of package included a bag of sodium bicarbonate or *llipta*, which came along with the selected *despalillada* variety. This is a special and more expensive leaf, where the stalk has been cut out to avoid hurting the mucous tissues of the mouth. A habitual chewer would do this by hand as he or she puts the leaves in the mouth, but the *despalillada* would save one this "effort". The display and packaging of the different varieties of coca leaves reveal the various styles and etiquettes of chewing, as well as the preferences of *connoisseur* consumers. This is also the case with handcrafted leather bags for carrying the leaves, or little cases made of horn or silver, which are used to carry sodium bicarbonate or *llipta*. All of these items are very popular in the artisanal markets of Salta and Jujuy.

Far from the center of town in Salta, we also discovered a street market where women from Bolivia were sitting on precarious benches behind wooden boxes, on top of which they displayed ritual items such as alcohol, coca leaves and a variety of *lliptas*, all produced in Bolivia. The coca leaves were already packed in green plastic bags containing as little as a quarter of an ounce, to as much as one ounce. It was a type of small scale retail market for ritual consumption, where coca leaves are used to do the *t'inkas* or *ch'allas* (coca leaf offerings and libations invoking mountain spirits) of August. For a while we walked through the

place, and met some customers, all of them of modest appearance, probably Bolivian migrants and workers who had to pay the August offerings and share some coca leaves with friends or relatives. They usually chose one ounce bags, at a much lower price than in the retail stores of the busy commercial area: 1 peso per ounce of what seemed to be a small or *taki* variety of a slightly lower quality.

In contrast, the retail stores owned by established entrepreneurs from Salta, charged from 2 to 2.50 pesos for an ounce of *taki* leaves, 3 pesos for the selected (big and regular) leaves and up to 4 pesos for the *despalillada*, of which the stalks had been removed. The later usually included a small amount of *bica*, and it is worth noting that Bolivian sodium bicarbonate seemed to have a reputation for good quality, as was advertised in one of the street signs. At the top price of 4 per ounce, the selected and stalked leaves could reach a price of 138 pesos per kilo (at that time, US\$138), more than ten times the price of the best quality selected leaves available at the ADEPCOCA market in La Paz.

That evening we went to a folkloric restaurant (*peña*) located in one of the most centric and busy streets of Salta. Three out of four tables showed customers chewing coca leaves, some with sodium bicarbonate and others with *lejía* or *llipta*. As in the billiard saloon in Jujuy, the style of *coqueo* was modern, individualistic, and its etiquette showed the habit of connoisseurs. Nobody really “chew” the leaves, and the big coca leaf wads were shown bulky in the cheeks, slowly turned around and supplemented with alkaline substances or more leaves. In one of the tables we had a brief dialogue with a blonde salteña woman, who happened to be a high official of the *Dirección de Prevención de Adicciones* (Bureau for the Prevention of Addictions). While she skilfully mixed the leaves with sodium bicarbonate, she mentioned Law 23737 that decriminalizes *coqueo*, and referred to its current experimental use by local physicians in the treatment of addictions to tobacco, cocaine hydrochloride and cocaine base, a therapy that has successfully been introduced two decades ago by Bolivian psychiatrist Jorge Hurtado.¹¹

¹¹ There is an updated English translation of his original 1987 contribution about this issue (Hurtado 1995).

The ground floor of the *peña* was full of people. The teams of *coqueadores* were more variegated, and although in general there were more men than women, it was equally frequent to see them involved in *coqueo*. One image could symbolise the type of consumer market we were witnessing. On a table, a good looking woman in her thirties had put her cell phone, the keys to her car and a green bag of coca leaves. There was also a glass of wine and a dish with sodium bicarbonate. To us, she seemed the perfect modern consumer, an independent professional or upscale bureaucrat, who was enjoying herself alone and visibly at ease in this night of partying and live music.

Next day we travelled to the Concert of the Mountain, in a natural amphitheater carved by water currents on the red rock, on the way to Cafayate, the southernmost town of the Salta province. The scenario was awesome, and it served as an acoustical shell to an extraordinary music concert, where both folklore of the Argentinean North and classical music were played by various groups, including a chamber orchestra from Germany. *Coqueo* was widespread in the public. Among the music groups there were many that played Bolivian genres such as the *waynu*, the *kacharpaya* and the carnival dances of Oruro. This sort of “appropriation” of Bolivian music would have bothered more than one among the chauvinist members of the Bolivian elite. To us, the fact that a group from Buenos Aires was playing *Señora Chichera*, the *Diablada* (Devil’s Dance) or *Ojos Azules*, emblematic pieces of Bolivian folklore, did not seem a “cultural theft”¹² but rather an evidence of the expansive and hegemonic potential of the Andean culture, in the context of a crisis ridden country whose

¹² The case of the Devil’s Dance, performed by a group in La Quiaca and studied by Gabriela Karasik, is only one of many examples in which “cultural theft” is used as an argument to reinforce frontiers that are culturally fluid but administratively rigid. The paradox here is that the group members are sons and daughters of Bolivian migrants. In turn, nationalist elites in the Jujuy have considered the Devil’s Dance as a “cultural invasion” from Bolivia (see Karasik 2000). Fantasies about purity and authenticity regarding Bolivian music are in sharp contrast to the universality of *coqueo*, that easily adapts itself to the construed identities of all sorts of consumers.

