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'TIPNIS SOMOS TODOS': DISCOURSE OF INDIGENOUSNESS WITHIN AND BEYOND A NATIONAL CIVIL SPHERE

ABSTRACT
This paper explores the intersection of indigeneity, environmental conflicts, and global solidarities. Adopting a theoretical framework from the Strong Program of Cultural Sociology, this research examines how indigenous groups contesting environmental threats invoke a deep structure of discourse to cultivate solidarity beyond their communities at national and international levels. The TIPNIS (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro-Sécure) conflict, where lowland Indigenous groups marched against a state-backed highway project, serves as a case study. Employing a hermeneutic approach, this study analyzes 160 op-eds and editorials from Bolivian newspapers, revealing how public discourse framed indigenous resistance within a collectivist, pro-environmental, and non-liberal moral structure. The findings contribute to understanding how the *Indigenous Sphere* interacts with and challenges frameworks of democracy and solidarity.

KEYWORDS
Indigenous peoples, Environmental Conflicts, Democracy, Cultural Sociology, Bolivia

Introduction

The rise of indigenous political movements in the world has challenged traditional state structures, redefining nationhood and sovereignty. In Bolivia, this transformation was epitomized by Evo Morales, elected in 2006 as the country's first 'Indigenous president' (Sivak 2010). Morales promoted the transformation of Bolivia from a republic into a Plurinational State, officially recognizing 36 Indigenous nations. This moment in Bolivia's history marked what some called the emergence of a new *Indigenous State* (Postero 2017). Morales embodied the discourse of indigeneity[1] and was widely regarded as "a symbol of fight and hope" (Exeni 2006) in a country with a long history of indigenous exclusion.

1 In this paper, I use Indigenousness and Indigeneity interchangeably, acknowledging that their usage varies across academic literature and that their translation into other languages can be complex. While 'Indigeneity' often highlights relational and socio-political

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However, this vision of an indigenous-led government was challenged in 2011 when lowland indigenous groups marched to La Paz to protest a road project that would cut through the Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS). This clash was not merely a confrontation between the state and Indigenous actors but a deeper tension within indigeneity itself—between its role in governance and its resistance to state-driven developmentalism. The project had been approved without the legally required Free, Prior, and Informed Consultation. The conflict exposed a fundamental contradiction: How was indigeneity interpreted when the very notion of an Indigenous State faced resistance from Indigenous-led activism?

This paradox reveals a deeper theoretical question about the role of nation-states in shaping democratic inclusion. Historically, nation-states have been the primary arbiters of incorporation, yet their frameworks of belonging can also impose limits on inclusion, particularly for indigenous peoples. Through the lens of Civil Sphere Theory (CST), the language of civil solidarity—central to democratizing efforts of repair—is often essentialized by specific historical and geographical contexts (Alexander 2006:195-202). Nation-states construct national identities that frequently rely on exclusionary logics, where citizenship, nationalism, and statehood become mechanisms of both inclusion and marginalization. In this sense, *nativism* has emerged as a major challenge to democracy, fueling struggles against immigrants and marginalized groups worldwide (Abidde, Hall, and Da Cruz 2024; Duyvendak, Kesic, and Stacey 2022). If nation-states remain the dominant arbiters of inclusion, can universalistic solidarity extend beyond the boundaries of state-driven civil spheres?

This paper extends Civil Sphere Theory (CST) by proposing the existence of an international framework centered on historically marginalized indigenous groups. Unlike national civil spheres, which can be constrained by state-driven discourses of belonging, this *Indigenous Sphere* advances universal democratic demands for solidarity while simultaneously asserting local particularistic claims. For instance, indigeneity often invokes the protection of "Mother Earth," promoting a global ethic of environmental stewardship while emphasizing indigenous communities' specific ties to their lands.

A key factor driving the growing prominence of this discourse is climate change, which has become central to international debates (Aykut, Foyer, and Morena 2017; Gray 1990; Hays 2000). Historically, indigenous populations have focused on defending their rights and resources within their territories. Today, however, they have gained visibility in the global media, mobilizing broader support for their causes. Unlike nativism, which often seeks to exclude, indigeneity fosters unity across groups, welcoming non-Indigenous allies regardless of race or origin in the collective struggle against environmental degradation.

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dimensions, and 'Indigenousness' tends to convey a more essentialist perspective, my focus here is on reconstructing an ideational cultural structure of discourse about Indigenous peoples. Ultimately, my aim is to examine how Indigenous discourse is framed and interpreted, and these words help me refer to this process.

To explore this framework, we examine the Bolivian case—specifically, the TIPNIS conflict—as a site where the Indigenous Sphere and national political structures intersect. Through a hermeneutic reconstruction of indigenous discourse, we analyze how the march was *interpreted* within competing discourses of indigeneity.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section outlines the theoretical foundations of the civil and non-civil spheres. The second section defines the Indigenous Sphere and its characteristics. The third section situates Indigenous discourse within Bolivia's historical context. The fourth section introduces environmental conflicts, the TIPNIS case, and the methodological approach. The fifth section presents our primary research findings. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the broader implications of this framework.

The Civil Sphere and non-civil spheres

The civil sphere is a distinct, autonomous, and morally universal sphere in direct interaction with other non-civil spheres (Alexander 2006). The relationship between the civil sphere and non-civil spheres is characterized by tension and instability. Three typical-ideal forms of these boundaries determine their interaction: facilitating inputs, destructive intrusions, and civil repair (Alexander 2006: 205). While the functions of non-civil spheres such as the economy or religion contribute to societal plurality, it is the civil sphere that introduces the capacity for social criticism to uphold the normative ideals of democratic societies. This binary coding sustains solidarity and justice by protecting against contamination and threats to these ideals (Alexander 2019). Alexander asserts the existence of a symbolic realm constituting an independent sphere of justice and universal solidarity (Alexander 2006).

This study aligns with this perspective, focusing on discourses and deep meaning structures rather than organizational frameworks. In this sense, scholars have examined how the sphere of universal solidarity coexists with *non-civil structures shaping democratic life*. Civil Sphere Theory provides insights into how actors define the civil and anti-civil dynamically (Jijón 2018). Scholars have identified and analyzed the mobilization of non-civil conceptions of democracy, particularly in response to political conflicts, and their role in contesting legitimate definitions of social life.

