

**Article:** State Governance and Micropractices of Power in the Process of Decolonizing the State in Bolivia

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**Abstract** This article investigates how multiple and nuanced micropractices of power work through everyday bureaucratic actions in the course of major state transformations. It argues that it is not solely the grand ideological battles or global asymmetries of power that impede the implementation of revolutionary political alternatives. More attention should be paid to the internal functioning of state governance and its micropractices of power in processes of change. Empirically, it examines the process of decolonizing the state in Bolivia, where the notion of *vivir bien* (living well) has been introduced into policy-making processes since 2006. Initially, it was portrayed as a democratizing and decolonizing policy alternative deriving – to an extent – from indigenous cultural heritage that provides locally grounded solutions to societal problems. While many of the outcomes of the shift in public policy have been critically assessed, there is still a lack in showing how difficulties in implementation emerge. By discussing the contested nature of everyday bureaucratic practices in Evo Morales' Bolivia, this article tries to fulfill the gap. It is demonstrated here that multiple everyday techniques, procedures, and routines of the state continue to create and reproduce various forms of coloniality. The ethnographic evidence of the continuation of neoliberal rationalities suggests that it is these exact - and assumingly insignificant - bureaucratic routines that derogate *vivir bien* transformation agenda internally. Consequently, together with opposition and outright racism by public servants, it is shown that deep ruptures have emerged between political rhetoric of decolonization and concrete everyday actions amidst state bureaucracy.

**Keywords:** *vivir bien*; decolonization; governance; state bureaucracy; micro-practices of power; Bolivia.

## Introduction

State-centred social theorizing has typically located power in the state or the economy.<sup>1</sup> Foucault's take on the genealogy of modernity, however, as Fraser (1981: 272) has argued, questions this stance by suggesting that power 'operates at the lowest extremities of the social body in everyday social practices'. While this view expands our understanding of power from the loci of specific political ideologies, political figures, or class struggles to a much broader field, it simultaneously concretizes it through references to the multiplicity of what Foucault calls micropractices of power (Ibid.). This article describes and analyzes how multiple and nuanced micropractices of power work through everyday bureaucratic actions in the course of major state transformations. State transformation refers to radical attempts at constructing the state differently; in the case of this article, to indigenous and activist attempts at decolonizing the state. The article argues that it is not solely the grand ideological battles or global asymmetries of power that impede the implementation of revolutionary political alternatives. In addition to these large-scale structural issues, more attention should be paid to the internal functioning of state governance and its micropractices of power in processes of change.

Empirically, the article discusses the case of Bolivia, where the notion of *Vivir Bien* (Living Well) has been incorporated and used in state political discourses and policy making by Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous president, and his political party Movement Toward Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS) for more than a decade now. Although the birth of the MAS as a political instrument initially served the interests of coca growing peasants, it gained political momentum through a massive popular protest movement comprising lowland and highland indigenous organizations, peasant unions, and social movements active in various resource struggles. As a resistance to nearly two decades of neoliberal restructurings of Bolivian economy and state, a wide coalition of different kinds of actors were searching for a unifying ideological tool and agenda for alternative forms of politics and policy. Together with a fellow Andean country, Ecuador, under the leadership of the left-wing President Rafael Correa (Walsh 2008, 2010; see Lalander and Merimaa in this special issue)<sup>2</sup>, Bolivia brought the *Vivir Bien* paradigm to the fore in the state transformation process, with alterations to the concept appearing in such countries as Nicaragua (*Vivir Bonito*)

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this article formulates the first half of Chapter Five in my forthcoming book *Vivir Bien as an Alternative to Neoliberal Globalization: Can Indigenous Terminologies Decolonize the State?* (Routledge, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The concept of *Buen Vivir* is utilized in the context of Ecuador.

(Radcliffe 2015a: 861). It was an attempt to find new locally rooted alternatives to the concept of development, which was perceived to be intimately linked with neoliberal globalization and outside dictation of parameters for political and economic change in the Global South. Gudynas (2011), one of the leading scholars on *Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien*, has argued that by rejecting growth and capital, it represents a post-neoliberal alternative, replacing the idea of development as linked to global capitalism. *Vivir Bien* rather emphasizes ethics and a wider variety of values – cultural, spiritual, ecological – than merely those produced by capital (Gudynas 2011: 445).