links with Europe have only served to create a distorted mirror of the West. And there, invariably, along with *empanadas* (meat pies) and *locro* (a local stew), wine and *ginebra*, coca leaves were consumed by a variety of people, from hippie artisans to university professors, bohemians and music lovers from the intellectual elite of Salta. Among them there were many survivors of the military dictatorships that had caused so many disappearances and deaths in the seventies. In this culturally and politically charged environment, coca leaf chewing had become a symbol of invented traditions and identities that had both emotional and political connotations, connecting modern markets with deeply felt memories and motley cultural practices.

The inclusion of “*sahumerio*”¹³ or *misa dulce* (sweet mass or table) in the *pachamama* ceremonies currently performed in Salta and Jujuy seems to have spread only recently, through influences from the Bolivian Altiplano of Oruro and Potosí. Yet, the burial of food and coca is linked to local rituals by the indigenous dwellers of the Puna. The ritual practices that were previously confined to the isolated and discriminated communities of “muleteers, herdsmen and weavers”, that folk narrator Fausto Burgos described in the twenties, have now come down to the cities and expanded transculturally. At the Jujuy market it was quite impressive to see how many *misas* of various sizes were being sold from 1 to 10 pesos (US\$1-10 at the time). Similar *misas* in La Paz are much cheaper and bigger, but their symbolic contents remain the same, though in tiny scale. The street and market trade of *sahumerios* and other ritual items is intense by the end of July and throughout the month of August, a period that is called *laka phaxsi* in aymara, i.e. the month when the mouths of the earth are hungry and open. The *pachamama* rituals have been expanding due to the general wave or revitalization of cultural

¹³ Sahumerio (from the Spanish verb *sahumar*) is an offering to be burnt, and the smoke carries the scents of herbs, sweets, untu or llama lard and many symbolic items, to the heights of the mountain Gods. The sweet *misa* or *mesa* (mass or table) is a preparation of sweets, coca and other herbs, and many ritual and symbolic items which are burnt on special occasions to propitiate good fortune, abundant crops or health.

expressions by both local and migrant populations. Along with coca leaves, an intense and somewhat hidden import trade of ritual items from Bolivia (including llama foetuses, llama lard and others) is flourishing, and the demand for authenticity still favours the shamanic and ritualistic knowledge of Bolivian traders.

REFLECTIONS IN THE MIRROR OF A BORDERLINE

Non ritual contexts, such as the ones described in a Jujuy journal, were almost lacking from our ethnography. Some spaces were inaccessible to us for a first hand ethnographic observation (and video recording), such as the Provincial House of Representatives, public or private clinics and hospitals and the Judicial Courts, for which we needed special permits that were not easy to obtain. But the evidence pointed out to the normality of *coqueo* in such contexts, both among elite officers and doctors and rank and file employees, much as the coffee break has been universally established in other urban and modern contexts. And while sharing the leaves is a usual practice in rituals that form the core of the invented or re-elaborated traditions that we described above, the individualized form of consumption is dominant among all the professional strata, both male and female, who chew in public and in their workplaces. This is in sharp contrast to Bolivia, where it would be unthinkable to find public employees, judges or medical doctors chewing coca-leaves during work hours (even if they like *akhulliku* in private). And in the Parliamentary sessions, only the representatives of the MAS (Movimiento Al Socialismo), or the MIP (Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti), would consume the leaves in public, in a defiant political gesture which is consistent with their ideological position and background.¹⁴

Another important group of consumers in the North of Argentina are the drivers who work in the private or public transportation

¹⁴ The MAS (Movement to Socialism) has become the second electoral force in the national elections of 2002. The MIP (Pachakuti Indian Movement) is a smaller party from the aymara Altiplano of La Paz, led by Felipe Quispe, the Executive Secretary of the CSUTCB (the main peasant confederation of the country). They control 35 and 6, respectively, of the 105 congressional seats.

system. This is not uncommon in Bolivia, a country famous for its bad and dangerous roads, where *akhulliku* serves bus and truck drivers to stay alert and avoid falling asleep after long hours on the road. But bus and truck drivers in Bolivia are generally part of a population of discriminated urban *cholo* strata of Andean origin, whereas the *criollo* or westernized mestizo drivers would seldom be seen in public with a coca-*jach'u* or wad in their cheeks. In contrast, bus and taxi drivers of all social strata in Northern Argentina would admit chewing coca leaves during their work hours, either to ease drowsiness and fatigue or because they had gastritis, ulcers or other ailments for which coca leaves are recommended as part of both the biomedical and the tradicional farmacopaea.