The *patrimonial discourse*, for example, has been extensively explored in Mexico, addressing historical moments such as the critical year 1994 in Mexican politics and scandals involving former president Enrique Peña Nieto's residence (Arteaga and Arzuaga 2018; Arteaga 2022; Arteaga and Mejía 2024). In Brazil, during its democratic transition, Baiocchi (2006) contrasts a *corporate code* with the liberal code. In Colombia, the *hacienda discourse* (opposed to the liberal) and the code of violence serve as central frameworks for understanding social and cultural life in this country (Rudas 2019; Tognato 2011). Similarly, the *militant revolutionary code*, emphasizing collective mobilization, sacrifice, and loyalty to revolutionary ideals, has been identified in Cuba through analysis of

the blogosphere (Martínez 2018), in Venezuela through the examination of the middle class (Villegas 2018), and in Colombia during its transition from war to peace in university contexts (Tognato 2019). Proposals for alternative non-civil spheres in Asia have also been discussed elsewhere (Alexander et al. 2019).

The Indigenous Sphere

Building on the importance of non-civil cultural structures, I highlight scholars who have called for understanding alternative justice frameworks within Andean and Amazonian communities (Jijón 2018: 235) and distinctions between Western and non-Western traditions in societies with significant indigenous populations (Tognato 2019). More recently, Ray and Jimmie (2025) have argued that there are multiple Indigenous Civil Spheres with their own institutions, using the case of self-government in the Nicola Valley, Canada. It is important to emphasize that indigenous groups/nations have their own institutions, languages, and systems of knowledge. While some might share similarities with other indigenous groups, their historical trajectories, particularly their interactions with colonization, shape their contemporary demands and practices of self-determination. However, rather than focusing solely on localized space-time, this article examines how indigeneity has solidified as a global or transnational structure of discourse, promoting solidarities that articulate or contest liberal practices at an international scale.

This discourse of indigeneity at times advances universalistic aspirations for solidarity, particularly when the nation-state essentializes the boundaries of inclusion. In this way, it contrasts with the expected fragmenting consequences of nationalistic civil spheres (Alexander 2006: 197-199). Despite decades of efforts toward multicultural incorporation, pressures for homogeneity persist, revealing how democracy, as an ongoing process, continually grapples with particularistic tendencies. Alternative international frameworks, such as the *Indigenous Sphere*, emerge in response, extending solidarities beyond the limits of state-driven incorporation.

The contemporary discourse of indigeneity can be understood as an international indigeneity that bridges the local with the universal while distinguishing itself from ethnic particularism. Its origins lie in international legal frameworks related to the protection of Indigenous rights and self-determination (Niezen 2003). This shift represents an international imagined community in which "the Indigenous" has become a transnational identity uniting disparate groups around shared political struggles (Johnson 2002: 310). Mackay (2022) emphasizes that this process has contributed to the formation of a shared and generalizable indigenous thought structure or at least an extensive collaboration of knowledge-building (Mackay 2022: 3). Other scholars highlight how indigenous organizations strategically appropriate liberal principles and frame their claims within international human rights discourse (Samson and Gigoux 2017: 153). However, this contemporary indigeneity is neither a singular way of being Indigenous shared by all Indigenous peoples nor a purely contested

and fragmented identity. Instead, it serves as a referential cultural structure, a conjoint ideational framework through which Indigenous peoples of the world articulate their collective demands, what Dahl (2012) describes as indigenous "peoples" in the plural.

This indigeneity/indigenousness established in an international sphere have consolidated within institutions such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and other global indigenous advocacy networks. These institutionalized actors, which scholars have described as the Global Indigenous Movement Network, gained momentum starting in the second part of the previous century (Roca-Sánchez 2025). In this sense, we propose to read contemporary indigeneity as a cultural structure that matters for both indigenous and non-indigenous groups worldwide. This Indigenous Sphere occupies a distinct position from previously studied non-civil spheres. It lies at the intersection of universal aspirations—such as international law and environmentalism—and the "primordial ties" of local beliefs and land belonging. This interplay allows the Indigenous Sphere to promote a vision of solidarity that ranges from highly particularistic local struggles to broad universalizing demands. This ideational cultural system of indigeneity thus exists in a continuum between the universal democratic and the particularistic essentialized. Alexander (2006: 195) argued that "civil primordiality is a contradiction in terms" due to the conflicting universal and particularistic nature of the civil and the non-civil spheres. However, the Indigenous Sphere exemplifies the interplay of this contradiction, demonstrating how the universal and particular function in dynamic tension rather than mutual exclusion.

Indigeneity was long marginalized by nation-states, often perceived as an obstacle to modernity and democracy. Indigenous relationships with the land were seen as pre-modern, while alternative knowledge systems were dismissed as irrational, interpreted as a *destructive intrusion* to democratic ideals of civility. As a result, Indigenous demands were framed as a disruption to the civil sphere. At times, states selectively incorporated elements of indigeneity as a *facilitating input* to reinforce national identity, relegating it to folklore or cultural heritage while limiting its political significance (Bigenho and Stobart 2016: 151–54). However, the rise of transnational Indigenous movements has transformed indigeneity into a site of *repair* rather than exclusion. One of the central dynamics of this shift is the concept of "Mother Earth" or "Pachamama," which Lehmann (2022:133) describes as being mobilized in an "all-purpose manner", connecting Indigenous territorial struggles with global environmental concerns. This articulation extends beyond localized claims, characterizing indigeneity as inherently peaceful (Hristov 2005) or as an alternative to Western frameworks of knowledge (Mackay 2022). In the following, we will examine how these dynamics unfold in the Bolivian case, specifically through the TIPNIS conflict.