While originating in social movement struggles and indigenous liberation battles, the notion of *Vivir Bien* became one of the key concepts of Bolivian state policies, when the National Development Plan (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo: Bolivia Digna, Soberana, Productiva, y Democrática para Vivir Bien, NDP) was launched in 2006. A major shift occurred in the subsequent governmental programme which gave priority to resource extraction, industrialization, and grand scale state-led developmentalism (Movimiento al Socialismo MAS-IPSP 2010). In the 2016–2020 policy guideline (Plan de Desarrollo Económico y Social en el Marco del Desarrollo Integral para Vivir Bien), *Vivir Bien* re-emerged to policy discourses. Stated to originate from indigenous, afro-Bolivian, and peasant ideas, worldviews, and knowledges, state policy defines *Vivir Bien* as ‘an alternative civilizational and cultural horizon to capitalism and modernity’ (Ministerio de Planificación al Desarrollo 2015: 4). It highlights the assumed strengths of previously underprivileged groups of people such as indigenous communities – solidarity, collective wellbeing, sense of community, identity politics, and ecological knowledge and sustainability – as opposed to a ‘culture of individualism, mercantilism and capitalism that is based on the irrational exploitation of humanity and nature’ (Ibid.). *Vivir Bien* is also present in the constitution where such conceptualizations as *ama qhilla*, *ama llulla*, *ama suwa* (don’t be lazy, don’t be a liar, don’t be a thief), *Suma Qamaña* (to live well), *Ñandereko* (harmonious way of life), *Teko Kavi* (good life), *Ivi Maraei* (land without evil), and *Qhapaj Ñan* (noble way or path) – often understood as the multiple indigenous origins of the Spanish umbrella term *Vivir Bien* – are defined as the ethical-moral principles for Bolivian society (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia 2009)<sup>3</sup>. Indigeneity is much contested and changing in the Bolivian context where indigenous peoples make up the majority of the

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<sup>3</sup> For a criticism of the assumed indigenous origins of the notion of *Vivir Bien*, see, for example, Portugal Mollinedo (2017).

population and the state governs in the name of indigenous terminologies (Canessa 2014; Postero 2017)<sup>4</sup>.

In the course of Bolivian state transformation the notion of *Vivir Bien* has become contested in the practice of state, thus becoming something quite different from what has been claimed. Scholars now widely agree that instead of enhancing decolonizing, democratizing and ecological practices, Bolivia's progressive government rather promotes state-led resource extractivism and centralization of state power (McNeish 2013; Ranta 2016, 2017; Webber 2011). Demands for the nationalization of natural resources unified a large gamut of social movements in support of Morales's election. While resisting neoliberal privatizations of natural resources, many indigenous groups, however, promoted indigenous self-governance over natural resources, lands and territories. Despite policy discourses of an indigenous, communitarian, and ecological alternative, the governing regime – as progressive post-neoliberal states in Latin America in general – has revived the developmentalist state, economic growth agendas, and the expansion of an export economy of natural resources (Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012). Escobar (2010: 20) calls this neo-developmentalism. Thus, the capacity of such alternative notions as *Vivir Bien* to offer real alternatives to global capitalism and to transform the underlying political-economic structures has been questioned (Petras et al. 2014; Veltmeyer and Petras 2014). Furthermore, extractive economies and growth agendas are detrimental to environment and climate change, standing in stark contrast with ecological values and sustainable human / non-human relationships of such alternatives as *Vivir Bien*. Consequently, there is an increasing concurrence among *Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien* scholars that its conceptual introduction into state policies has failed to produce meaningful political-economic transformations (Radcliffe 2015a: 861). In terms of decolonization and democratization, the Constituent Assembly (2006), which was perceived as the first litmus test for creating alternative ways of doing politics, failed miserably (see Postero 2017; Webber 2011). The idea of a Constituent Assembly had emerged in activist agendas as early as the 1990s. Convening it was one of the key political demands by social movements that agreed to support Evo Morales in 2005. Instead of creating new forms of people's power and democratic decision-making arenas, political conflicts between the executive and the political opposition and internal fights within different sectors

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<sup>4</sup> Recognized by the constitution (2009), Bolivia's 36 indigenous nationalities, including the Quechua (31 per cent), the Aymara (25.23 per cent), and minor groups such as the Guaraní, Chiquitano, Mojeño, and others (6.10 per cent), make up approximately 63 per cent of the total Bolivian population (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2004: 104). In the 2012 census, however, the number of those self-identifying as indigenous dropped to approximately 40 per cent (Postero 2017: 182).

of the MAS hampered attempts at decentralizing power to self-governing assemblies. Indeed, it became one of the first signs of the continuation of coloniality in state governance, a tendency that has later intensified.