But perhaps the most evident contrast between Bolivia and the North of Argentina regarding the normality of coca-leaf chewing can be found among the media people. In the North of Argentina, journalists of newspapers or radio stations are champions of *coqueo*, and perhaps it is their personal experience with the habit that allows for a more balanced representation of the issue in their articles or reporting. But in the journals of La Paz or Cochabamba, the press rooms would be full of cigarette smoke and a journalist would seldom be seen chewing coca leaves. The Bolivian press is thoroughly censored, and it readily supports government and US campaigns against *cocaleros* (coca leaf producers) and their product. Prejudices are generalized among government officials, but journalists do not seem aware of the distorted information they are helping to spread. The stereotyped perceptions of the Bolivian elite are in sharp contrast with the attitude by public figures and journalists in Salta and Jujuy, who have first hand experience of the effects of coca-leaf chewing.

The undergraduate and graduate students in Salta and Jujuy are also an important sector among the practitioners of *coqueo*. While giving talks and courses in the public universities of both cities (1998), I had the chance to observe the normality of *coqueo* among students, during and after classes. Many of them also carried to the classrooms the much bigger and ostentatious implements that are used to drink *yerba mate*, the stimulant herb

discovered by *guarani* peoples in pre-hispanic America.¹⁵ In Bolivia the use of coca leaves among university students is quite usual as well, but since the social shame is still strong, the contexts for *akhulliku* are much less visible. Only in the southernmost capital city of Tarija (perhaps due to Argentinean influence), I have seen students chewing coca leaves during class hours. In La Paz and Cochabamba, it is only recently that a few spots such as *peñas* and cafés, frequented by students, are offering coca leaves. In Cochabamba, as *cocalero* demands have become a public and political issue of general appeal to the public (especially after the “water war” of April 2000), coca-leaf chewing by university students has become an activity of both recreational and political implications. “First Friday” ceremonies (*ch’alla* and libations to the *pachamama*, held on the first Friday of each month) and graffiti in defence of coca leaves are now common in the streets and *chicherías* (bars where maize beer is sold) of Cochabamba and around the university. But we are still far from the normality of *coqueo* that we saw among youth in Salta and Jujuy.

Changes in the composition of demand were already mentioned in the study by Rabey (1989), the most notable being the expansion of *coqueo* to the female and younger population. As a female union leader in the CTA meeting stated: “Before, it was not a good thing to be seen in public chewing coca, if you were a woman. Today it is “normal” (Collective interview, CTA, Jujuy, August 31, 2001). On the other hand, its use among youngsters in the late years of adolescence and early youth is slowly expanding, although *coqueo* has to compete with other preferences and tastes which have more appeal and bring the illusion of the world coming closer to them (from video games to “designer” drugs). The slow process of learning how to chew coca leaves and their strange taste make it difficult for children or young adolescents to take up

¹⁵ As in the case of coca leaves, yerba mate saw an impressive colonial expansion to a vast internal market (that included today’s Brasil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina); but unlike coca leaves, there was never a “black legend” about yerba mate, and presently it is being freely exported to the world market for natural remedies and stimulants.

the habit, and in fact, constitute a barrier for its universalization.¹⁶ But the paranoid attitude towards “drugs” that is prevalent in the West, as well as the “manufactured consensus” (Chomsky) fabricated by the press and the crusaders of the War on Drugs have blurred elementary distinctions and changed the public common sense to the extreme of sheer ignorance.

It seems that the cultural and cognitive gap involved in mythical commodities coming from the South has only widened since the times of Freud and Mantegazza, in spite (or perhaps because) of the speed and intensity of communication flows. In the global village, the intensity of prejudice and the flow of misinformation have done their part in obscuring the nature of this commodity and in erasing its modern history as a mercantile fuel of post-colonial internal and interregional relations. The coca leaf boom in Northern Argentina sits upon a dense texture of shared beliefs that permeate labour relations in modern capitalist enterprises as well as the more general sociality involved in entertainment and leisure activities. I hope that this paper has helped to clarify some of the broader theoretical and political issues involved in these relations, showing how the economic processes to which they give rise are deeply embedded in a network of symbolic and cultural meanings, but also of uneven relations of power, which share a shifting and dynamic nature. The ethnography of a consumption market presented here has allowed me to reflect upon the permeability and flexibility of Andean cultural practices, and to discover their hegemonic potential in the modern scenarios of industrial capitalism and globalized urban cultures. Coca leaf consumption in these contexts has bridged frontiers of class, nationality and culture, in spite of the rigid barriers imposed by world-wide prohibition, in a local context marked by an international borderline. The situations described here have helped us to reveal not only the economic

¹⁶ It is usual that beginners, not knowing how to combine the coca leaves with llipta or sodium bicarbonate, will cause excessive salivation or irritate the mucous membranes of the mouth, even producing blisters when not doing it properly. I know of people who have abandoned the attempt after one or two experiences of this sort.

importance of the Argentinean market for the “traditional, licit uses” of the coca leaf (as Art. 14 of the Vienna Convention states), but also to give some historical and contemporary evidence of the long term processes of mercantile intercultural exchange involved in the expansion of the demand. The tacit knowledge that consumers have about the coca leaf as a sort of social fuel in interethnic relations is a key aspect in the political economy of this quasi-legal commodity, and might help us to understand the peculiarities of the market, not only as a space for the circulation and exchange of commodities, but also as a cultural arena for the negotiation of identities and for the interplay of complex and utterly uneven relations of power and domination.

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