The Bolivian Civil Sphere and the Indigenous Sphere

The first significant effort of an independent civil sphere in Latin America started when indigenous rebellions challenged colonial domination in the late 18th century. Leaders such as Tupac Amaru in present-day Peru and Tomás Katari and Túpac Katari in present-day Bolivia envisioned a "new era" of communal sovereignty over territory and resources (Thomson 2016: 408). However, Bolivia's independence process in the early 19th century, rooted in Simón Bolívar's liberal discourse, ultimately excluded indigenous peoples from citizenship and relegated them to the margins of a "civilized space" (Platt 1993). When Bolivia was founded in 1825, citizenship was limited to literate men with property (Irurozqui 1999). Unlike nations where indigenous populations were decimated, Bolivia retained one of the largest indigenous populations globally (Irurozqui 2006; The World Bank 2015). Nevertheless, this demographic majority remained excluded from civil life (Villanueva 2019).

"Indigenismo" emerged in the early 20th century as part of debates on modernizing traditional societies. The central question was whether indigenous peoples could integrate into "modern civilization" (Stavenhagen 2002: 26). Indigenous populations were often viewed as a "problem" requiring assimilation into nationalist projects. Alcides Arguedas, a controversial Bolivian thinker, promoted social Darwinism, attributing the nation's "sickness" to its indigenous population (Arguedas 1909). This assimilative model required indigenous groups to erase their identities to participate in the nation (Alexander 2006: 429).

A more concrete approach to incorporating indigenous populations emerged after the Chaco War (1932–1935) against Paraguay. The National Revolution of 1952 initiated agrarian reform, universal suffrage, and mines nationalization. The Agrarian Reform Decree of 1953 declared that "the land belongs to those who work it." Indigenous groups were reframed as a "peasant class," reflecting Marxist perspectives. President Víctor Paz Estenssoro declared, "There are no longer any Indians, only campesinos" (Casen and Rundell 2012: 4). This mestizo-centric framework sought to eliminate discrimination and racism while fostering solidarity and citizenship (Rivera 2004). However, this effort represents a hyphenated incorporation model, blending identities into mestizaje (Alexander 2006: 432) without respecting their differences. At this point of history of Bolivia, indigenousness was considered as a *destructive intrusion* to the civil aspirations, so it needed to be eliminated or condensed with other identities.

In subsequent decades, responses to Revolutionary Nationalism gave rise to "Indianism" and "Katarism" movements. These emphasized not only economic or peasant concerns but also colonial structures of indigenous oppression. Indianism rejected nationalist and Marxist traditions, focusing instead on racialized relations and colonial perspectives on social issues (Escárzaga 2012: 192). This marked the delineation of an indigenous sphere. Beyond academic discourse, these movements manifested politically through parties such as the Indian Movement Tupaj Katari (MITKA) and the National Katarista Movement (MKN), led primarily by Aymara intellectuals (Mayorga 2005).

These movements sought not only recognition but also self-determination. In the 1990s, Felipe Quispe ("Mallku") reintroduced Indianism as Communitarian Indianism, envisioning communities as political bases and advocating for revolutionary Tupakatarism as an armed struggle against "colonized Bolivia." However, the ethnic and primordial tones of Indianism hindered its integration into national politics (Gamboa 2009; Mansilla 2014).

During the same period, Bolivia pursued multicultural incorporation within a neoliberal economic intersection. President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and Vice President Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, of Aymara origin, implemented state policies promoting intercultural education and indigenous language preservation (Viaña 2009). We can consider this as an initial state-led effort to interpret indigeneity as a *facilitating input* within the Bolivian civil sphere. However, structural inequalities persisted, marginalizing indigenous groups compared to non-indigenous populations. This context catalyzed an "indigenous awakening" (Chihuailaf 2018). By the century's end, indigenous groups transitioned from minimal public participation to becoming central to comparative politics debates (Van Cott 2003, 2005, 2010).

This movement led to a new multicultural incorporation model in Bolivia. Evo Morales's social movement, rooted in coca growers' unions, garnered support from indigenous organizations aligned with his populist discourse on uniting cultural diversity (Avila 2019) and urban groups (Albro 2005). The MAS political party employed a civil metalanguage to highlight the social struggles of particular groups, positioning them at the symbolic center of society's utopian ideals (Alexander 2006: 231). Morales's presidency marked an effort to universalize solidarity, evident in his speeches advocating justice, equality, and the end of discrimination:

> From 500 years of resistance to seizing power for 500 years, Indigenous people, workers, all sectors coming together to put an end to injustice, to end inequality, and above all, to end discrimination and oppression, where we have been subjected as Aymaras, Quechuas, Guaranis. We deeply respect and admire all sectors, whether they are professionals or not, intellectuals or not, entrepreneurs or not. We all have the right to live in this life, on this land, and the outcome of the national elections is precisely the result of the combination of social awareness and professional capability. This demonstrates that the Indigenous movement is not exclusionary. Hopefully, hopefully, others will also learn from us. (Ersilias 2006)

Morales and the MAS spearheaded Bolivia's constitutional reform, establishing the Plurinational State of Bolivia and recognizing 36 indigenous nations. Rooted in the concept of Living Well (Vivir Bien), this framework combined indigenous beliefs with environmental harmony, opposing global capitalism (Avila 2019). Morales delivered impactful speeches at international forums, emphasizing respect for Mother Earth (Madre Tierra) (Dawson 2011). The new government utilized the Indigenous Sphere as a facilitating input to advance the universalizing aspirations of the Bolivian Civil Sphere, ultimately aiming to achieve civil repair.

However, this process was far from complete. Morales played a central role in embodying and institutionalizing the Indigenous Sphere in this capacity. These "indigenous performances" provided legitimacy to government actions and helped consolidate state power: "Morales continues to invoke Indigenous history and culture, but he does so in performances of a state-controlled version of indigeneity that legitimized state power" (Postero 2017: 4). The indigenized Bolivian Civil Sphere was framed within a nationalist and economic framework, which simultaneously challenged indigenous nations' self-determination while reinforcing state control (Burman 2014; Canessa 2012).

Our case study enters at this point. The TIPNIS conflict in 2011 posed a significant challenge to the government, exposing the contradiction between the nation-state's interests and the aspirations of indigenous solidarity.