At the same time with the political turmoil of the Constituent Assembly more minor scale everyday state operations on which this article concentrates were taking place, derogating on their part the implementation of alternative politics and policy. In terms of Bolivian state policy, many of the outcomes of the shift in public policy have been critically assessed from a political-economic perspective (Mendoza Cunha Filho and Santaella Goncalves 2010; Molero Simarro and Paz Antolín 2012; Webber 2011, 2016), but with little focus on indigenous terminologies apart from important recent work by Postero (2013, 2017) on the indigenous state. In comparison to these works, this article focuses more on the internal functioning of state bureaucracy, because equally missing have been those studies examining how policy transformation is experienced, shaped, and contested by those state actors who are responsible for its translation into practice. There is still a lack in showing how and why difficulties in policy implementation emerge. By discussing the contested nature of everyday bureaucratic practices, this article tries to fulfill the gap. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during Evo Morales' first term of presidency<sup>5</sup>, the article shows that the problems with which we are familiar now emerged right at the beginning of the revolutionary process. In a phase of enthusiasm, ruptures and frictions were already visible: in technologies of the state, in micropractices of power and in the continuation of racism. It is demonstrated here that multiple everyday techniques, procedures, and routines of the state create and reproduce various forms of coloniality. The ethnographic evidence of the continuation of neoliberal rationalities suggests that it is these exact – and assumingly insignificant – bureaucratic routines that derogate *Vivir Bien* transformation agenda internally. Consequently, together with opposition and outright racism by public servants, it is shown that deep ruptures have emerged between political rhetoric of decolonization and concrete everyday actions amidst state bureaucracy.

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<sup>5</sup> The ethnographic fieldwork on the discourses and practices of *Vivir Bien* was conducted between 2008 and 2009 for the purpose of PhD thesis (Ranta 2014). Additionally, I lived in Bolivia for a total of 13 months in 2001 and 2002, when I volunteered and worked in an indigenous NGO and UN office. Since the fieldwork period, I have maintained systematic communication with various informants through e-mails and social media. I have also conducted a few formal follow-up interviews in 2016 and 2017 through skype. The article also draws on critical engagement with recent state policy documents and academic literature.

The starting section introduces the theoretical foundations of this article, followed by four empirical chapters on the complicated processes of translating the notion of *Vivir Bien* to bureaucratic practices.

### **State governance and micro-practices of power in processes of state transformation**

*Vivir bien* state policy is approached here through the concepts of government and neoliberal governmentality. Influenced by Foucault's conceptualization, Rose (1996: 41–2) has described the notion of government as being constituted by 'all those ways of reflecting and acting that have aimed to shape, guide, manage or regulate the conduct of persons...in the light of certain principles or goals'. Through state policy as an instrument of government power is exercised on individuals and groups of people. Paramount in this is the "will to improve" (Li 2007); the idea of improvement and positive social change that can be achieved through state policy. The moral attributes fit well with the idea that 'government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth' (Foucault 1991: 100). Thus, the notion of government implies "positive" use of power instead of outright coercion or authoritarianism. Government in Foucault's sense did not refer to the state as a coherent and well-bound entity, and certainly not to specific governing regimes as sources of power, but rather to a conglomeration of micro-practices and techniques of power, that is, wider forms of governance, that circulate within the sphere of the state. The forms and effects of state power were rather to be understood in a more subtle way than as a form of coercion clearly identifiable to specific individual authorities or institutional or economic structures.

What, in Rose's (1996) opinion, makes state policy governmental, rather than merely conceptual or theoretical, is the aim of their becoming practice. What Li (2007) calls the practice of government occurs through the translation of government into technical exercise through concrete bureaucratic practices, such as program or project management. This requires two key elements: first, the identification of a problem or a negative state of affairs that needs to be corrected; and second, an affirmation of what Li (2007: 7) calls rendering technical, which 'confirms expertise and constitutes the boundary between those who are positioned as trustees, with the capacity to diagnose deficiencies

in others, and those who are subject to expert directions'. Important in the practice of government is the role of technical experts as knowledge brokers and gatekeepers of "truth". Their role has been fundamental in the institutionalization of forms that govern and control individuals and groups of people, because 'political rule would not itself set out the norms of individual conduct, but would install and empower a variety of "professionals", investing them with authority to act as experts in the devices of social rule' (Rose 1996: 40). What is crucial in the case of Bolivia is how indigeneity is translated into technical language and expertise and the experiences of indigenous and non-indigenous state functionaries in this process (on indigenous state bureaucrats in Chile, see Radcliffe and Webb 2015).

