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Current Challenges in Multiculturalism: Effects and Possibilities following the Consolidation of the Politics of Difference throughout Latin America

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More than three decades have passed since a set of changes in the political arena drew the attention of academics around the world. The core of the turn related to the politicization of cultural differences, especially in regards to social mobilization, the transformation and emergence of state institutions and multilateral organizations, and the importance of scholarly studies dealing with the social production of alterities, to mention only a few of the most outstanding features. This global concern about multiculturalism and the policies related to its production and administration have been gathered together under the label of multiculturalism.

Despite broad interest in multiculturalism at the onset of the 21st century, its centrality for the academy has declined even as the project has consolidated in the political mobilizations and institutions. In the Latin American context, it has been mostly linked to policies mobilized by Indigenous peoples or deployed upon them by states. Additionally, Afrodescendant, rural, and even urban scholars and organizations have resorted to claims expressed in culturalist and collective rights. What initially seemed to be a continuation of state policies towards Indigenous

peoples is now presented as a commonsensical way to express political demands from various sectors of the population.

Rather than establishing a radical distinction about what multiculturalism is, we believe that we need to understand it as a heterogeneous project expressed in different ways. Indeed, we are witnessing a process of substantial transformation in politics whereby cultural difference and the arguments sustaining the legitimacy of political action are increasingly distinct from those that were central at other times in history. It is also possible to assert that political subjects and practices that were understood as socially and institutionally legitimate are not understood the same way they were a few decades ago. Therefore, it is worth asking about the effects and the horizons of political mobilization at the present time.

In specific cases, like the Colombian one, collective rights to land and the legal recognition of ethnic governments mean in practice that Indigenous populations perform roles that have traditionally been restricted to states, such as the administration of a judicial system, exercising territorial control, or administering the national budget. By adopting these new roles, traditional authorities, who in the past often led organizational and mobilization processes to confront the state, find themselves in an unprecedented situation: they organize themselves and struggle as a social movement, while they are performing roles of the state in their own territories.

Increasingly, in various countries of the region Afrodescendant populations claim rights similar to those that states have recognized for Indigenous populations. For the most part, these claims do not enjoy the same institutional treatment, although there have been advances in the issuance of norms regarding the collective protection of territories. Additionally, non-racialized peasant sectors, which are recognized as mestizos, demand equal treatment that would allow for the protection of their lands and similar attention from the state as subjects of rights.

The manifold expressions of multiculturalism raise questions about the effects of these new forms of political organization. In this regard, we are interested in studies analyzing the scope, tensions, and possibilities of ethnic governments confronting the rise of extractivism, both legal and illegal. We are also interested in studies focusing on the analysis of tensions stemming from the expansion of illicit economies in territories governed by ethnic authorities and the relations with state agencies and law enforcement when it comes to resolving these conflicts. We are also interested in critical studies on conflicts that are analyzed and expressed in culturalist terms (such as “inter-ethnic” or “intercultural conflicts”).

Even though multiculturalism has gained visibility by bringing historically subalternized populations to the fore, it is necessary to widen the scope asking about its manifestations in places traditionally unrelated to the culturalist view. Here we might ask, for instance, about multiculturalism operates among elites, state institutions, or the expansion of market niches that conceive of alterity as an object to be consumed. It is also urgent to analyze the relations between the institutionalization of multiculturalism and shifts in racial formations and expressions of racism throughout Latin America. We need to study culturalism as a new expression of racial thinking along with how it relates to the production of new privileges emerging and sustained by this project.

Changes in government throughout the region in the last few years range from progressive popular articulations associated with the political left to neoconservative projects linked to traditional right-wing trends. In these shifting national settings, political mobilizations demanding recognition through cultural difference face new challenges. One of those challenges is related to the possibilities and limits of a politics of cultural difference to contribute to or participate in wide-ranging projects that include other kinds of political subjects. As seen here, multiculturalism can be analyzed through a wide spectrum of phenomena. This call for papers seeks critical studies that contribute to how we understand the production of new subjectivities, forms of government, institutions, and conflicts that reveal the effects and challenges of the consolidation of politics that appeal to claiming cultural difference.

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