Indigenous Environmental Conflicts and the TIPNIS Conflict

Indigenous communities have long been at the forefront of environmental conflicts, particularly concerning land use in rural areas, over the past decades (Environmental Justice Atlas 2024). In Latin America, these conflicts often target indigenous populations, not only violating basic human rights but also leading to violence, including the assassination of land defenders (Raftopoulus 2018; Scheidel et al. 2020). The historical processes of dispossession and exclusion that began with colonization have re-emerged in the democratic era through the imposition of pipelines, roads, and mining projects. In response, indigenous communities have employed peaceful self-defense, legal action, and efforts to gain international and local support.

According to Merino (2015), extractivism in Latin America is deeply tied to extensive infrastructure projects that perpetuate a "colonial model of accumulation." Even in countries like Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador, where left-wing parties have promoted the creation of plurinational states, indigenous communities protesting development projects by transnational corporations are often ignored, repressed, or left to fend for themselves (Merino 2012). In this context, the pursuit of self-sovereignty has emerged as a critical strategy to counteract extractivism.[2] Since the indigenous resurgence of the 1970s, there has been a reevaluation of legal understandings of sovereignty, encompassing self-government and self-determination (Wiessner 2008). However, this debate

2 This is the right to make decisions about one's territory and it is central to understanding environmental conflicts in rural areas where the relationship with the territory plays a key role in identity and politics of defense. Some authors consider that there can be a framework to solve sovereignty problems by focusing on three characteristics that are dynamic and require the specification of the context: "(1) shared sovereignty, (2) institution building, and (3) a determination of final status" (Williams, Avoryie, and Armstrong 2015:23). Scholars have argued that "indigenous sovereignty" can be interpreted through the traditional legal framework of state sovereignty, emphasizing: "a) a permanent population; b) a defined territory; c) government; and d) capacity to enter into relations with other States" (Lenzerini 2006:196).

remains ongoing, grappling with the contested history of land titles, rights claims, and the symbolic nature of policy implementation. For instance, in Australia, some scholars have suggested that acts of recognition may be merely symbolic and fail to fully address the responsibilities owed to indigenous nations (Moreton-Robinson 2020).

Despite these limitations, symbolic recognition holds importance due to its global resonance. In Argentina and Chile, for example, some scholars have highlighted how discourse around mining-related conflicts has evolved into international networks that systemically frame these disputes (Urkidi and Walter 2011). Indigenous discourse has effectively brought local debates into the broader global context of environmental justice. McGregor et al. (2020) argue that indigenous peoples, drawing on their ontologies, philosophies, and epistemologies, have presented a global perspective on the ecological crisis of climate change. Concepts like *Vivir Bien*, which ascribe legal personhood to the planet, have emerged within this framework (McGregor, Whitaker, and Sritharan 2020:27). This represents a shift from Western liberal paradigms toward an integrated approach that views the human and physical world as a continuum within a systemic vision of justice (Parsons, Fisher, and Crease 2021).

TIPNIS

The Isiboro Sécure National Park was established on November 22, 1965, through Supreme Decree 07401 under the presidency of René Barrientos Ortuño. Encompassing areas in the departments of La Paz, Beni, and Cochabamba, it was originally managed by the Ministry of Agriculture. Over time, the territory's status evolved due to demands from indigenous populations. On September 24, 1990, Supreme Decree 22610 recognized the park as an indigenous territory, renaming it Indigenous Territory and National Park Isiboro Sécure (TIPNIS). This decree introduced a "red line" to prevent encroachment by new settlers and mandated that any construction projects require the participation of indigenous peoples in the area (Gaceta Oficial del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia n.d.).[3]

The decree was a milestone in indigenous history, marked by the First March for Territory and Dignity in 1990. This historic mobilization saw lowland indigenous organizations march to Bolivia's political center in La Paz. The event highlighted the marginalization of lowland indigenous communities, who had long been overshadowed by the larger Aymara and Quechua populations of the highlands.

Bedoya (2019) notes that the march symbolically initiated a series of mobilizations in the region, emphasizing the identity-based nature of indigenous claims. These included language, ethnicity, territory (as a central unifying element),

3 During the First Conference of Indigenous Nations of Beni in 1989, the Central de Pueblos Indígenas del Beni (CPIB) was established, laying the groundwork for this mobilization (Patzi 2007). The march brought attention to conflicts with timber enterprises and agro-exportation cattle businesses, which had strong ties to the Bolivian government.

systems of political and social organization, and shared historical narratives. The march united diverse groups, including the Chiman, Trinitarios, Chacobo, Esse Ejja, Tacana, Yuracaré, Movima, Joaquiniana, Ignaciana, Itonoma, Baure, Javeriana, and Sirionó peoples. It also revealed tensions between indigenous organizational structures, such as the *Cabildo Indigenal*, and the democratic frameworks promoted by the nation-state. These tensions underscored the state's limited understanding of indigenous logic and highlighted potential violations of international regulations regarding indigenous rights (Torrico 1992).

Eighth Indigenous Peoples March in Bolivia

The TIPNIS conflict emerged during Evo Morales' presidency, revealing contradictions in the government's pro-environment discourse. The government's decision to construct a road through the Core Zone of TIPNIS was ostensibly aimed at uniting Bolivia's eastern and western regions. However, the underlying motives included expanding coca cultivation, advancing the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA) for improved trade access between Brazil and China, and facilitating hydrocarbon extraction. The project contradicted the recommendations of the National Service of Protected Areas (SERNAP), which, in its 2011 Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment, prohibited infrastructure construction in the biodiversity-rich Core Zone. Moreover, the government failed to conduct the required Free, Prior, and Informed Consultation (FPIC) with indigenous communities before initiating the project (Laing 2015).

The TIPNIS conflict underscores the complex interplay between development strategies, neo-extractivism, and indigenous rights. Scholars have highlighted the colonial underpinnings of these practices, which often result in predatory actions against indigenous communities (Delgado 2017). The conflict also raised questions about indigenous veto power over policies and the need for deliberative spaces to address potential inequalities in FPIC processes (Christoffersen 2020; Shaw 2017). Furthermore, the conflict brought attention to the performative dimensions of indigenous march and their role in foregrounding issues of indigeneity and gender (Fabricant and Postero 2018; Hope 2016; Roncken 2019).