Foucault's elaborations on power are used theoretically here to demonstrate, on the one hand, how hard it is to change neoliberal rationalities of modern state formation and, on the other, how neoliberal governmentality is being spread through assumedly universalist development models to countries like Bolivia that, due to violent histories of coloniality and capitalist exploitation, have little room to manoeuvre vis-à-vis global actors, such as International Financial Institutions (IFIs), development agencies, and transnational corporations. Since the Washington Consensus era, the role of global financial and development actors in shaping the lives of individuals and groups in the Global South has been significantly enhanced, while the role of the state, on the contrary, has been in many ways challenged. For example, in the case of Bolivia, the phenomenon that Ferguson and Gupta (2005) call neoliberal governmentality, changed the nature of the nation-state from a corporatist and centralized agent of productive forces to an outsourced government. The neoliberal governmentality functions through 'all the processes by which the conduct of a population is governed: by institutions and agencies, including the state; by discourses, norms, and identities; and by self regulation, techniques for the disciplining and care of the self' (Ferguson and Gupta 2005: 114). In her ethnography on Bolivian lowlands indigenous politics, Postero (2007) has vividly shown how internationally funded NGOs became instrumental in forming local indigenous activists into "good" neoliberal subjects, when training them about the government-led decentralization process. Goldstein (2004: 88–9), on his part, has demonstrated that while neoliberal reforms reduced the responsibility of the Bolivian state over the welfare of its population, the operation of forms of governmentality increased through daily routines and bureaucratic regulation inherent in these reforms.

One of the key arguments of policy as government has been the claim that it depoliticizes. What is meant by this is that matters of great political importance are turned into seemingly technical issues through knowledge and expertise. In his classic – and much criticized – work, Ferguson (1994: 256), for example, has claimed that ‘by uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem, and by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people, the hegemonic problem of “development” is the principal means through which the question of poverty is depoliticized in the world today’ (1994: 256). In the field of development practice, questions of development are translated into a technical medium: scientific knowledge and expertise are used in the elaboration and legitimization of policy guidelines, project documents, logical framework matrixes, and so forth. Important for the advancement of depoliticization are knowledge production and technical expertise because they, as Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 186) have summarized, take ‘what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language’. This ‘masking of the political under the cloak of neutrality is a key feature of modern power’ (Shore and Wright 1997: 8).

Nevertheless, Shore and Wright (1997: 8) have shown in their ethnographic study that ‘policies are most obviously political phenomena, yet it is a feature of policies that their political nature is disguised by the objective, neutral, legal-rational idioms in which they are portrayed’. Instead of being depoliticized, Li (2007) has showed that the business of doing good is part of a complex web of interests and relations through which people are managed, controlled, and targeted as objects of development governed by neoliberal rationalities in a way that delimits – but does not impede – their opportunities to question and confront existing power relations. A counterpart to the concept of the practice of government emerges here: the practice of politics. While the practice of government was earlier explained as a calculated mode of enhancing the wellbeing of populations through technical means, the practice of politics is defined by Li (2007: 12) as a critical challenge that ‘shapes, challenges, and provokes it’. Therefore, while the aim of the practice of government is to rule through the taming of political contestations (that is, through depoliticizing effects of development policy and its micropractices of power), there is always room for critical challenge. Foucault’s suggestion that power comes from below is paramount in rethinking resistance as positive and productive in the construction of transformational politics (O’Malley 1996: 312).

As a result of colonial histories, racial segregation, and transnational capitalism, Foucauldian approaches to state formation and power need to be complemented with other theoretical tools when examining formerly colonized contexts of the Global South. Latin American decoloniality thinking as a regional provider of theoretical and political alternatives (Mignolo 2005; Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui 2008; Quijano 2000; Walsh, García Linera and Mignolo 2006), with salient figures such as Mignolo establishing a critical dialogue with Foucault on power and knowledge relations (Alcoff 2007), has suggested that global capitalism – and the concept of development attached to it – is deeply colonial in nature. Decolonial projects, such as promoting the notion of *Vivir Bien*, are perceived as vehicles for confronting and transforming coloniality. Coloniality can be defined as ‘a term that encompasses the transhistoric expansion of colonial domination and the perpetuation of its effects in contemporary time’ (Moraña et al. 2008: 2). Development as a scheme of improvement is intimately tied to and constructed upon colonial differences and multiple forms of inequalities. As Radcliffe (2015b, 5) suggests, coloniality is an underlying factor in all development interventions, because ‘development represents simultaneously and inextricably a form of knowing and a presumption of embodied, epistemological, and categorical social difference, through which governmentality operates’.

While the state has clearly been stripped of its previously strong roles in regulating the economy and providing social welfare by neoliberal restructurings, the intensification of state-led extractive economies and the political rise of progressive governments has turned the tide in Latin America (Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012), indicating that further analyses are needed (see, for example, Krupa and Nugent 2015). Important recent accounts on Andean postcolonial states provide inspiration for this study (Postero 2017; Radcliffe 2015b). Bolivia presents a case in which previously marginalized actors, such as social movements, indigenous organizations, and peasant unions – those presumably chaotic, undisciplined, and contentious masses at the margins of the state whose lives the practice of government aims to improve and govern – entered the sphere of government. Through contestations and political uprising, they captured the state apparatus. It is in this context that the double understanding of power and politics as forms of rule and as the transformative potential confronting forms of rule is most salient. This juxtaposition between political fiction and technocratic fiction has long characterized the Bolivian state (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2007: 41). Institutional traditions develop within organizations as, ‘bureaucracies are instruments of power that take on lives of their own’ (Heyman 2004: 489). Bureaucratic practices are seldom a direct result of

new or existing policy discourses, but they rather tend to function according to other logics, such as the maintenance of institutional relationships, hierarchies, and administrative order (Mosse 2005). Mismatch between analytical approaches to state images and state practices has also been dealt in Thelen et al. (2014) through the concept of relational modalities. In Bolivia, what was radically new was that the process of decolonization of the state not only aimed to open the state to previously marginalized peoples through new conceptual thinking, indigenous epistemologies, and alternative knowledge orientations, but in doing so, it also challenged the technical expert regimes and authority of public servants by condemning them as remnants of colonial, neoliberal past. This is where the theoretical consideration emerges. If the notion of *Vivir Bien* as a new form of government is about to succeed, something that is radically political needs to be tamed into bureaucratic practice.

In the following empirical sections, encounters between discursive and political aspects of the notion of *Vivir Bien* with bureaucratic practice and technical expertise are examined. Through ethnographic examples of policy events, workshops, and meetings between indigenous activists, ministers, consultants and public servants, it sheds light on the challenging task of transforming the notion of *Vivir Bien* into a technical framework. The following examination of perceptions and practices of public servants reveals that various interests emerged and collided already at the early stages of the revolutionary process, making the process of putting new conceptual ideas into practice a very complex matter.

### **Translating *Vivir Bien* into bureaucratic practices at sectoral plan workshops**

On a chilly, misty, early-November morning I joined a buzzing crowd of public servants on the doorsteps of the Ministry of Development Planning at the upper end of the Prado, the main avenue of Bolivia's capital, La Paz. I was about to catch a bus that would take planning directors and public servants from various ministries to the rugged and impoverished indigenous neighborhood of Chasquipampa up in the hills at the outskirts of the wealthy southern zone of the city. During the last months of 2008, the Vice-Ministry of Planning and Coordination organized a series of workshops in order to facilitate and coordinate the elaboration of sectoral development plans. Their aim was to enhance the implementation of the *vivir bien* state policy at ministries and other state institutions. The

first two-day sectoral workshop, where we were heading now, concentrated on defining vision, focus areas, and strategic development objectives for each sector. A similar two-day workshop in late November, for its part, focused on budgeting and on the creation of indicators for the purpose of monitoring and evaluation.

The workshop location in Chasquipampa was a large two-storey conference center, whose second floor auditorium held approximately one hundred public servants and sectoral stakeholders. It included university professors for the sector of education, policemen and military personnel for the sectors of security and defense respectively, and so forth. Most of the people appeared to be male, urban and middle class, some in suits, some in more informal jeans and sneakers. There were also some female public servants, especially among young sectoral consultants. At least from the surface, it seemed that representatives of social movements, indigenous organizations, and peasant unions were not present, which was curious given that discourses of *Vivir Bien* emphasized the value of indigenous knowledge and expertise.