The repoliticization of nature as a political strategy became a central theme of the TIPNIS conflict, illustrating the divergence between nation-state development paradigms and indigenous approaches rooted in substantive economies and ecological knowledge (Springerová and Vališková 2016). Scholars have also noted the potential for indigenous groups to counter global development trends, simultaneously positioning themselves as global actors while confronting exclusionary consequences (Brysk and Bennett 2012). Post-conflict analyses have documented the broader political and developmental impacts of the TIPNIS conflict, including its framing as "land dispossession" (Hirsch 2019) and the ongoing challenges faced by indigenous groups in the region (Reyes-García et al. 2020).

Methodology

The methodological orientation of this research is interpretative. First, it follows a hermeneutic approach, analyzing the social world as a text. For our empirical work, we select *records*, understood as objectified structures of significance that reflect deep meanings (Oevermann et al. 2019). These records are not randomly chosen to provide an objective description or to construct a chronological analysis of events—as seen in the Comprehensive Event Coverage approach, for example (Davenport 2009). Instead, our objective is to uncover the interpretative biases of the record creators, capturing different moral standpoints (Earl et al. 2004: 67; Ortiz et al. 2005: 402).

Second, we employ an abductive analytical process. Following Peirce, we infer hypotheses about reality based on a rule and a result (Peirce 1992). In Peirce's terms, *hypothesis* refers to inferences about social life based on a theoretically guided approach (Reed 2011), using empirical evidence to draw conclusions. We treat our records as *clues* (Ginzburg 1989) or *images* (Abbott 2001) embedded in public debate that allow us to reconstruct cultural structures (Smith 2005) as a whole.

In this study, the interpretation focuses on cultural objects such as newspaper columns, op-eds, and editorials from five of Bolivia's most prominent newspapers. Specifically, we analyze 160 op-eds and editorials from *El Diario, La Razón, Página Siete, El Deber,* and *Cambio*. Each newspaper represents has a distinct ideological orientation—ranging from left to center to right—and offers a national rather than local perspective. The op-eds are authored by public intellectuals, journalists, writers, politicians, and representatives of civil organizations. Beyond quantitative analysis (Mathieu and Hart 2024), our approach seeks to understand how these texts construct interpretations of social reality, particularly in relation to the march.

The theoretical framework distinguishes a binary structure that organizes motives, relations, and institutions. In this study, we aim to construct the *Indigenous Sphere* by drawing from the model of the *Civil Sphere* (Alexander 2006: 57-59). In the following sections, I will infer the deep structures shaping the interpretation of the march—its motives, relations, and institutions. The purpose of this analysis is to examine how the march was *interpreted* in public discourse, rather than how Indigenous groups perceive themselves.

The Sacred Indigenous against the Polluted Indigenous State

Even though the indigenous state promoted the most significant incorporation process in the history of Bolivia, the new indigenized Civil Sphere controlled by the Plurinational State of Bolivia, led by Evo Morales, could not avoid being criticized as representing particularized solidarities rather than fostering genuine repair. In the following, we will illustrate how the march was *interpreted* in two distinct phases: First, the start of the march on August 15th before the Yucumo Repression. Second, after the Yucumo Repression encompassing the journey toward the city of La Paz and culminating in their arrival on October 19th, 2011.

Part I: The Start of the Journey to La Paz

The Loss of Hope with the Plurinational State

Anti-indigenous Motives

Criticism of the government during the TIPNIS march centered on perceived missteps, such as the controversial Supreme Decree 748, which resulted in the "gasolinazo" fuel price hikes years prior (Chumacero 2011). Government actions were labeled as irrational, with particular emphasis on an apparent lack of negotiation skills and general incompetence (Capriles 2011; D. Editorial 2011b; Natusch 2011).

Accusations went beyond policy disagreements to portray the government as guided by personal whims and self-interest (C. Editorial 2011a). The government was characterized as arrogant and dishonest, driven by unchecked ambition that undermined the principles upon which the nation's faith was built (Valdivia 2011). Critics questioned the authenticity of the government's motives, particularly its defense of indigenous rights and environmental concerns, branding it a hypocritical ploy to maintain control (Untoja 2011). Evo Morales' motivations were described as selfish, with concerns about corruption and degradation stemming from his exercise of power (Berrios 2011b). The overarching sentiment demanded more genuine and responsible decision-making, resonating throughout discussions of the TIPNIS march (Caballero 2011).

Conversely, we have to highlight that some commentators argued that indigenous support from certain politicians and public figures was disingenuous, labeling it "political resentment" or "hypocrisy" (Coco Manto 2011b). Others criticized what they saw as "false militant ecologism" (C. Editorial 2011b).

Anti-indigenous Relationships

Evo Morales' government faced criticism for its selective relationships with various groups, especially *cocaleros*, and its approach to "pachamama" (Mother Earth). According to Vacaflor (2011a), the government's ties to *cocaleros* and other groups accused of illegal activities, such as forest plunderers, smugglers, and mineral thieves, drew condemnation for harming "pachamama" and favoring certain factions (Vacaflor,2011b). Likewise, discrimination against indigenous people is mentioned, attributing racist and discriminatory practices to Evo Morales' associates, especially peasant leaders (Berrios 2011a). The government's relationship with Brazil is also highlighted, suggesting potential foreign interests (Iturralde 2011a). Evo Morales is characterized as an "unbridled developmentist," implying an inclination toward development without sufficient environmental consideration (Paulovich 2011b).

Criticism extends to the apparent contradiction in Evo Morales' discourse, questioning the defense of Mother Earth's rights in international conferences compared to environmental destruction in practice (Chumacero 2011). He is also accused of demagogic contradictions regarding indigenous autonomy

(Andrade 2011a). Morales is considered the main critic of the marchers, despite declaring himself a follower of Mother Earth (Cárdenas 2011). The endorsement and relationships with *cocaleros* are criticized (Ortiz 2011a; Rueda 2011), as well as the alleged failure to adhere to environmental control or consultation rules (Tejada 2011). Additionally, the importance of cocaleros or colonizers as generators of disorder in indigenous lands is emphasized, disrupting harmony and destroying the ecosystem (Ríos 2011).

Conversely, indigenous lowland groups' relationships with external organizations, such as NGOs or the U.S. Embassy in Bolivia, were criticized as conspiratorial (D. Editorial 2011a).