The vice-minister of planning and coordination, Noel Aguirre, opened the workshop with a presentation in which he emphasized the importance of obtaining concrete results on how to implement *Vivir Bien* as bureaucratic practice instead of producing more and more discourses of what it means conceptually and philosophically as an alternative paradigm of development. ‘In the beginning, we [of the executive] were able to say that we don’t have experience in state administration,’ he said, and continued forcefully, ‘but now, now we have experience and we need to do something concrete.’ With this sentence Aguirre admitted that there had been problems and inefficiencies in concrete *Vivir Bien* policy execution. But now they were about to make a difference. Therefore, each institutional sector had to become aligned with the indigenous notion of *vivir bien*.

Aguirre suggested that each sector should use the workshop hours to analyze its own position towards the notion of *Vivir Bien* as a new development paradigm. Then sectors could go on discussing the possible vision for their sectors defined by Aguirre as the following:

A realistic and objectively calculable future situation for the state, society, target population, and the sector itself as a result of the actions of the sector that are conducted in the framework of its political and social mandate. It is based

on agreements between different actors, institutions, and social organizations with shared values, principles, and ideals that promote and inspire commitment towards change.<sup>6</sup>

Afterwards, the sectors were advised to define focus areas and strategic development objectives under which concrete programs and projects would be designed. Sectoral focus areas were defined by Aguirre as ‘those fundamental elements that summarize the most important components of the sectoral development vision’. A strategic objective was defined as:

An expected change that the sector is supposed to achieve in favor of the population. It is based on focus areas, potentialities, and problems of the sector. An objective is supposed to be short, simple, and straightforward, and it should express the expected change unambiguously. It has to be clear, specific (especially in its qualitative aspects), concrete, measurable, and verifiable. It should be ambitious, yet realistic and achievable.

Ultimately, it was difficult to see how these bureaucratic micropractices differed from previous ones, because the development planning techniques that Aguirre presented resembled universally applicable development techniques, such as those of program or project cycle, and logical frameworks approaches (LFAs) typical of development planning. It has been argued that these kinds of development techniques are used in development policy planning to portray ‘the rationality (and manageability) of a scheme with logically related and technically specified activities, measurable outputs, an ordered sequence and the functional integration of different components and institutional actors’ (Mosse 2005: 38). These were the exact techniques that indigenous activists and movements have often criticized because, in their opinion, these kinds of models and technical framings of problems and solutions are based on Western ideas of linear progress and causal logics; logics which, in their opinion, are the opposite of indigenous ideas, knowledge, and worldviews (Gudynas 2011: 445; Rodríguez-Carmona 2008: 226). Post-development scholars, Escobar (1991: 667), among others, has noted that this kind of planning approach ‘gives the impression that policy is the result of discrete, voluntaristic acts, not the process of coming to terms with conflicting interests and worldviews, in the course of which choices are made and exclusions effected’. Yet in Chasquipampa it appeared that the elaboration of sectoral plans within the framework of *Vivir Bien* relied on knowledge and logics typical of bureaucratic practice that are ‘explicit, codified, recognized as such and expressible...as rules [and] norms’ (Mosse 2005: 83). Conflicting interests and worldviews were not discussed despite the overt political criticism of previous development planning. Coupled with the lack of indigenous activists’

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<sup>6</sup> This and later definitions are my own translations from Aguirre’s power point presentations.

presence, it was difficult to see what new this kind of *Vivir Bien* planning was bringing to state governance.

Thus a contradiction had been established between indigenous policy discourses and concrete bureaucratic practice, which was very apparent in the views of public servants sitting in the audience. Commentaries made by public servants in the workshop strongly criticized the lack of clear planning, coordination, and guidance for public servants and institutions; they found it difficult to identify what they were supposed to do and in what direction and for what ends they were supposed to direct their work. They expressed the view that they needed more technical guidance and less politics. Most probably, they felt the insecurity of not having an identifiable problem – mentioned earlier by Li (2007) as the key of practice of government – they could solve with their fixed palette of expertise. Escobar (1991: 667), for example, has noted that the assignment of expertise has usually been based on the identification of ‘people as a problem....in such a way that some development program has to be accepted as a legitimate solution’. If capitalism and modernity – or “neoliberal colonialism” as defined by the first *Vivir Bien* state policy (2007) – was now identified as the problem to be solved, the attention of development expertise was detached from the poor and their inherent qualities. It was rather transferred to the non-poor and structural global inequalities, that is, to issues of power that have usually been out of the picture in de-politicized development discourses (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007). Therefore, public servants felt that their institutional traditions and technical expertise had been disrupted without their being offered clear guidelines for new institutional restructuring and technical management.

In his response to criticism, Aguirre underlined that the question was not about how to develop state institutions or how to define institutional strategies, but how to respond to the political and social demands of social movements, indigenous organizations, and peasant unions. He thereby reminded public servants that all technical work within the sectors had to respond to such political priorities as the notion of indigenous good life, decolonization, and resistance to neoliberal colonialism. After all, ‘the government does not want minor reforms but real transformations’, he concluded. Therefore, as political leader, he was balancing between politically set goals of radical revolutionary change, a new beginning, and existing bureaucratic practice that, on the one hand, should be decolonized, and on the other, function as the basis for the institutionalization of indigenous ideas through technical means. And, indeed, this translation is a challenge which is well recognized by political actors such as Aguirre

who, despite his political and ideological commitment to enhancing indigenous ideas, was deeply concerned about the translation of political discourses into bureaucratic practice. Aguirre explained to me in an interview that:

We know that we do not solely have to construct the philosophy...of *Vivir Bien* but, fundamentally, we know that we also have to construct a new model of development planning. Therefore, the notion of *Vivir Bien* has to have both a technical and instrumental side, as well as a political and ideological side. And this is our challenge. To combine the technical and the political is difficult; it is very complicated. It would be easier to follow what has already been written; what has already been worked upon before...But this is not what we want. We rather want to do something that has never been done before.

By stating this, Aguirre came to terms with what Escobar (1995) has written about overwhelming power of development discourse. Although there is a political commitment to think outside the box of neoliberal schemes of improvement, there is a difficulty in the practice of government to ‘move away from conventional Western modes of knowing...in order to make room for other types of knowledge and experience’ (Ibid.: 216). ‘The transformation in the order of discourse’, that Escobar calls for, is not sufficient; rather shifts in concrete technical exercise of development are needed. However, at the same time, Aguirre’s use of existing development techniques illustrated a tendency to institutionalize new political and indigenous discourses on the basis of existing micropractices of power.

### **Interpretational ambiguity of *Vivir Bien***

If some public servants at the sectoral workshop complained about the failure to render indigenous policy ideas into a technical agenda, others complained about the exact opposite: they noted that too much technicality would change the essence of indigenous discourses. Instead of demanding clearer technical guidelines for the translation of indigenous ideas into bureaucratic practice, they expressed concerns about traditional bureaucratic means. One of the public servants commented to Aguirre that, according to his understanding, the notion of *vivir bien* is not a ‘mechanistic neoclassical [economic] term’ that could be applied and measured in bureaucratic planning in a similar way to universally disseminated policy concepts. Another public servant joined him and suggested that, as public servants and policy actors, they ‘should not fall into *mecanicismo*’: mechanistic application of the notion of *vivir bien* which, in his opinion, rather referred to concrete life experiences of indigenous peoples in rural

communities.<sup>7</sup> By claiming that instead of being an achievable and measurable development goal, the notion of *vivir bien* signifies and symbolizes indigenous life (*vivencia*) itself, he (unconsciously) struck at the core of the criticism that many anthropologists and development researchers have made of the possibility of implementing indigenous policies as alternative paradigms. Scholars of indigenous knowledge, for example, have noted that when indigenous issues are raised as a policy concern, they are de-contextualized and extracted from their local cultural contexts. This is problematic because the solutions that indigenous knowledge is supposed to bring to development are, by definition, local (Ellen and Harris 2000; Pottier 2003). One manager of the Planning Unit at the Ministry of Development Planning expressed these concerns later to me in an interview in the following way:

The difficulty is the concept of *Vivir Bien* itself. In the NDP it appears as a very general concept whereas in real-life there are various ways of thought and action that can be considered part of the idea of *Vivir Bien* in different cultures and geographic areas. Although [as a state policy] it appears as a specific way of thinking – as a general philosophy – in reality it is a very diverse concept. The difficulty is that we have to construct *Vivir Bien* as a paradigm of development for the country, but for others it is their life experience as such. One Aymara intellectual from *Taller Oral Andino* expressed this to me by saying that “for us *Vivir Bien* is everyday life”. Solidarity, complementarity, and harmony with nature are integral parts of everyday life experiences in small indigenous communities but to take them to the level of the state is a problem. In urban environments reciprocity, complementarity, and solidarity have been lost; individualism, competitiveness, and productivity rather predominate. So, for some [*Vivir Bien*] is the practice of life itself, but for us as public servants it is something that we have to examine, classify, and construct... In terms of development planning, it is not clear how to work with these diverse practices and life experiences [of indigenous peoples]. In order to plan, we have to have a clear change in mind; we have to have development objectives, programs, and projects that can be operationalized. If we do not have concrete changes in mind; if the concept [of *Vivir Bien*] is not clear, we cannot work.