Anti-indigenous Institutions

The Plurinational State itself faced criticism for its structural deficiencies and the relationships associated with Evo Morales' leadership. The state was labeled a deceitful construct, and Morales' "indigenism" was dismissed as a "Chinese tale" (a fabricated narrative of indigeneity). Critics highlighted inconsistencies between the state's symbolic rhetoric and its actions: "Gone is the rhetoric; the real world confronted them. Gone is the symbolism they so fondly embraced. Gone are the enticing songs of the 'process of change.' The TIPNIS revealed them in full; they could not pass the consistency test" (Ortiz 2011a).

This statement encapsulates widespread dissatisfaction with the Plurinational State's failure to align symbolic promises with practical realities, particularly in the TIPNIS conflict. Critics interpreted Morales' "indigenism" as hollow and identified a lack of genuine environmental commitment. Internal conflicts among indigenous leaders were also noted, suggesting that their efforts should prioritize tangible benefits for their people (Zambrana 2011).

The Hope with the Indigenous March

Indigenous Motives

The indigenous marchers emphasized constructing a new, inclusive understanding of territory that contrasted with the government's approach: "Be that as it may, the indigenous people of Loma Santa are building territories in a broader sense, that is, 'counter-hegemonic' (inclusive)" (Chumacero 2011). The unique worldview of TIPNIS indigenous peoples, including their religiosity and reverence for nature, was underscored: "In addition to constitutional reasons and the rights of indigenous peoples over their territories, this is another reason why this road should not be allowed, as it will destroy the nature and the magic it holds" (Carvhalo 2011). The marchers condemned the damage to their "spiritual well-being" (Rivero 2011).

This perspective reframed development beyond economic motives, advocating for a broader understanding of human well-being: "Nobody opposes the comprehensive development of a region where there is extreme poverty;

however, we must understand that this is just a fundamental component to achieve full human development, in this case, for the indigenous people of the Bolivian Amazon" (Aguilar 2011).

Indigenous Relations

From the perspective of relations, people are characterized by demonstrating real connections with others: "And they receive the solidarity and sympathy of Bolivians from the legal sector" (Vacaflor 2011a). In this sense, there is a nationalist sentiment among the indigenous people of TIPNIS against the government. Negative land use is criticized, and it is highlighted that those from TIPNIS are taking a stand in favor of all Bolivians: "The project of that road that has aroused the interest and concern of the entire population must be reviewed at the request of indigenous nationalities who, representing the Nation, have expressed their opposition to this project" (Antezana 2011a).[4]

After the first weeks of the march, opinion leaders noted that the national community was attentive and supportive of the inhabitants of TIPNIS (C. Editorial 2011a). At one point, a national referendum was considered as a solution to resolve the conflict (D. Editorial 2011d). Furthermore, this conflict is characterized not only as a specific issue between the government and the indigenous people of the east but as a deeper conflict over land. This conflict soon sparked more conflicts in the country. Thus, it can be seen how it fits into a broader theme than the TIPNIS conflict: "If, on this occasion, the fundamental problem of the rural population, which is land, is not resolved, nothing will have been solved, and the solutions will have been no more than aspirins to cure a cancerous ailment" (D. Editorial 2011a). Moreover, it is considered that this is a problem that has transcended to an international level: "In time, the news of the march initiated two weeks ago left national borders and gained international projection, which obliged facing the bull by the horns with more ductility and patience" (D. Editorial 2011b).

It is deemed indispensable for the international stage and the defense of the land: "It has the backing of national and international institutions for being in line with the doctrine of environmental and biodiversity defense" (Capobianco 2011).

Furthermore, the cause of TIPNIS is positioned as the representative of the "common good" (Mariaca 2011). It is also considered that their motives, even the enchantment of nature, are important to understand their vulnerability: "The re-enchantment with nature is the 'Mother Earth', it is the cry of despair,

4 Others share the same perspective from a nationalistic standpoint: "We believe that this matter is of national interest and not only of the indigenous people living in that territory because the Homeland belongs to everyone" (Cárdenas 2011). It was also stated that "the urban population shows its moral and material support to the marchers" (Antezana 2011b). External group support is emphasized in the indigenous struggle: "This vision is shared by a large part of the Bolivian population, whose expressions of moral support translate into shipments of food, supplies, and medicines, as well as the reception offered by the towns along the route traced for the march" (Valdivia 2011).

of men and women condemned by the State to ethnocide in this century" (Untoja 2011). Also, a national consciousness about the territory and rich nature against capitalist beliefs (Coco Manto 2011a).

Indigenous Institutions

This construction undertaken by those from TIPNIS is also identified as a transformation of state power. It is not enough to have a president of indigenous origin; rather, there is a change in the dynamics of power and, consequently, in democratic senses: a different management of society. "The march for the defense of TIPNIS tends to transform the spiritual foundations of an official Power that wants to do everything, including elections for magistrates" (Numbela 2011).

Part II: The March Arrives to La Paz

The Yucumo Repression

Public opinion viewed the Yucumo repression as a moment that highlighted the "anti-indigenous" nature of the government and sacralized the march. Articles refer to this event as violent repression that undermines the government's legitimacy (Martinez-Salguero 2011). They are labeled as violent and savage: "We lean towards the latter, as we have already expressed, because the Government's action is unquestionably barbaric and savage in repressing innocent people" (Vaca 2011). Intolerance and a development-centric anthropocentric vision are consistently criticized in opinion columns (Sejas 2011).

Columnists commented that the event was undemocratic, and the country's solidarity increased for this reason:

> The country's solidarity in the face of such outrages is not delayed, and they are sufficient demonstrations that the current Government is mismanaging the State, where every voice of protest is not solitary but forms thousands, perhaps millions of citizens who, regardless of political color, place of birth, or other aspects, stand in solidarity with the TIPNIS marchers and condemn any act of violence against people who were legally and legitimately marching (Coca 2011).

The cause of TIPNIS was emphasized as "just" and presented as defenders of nature, forests, and more (D. Editorial 2011c). In this sense, their peaceful characteristic in the face of the megaproject in their territory is highlighted: "The indigenous march that left the city of Trinidad for La Paz is peaceful. It does not interfere with the free movement of people and vehicles; it causes no harm. The indigenous march, including women and children, is for a just cause" (Ojara 2011).

It is spoken of as having national support: "Faced with national resistance to the construction of section two of the road, the Government has no choice but to accede to the demand of the indigenous people of the area" (Luna 2011).

The growing international support for the construction of the road is mentioned: "As time goes by, the march in defense of the Isiboro-Sécure Park is being supported by various sectors of society, even international organizations" (Andrade 2011b). The journey described as "friendly" for the marchers is mentioned (Vacaflor 2011a). It is highlighted how in localities like Caranavi, for example, their entry is celebrated: "a triumphant entry of the indigenous people in merit of their determined purpose, even risking their lives to defend their constitutional rights" (Montecinos 2011). Before the entry of lowland indigenous people into La Paz, they were positioned as the "winners" of this battle: "In general, it can be considered that the issue is almost definitively lost for the official spheres and that the TIPNIS indigenous people have not only won a battle but are winning a war unjustly declared against them" (Antezana 2011c).

When the march reached La Paz, all the structures of motives, relationships, and institutions articulated in the opinion columns and editorials converged. One of the op-eds, from a narrator argued: "We put some clothes and food in a bag, and we went to reach the marchers, to give them principally our hearts" (Paulovich 2011a). This marked a moment of "effervescence" (Alexander 2006), where emotions and profound feelings of belonging to the cause of indigenous groups amplified the networks of solidarity with other groups. The systematized ideational structure of motives, relationships, and institutions is divided in the following charts:

Indigenous and Anti-indigenous Motives

Figure 1. Structure of Indigenous and Anti-indigenous Motives

Indigenous	Anti-indigenous
Active	Passive
Peaceful	Violent
Collectivist	Individualist
Not rational (Alternative futures)	Rational (Progress)

Own elaboration based on data analysis

During the arrival of the march, the indigenous groups were depicted with sacred motives, a perception consistent since the commencement of the mobilization. However, a clear distinction emerged between the objectives of the government, led by Evo Morales.

For instance, the peaceful and active nature of the march held significant importance. The participants were seen as having a distinct purpose: to conduct a peaceful march that emphasized a culture of peace essential for Bolivia. As stated by Bonadona (2011), "A demonstration of determination exercised peacefully, which is only possible when there is clarity of objectives and deep conviction" (Bonadona 2011).

In contrast, the government's motives accentuated violence from the outset: "On September 25, the march was attacked in a perverse manner by police troops, in an action that had never been seen in the country" (E. D. Editorial 2011). The focus wasn't solely on the event but also on the violent approach to politics against the peaceful movement led by the TIPNIS marchers: "Rejection of abuse, authoritarianism, arrogance" (P. S. Editorial 2011), emphasizing that "arrogance is useless, and political power is not enough" (Atahuichi 2011).

On the flip side, the collectivist nature of the march's motives aimed to unite the Bolivian population: "It will be a day of unity among Bolivians, the day when real change is born" (Arias 2011). Conversely, the government's individualistic approach was criticized as anti-indigenous for neglecting other groups and failing to listen to the people: "The Government, with the president of the State at the helm, with its incomprehensible ideological confusion in the conflict, the succession of errors of action or omission in its management [...] We need them to see, to listen to the people, and understand what is happening" (Prudencio 2011).

Lastly, the rationale behind "development" was questioned, and indigenous perspectives were highlighted for surpassing rational thinking: "The Road is nothing but a metaphor, the symbol of Western thought that collides head-on with indigenous thinking" (Lea 2011). Other arguments also arose, challenging the rationality of the well-known development model: "The TIPNIS march calls on the Bolivians to deliberate on a new Development model that links education with the economy to overcome, through knowledge, the extractive model" (Gómez 2011).

Indigenous and Anti-indigenous Relations

Figure 2. Structure of indigenous and Anti-indigenous Relations

Indigenous	Anti-indigenous
Loyal to everybody's well-being (including mother earth)	Betraying/suspicious of everybody's well-being (including mother earth)
Based on a millennial cosmology	Based on new interest
Oriented to global/earth repair	Oriented to a particular interest

Own elaboration based on data analysis

Additionally, public commentators interpreted indigenous relationships as sacred, portraying them as honest and loyal connections with society and nature or Mother Earth. Some commentators explicitly identified these relationships as a commitment to preserving nature rather than seeking personal benefits: "But they don't want tributes or recognition; they just want to save nature" (Vacaflor 2011). In general, it was observed that "indigenous peoples continue to demand that Mother Earth not be sacrificed for a Road" (Puente

2011), even if it means putting their lives at risk: "They defend it even at the cost of sacrificing their lives" (Mercado 2011).

The government's relationships were viewed with suspicion: "The power that MAS encapsulates confuses, divides, offers dialogue while discrediting, advocates unity while repressing, retreats, and improvises, denying" (Brockmann 2011). Furthermore, the constant emphasis on the government's connections with other groups was noted: "Without invasive actions from illegal loggers or coca growers" (Gramunt 2011).

These relationships were seen as oriented toward the interests of specific groups: "They knew that if the Government achieved its goal of allowing coca growers in Chapare to consolidate their control over this national park, other territories would fall one after another" (Ortiz 2011). Additionally, links with narcotics organizations were highlighted (Salinas 2011).

On the contrary, the sacrifice made by indigenous groups appeared to extend beyond their own interests or Bolivia, evolving into a global fight for humanity: "They have taught future generations that defending biodiversity is fundamental for human life against materialism" (Berrios 2011); "It is up to humans to defend their values, unite around faith, and sow hopes for the future without compromising the values that nature offers" (Valdivia 2011).

Indigenous and Anti-indigenous Institutions

Figure 3. Structure of indigenous and Anti-indigenous Institutions

Indigenous	**Anti-indigenous**
Communitarian	Hierarchical
Millenarian	New
Inclusive	Discriminatory

Own elaboration based on data analysis

Against the figure of the Bolivian nation-state, the indigenous institutions are linked to their organizations based on their territory and their rights (Vilar 2011). It is highlighted the groups and their "ancestral" position of the land: "since time immemorial" (Seleme 2011). At the same time, the millenarian characteristic: "a population perhaps quantitatively reduced, but qualitatively superior due to the presence of ancestral peoples, nations, and cultures that are lost in the distant past of our continent" (Capobianco 2011).

The anti-indigenous position of the government was established as hierarchical and discriminatory. The hierarchy is highlighted when stating the characteristics of the people in the government: "the president and his ministers must rid themselves of arrogant and authoritarian attitudes, making constructive, sincere dialogue prevail" (Aguilar 2011). The government, and the people working there, were also considered as discriminatory, or "racist" against the indigenous groups: "Difficult task to find more pettiness than this revenge

orchestrated by Morales, García Linera, Juan Ramón Quintana, and their followers, unyielding in their racism towards the indigenous peoples of the lowlands" (Seleme 2011).

In contrast, the fight of the indigenous groups marching is considered inclusive as they unite Bolivian thinking: "it has awakened deep admiration and solidarity throughout the national territory" (Valdivia 2011). Moreover, some values are highlighted: "unity (from east to west that definitively buried the nefarious intentions of small groups with separatist paranoia); integration of La Paz residents under the influence of indigenous determination" (Loayza 2011).

Conclusions

Previous scholarly work has interpreted that, in the TIPNIS case, the indigenous way of being challenged the Bolivian nation-state's understanding of democracy (Torrico 1992), constructing a unifying narrative around Indigenous identity (Bedoya 2019). In this paper, I have analyzed the interpretation of the TIPNIS conflict to illustrate how indigeneity, as embodied in Evo Morales and the Plurinational State, was contested by the march of lowland Indigenous groups in Bolivia. This analysis aimed to identify the ideational structure of the non-liberal *Indigenous Sphere* attributed to the march. Through this case, I have reconstructed a structure that sacralizes the active, peaceful, collectivist, and non-rational motives driving Indigenous populations in their defense of land. The analysis also highlights how this structure frames Indigenous relationships as deeply connected to nature and *Mother Earth*, rooted in a pre-millennial cosmology, and oriented toward collective well-being. Finally, Indigenous institutions emerge as inclusive, grounded in communal ties, and shaped by millennia-old traditions.

In this sense, I argued that public opinion in Bolivia largely identified the march as embodying the *Indigenous Sphere* in opposition to Evo Morales and his government. However, this opposition should not be understood as a simple betrayal of indigeneity by Morales, but rather as an internal drift of the discourse of indigenousness/indigeneity when embedded with the nation-state. The TIPNIS conflict illustrates how tensions within the Indigenous Sphere – between its collectivist, non-rational, peaceful and millenarian environmental commitments – arise in its embeddedness in state power, producing a shift in Morales' leadership interpretation. His trajectory reflects not an abandonment of indigeneity but an inherent contradiction within the Civil Sphere as it navigates the demands of governance and wants to maintain state authority circumscribed in a national imaginary. In this sense, the *Indigenous Sphere* and the *Civil Sphere* are not strictly separate; rather, their interweaving reveals how democracy is continuously shaped by both universalist and particularist solidarities. The challenge is not simply the incorporation of Indigenous discourse into the Civil Sphere, but how this discourse redefines the very terms of inclusion and solidarity.

Beyond its interaction with the Civil Sphere, deeper theoretical questions remain regarding the nature of the Indigenous Sphere. To what extent can

this sphere be considered "civil" in the sense of Civil Sphere Theory, or does it represent an alternative ontological category? Can non-Indigenous actors fully mobilize the Indigenous Sphere, or is it necessarily ascriptive, tied to ancestry, land, and lived experience? Can this sphere help us understand other topics such as cultural appropriation of indigenous material and immaterial cultural expressions or the popularity of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies in academia? These questions point to a broader issue: whether the Indigenous Sphere can be fully translated into the conceptual language of democracy, or whether its structure resists incorporation into a model that, historically, has been entangled with colonial frameworks of inclusion. This study does not attempt to resolve these tensions, but instead lays the groundwork for further exploration.

At the same time, this case highlights how indigeneity has gained authority through its deep connection with universalistic aspirations to environmentalism, positioning itself in opposition to developmentalism and extractivist models of economic growth. The TIPNIS conflict is one example of how land defense movements are framed not only as local struggles but as part of a broader global discourse that challenges dominant models of progress. Future research should examine whether this environmental discourse remains central across different Indigenous movements or whether it varies based on local political and economic contexts.

To deepen our understanding of these dynamics, further empirical research is essential. Comparative case studies across diverse geographical settings will be crucial in determining whether the discourse structure identified in this case remains consistent or varies across different historical and cultural contexts. A multifaceted approach—incorporating different methodologies and theoretical perspectives—is necessary to fully grasp the complexities of the Indigenous Sphere and its broader implications.

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'TIPNIS somos todos': Diskursi autohtonosti u okvirima i iznad okvira nacionalne građanske sfere

Apstrakt

U ovom radu se istražuje presek između autohtonosti, ekoloških sukoba i globalnih solidarnosti. Polazeći od teorijskog okvira jakog programa u kulturnoj sociologiji, u radu se ispituje kako se autohtone grupe koje se suprotstavljaju ekološkim pretnjama oslanjaju na duboku strukturu diskursa kako bi izgradile solidarnost koja nadilazi njihove zajednice, na nacionalnom i internacionalnom nivou. Sukobi oko Teritorije autohtonog stanovništva i nacionalnog parka Isiboro-Sécure (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro-Sécure TIPNIS), prilikom kojih su autohtone grupe iz nizijskih područja marširale protiv državnog projekta izgradnje autoputa, predstavljaju studiju slučaja. Primenom hermeneutičkog pristupa, istraživanje analizira 160 autorskih tekstova i drugih priloga iz bolivijskih novina, otkrivajući kako je javni diskurs uokvirio autohtoni otpor unutar moralne strukture kolektivističkih, ekoloških i ne-liberalnih motiva. Nalazi istraživanja doprinose razumevanju načina na koji autohtona sfera interaguje sa okvirima demokratije i solidarnosti i dovodi ih u pitanje.

Ključne reči: autohtoni narodi, ekološki konflikti, demokratija, kulturna sociologija, Bolivija