In this quote, the manager crystallized anxieties and challenges that public servants faced in their attempts to work with the new development paradigm. The lack of a centralized indigenous agenda through which to apply common policy frameworks has been identified elsewhere as well. Niezen (2003: 13), for example, has suggested that ‘notwithstanding a few widely prevailing notions of indigenous peoples’ innate environmental wisdom, what really sets this cultural movement apart is its absence of centralized dogma’. The notion of *Vivir Bien* has arisen from indigenous criticism of Western development discourses that, according to many indigenous activists and intellectuals, have concentrated on indigenous issues as “development problems”. With the notion of living well, this negative idea that indigenous peoples are always lacking something – more education, better health, in general more development – was transformed into a source of strength and aspiration. Yet from the point of view of public servants, this politically important aspect meant that new policy ideas were

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<sup>7</sup> Due to rural-urban-migration, such urban environments as El Alto – an Aymara city surrounding the capital La Paz – are also often described as sites for the emergence and production of *Vivir Bien* discourses and practices.

not represented as a problem needing to be fixed – a condition requiring technical and bureaucratic exercise. Instead, the notion of good life appeared as a goal towards which to aspire, or even as an already existing state of affairs. Therefore, it was not clear what public servants should do and with what means. To give an example: one person from the ministry in charge of nationalizations commented to me that ‘it has now become clear to me that we have to do everything in the name of *Vivir Bien*. You can ask me what it means, but I don’t know what to answer you.’

This has led into a situation in which public servants interpret and apply the notion of *Vivir Bien* through their own professional points of view, academic expertise, and technical capacities. A public servant from the Ministry of Education, for example, defined it to me as the satisfaction of basic needs and as an access to education, health, and housing. Another public servant from the health sector expressed that although indigenous life experiences were foreign to him, he could, nevertheless, relate to some ideals that were akin to his own rather conservative thinking. Public servants, therefore, identified those bits and pieces of the notion of *vivir bien* that were familiar to them. For Aguirre, one way to surpass the ambiguity was the use of clear technical planning tools. Sticking to traditional techniques of development and to the bureaucratic language spoken by public servants enabled Aguirre to direct public servants beyond the conceptual vagueness. Mosse (2005: 15) has described this kind of tendency, typical to policy making, as ‘the art, first, of making a convincing argument and developing a causal model (relating inputs, outputs, and impacts)... validating higher policy goals, and, second, of bringing together diverse even incompatible interests’. Standard intervention models offered new – and inexperienced – political actors a tool to direct public servants with various interests towards a common effort. However, there emerged the risk of continuing with neoliberal rationalities of depoliticization rather than introducing new decolonizing and democratizing ways of doing revolutionary politics.

Already during the period of my fieldwork, the notion of *Vivir Bien* provided a battlefield of meanings. Valentin Ticona Colque, the then Vice-Minister of Community Justice<sup>8</sup>, gave me an example of this in his own field: human rights and justice:

*Vivir bien* is a Spanish translation. And sometimes concepts make us fight with each other; they bring us difficulties and problems in this process [of change]...So, the problem resides in the concept: how does one understand it?...We

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<sup>8</sup> After the approval of the new constitution, the Vice-Ministry was renamed *Viceministerio de Justicia Indígena-Originaria-Campesina*.

should discuss these concepts profoundly; one should understand what we [the Aymara] really mean with the concept *Suma Qamaña*...We are trying to reconstruct these principles and values that still exist today among indigenous peoples so that they could serve for the whole society, for the whole country. We understand *Vivir Bien* as *Suma Qamaña*...

Ticona's point here was that as a Spanish translation, the notion of *Vivir Bien* does not necessarily capture all those elements that its indigenous advocates promote. As an indigenous leader from the *ayllu* Chullpa in North Potosí, one of the poorest regions in the country, Ticona was of the opinion that the Aymara concept of *Suma Qamaña* reflected the “real” characteristics and foundations upon which policy shift should rely. A “proper” understanding of *Suma Qamaña* as an Aymara idea, worldview, or a way of life was not being translated into the practice of government, and the notion of *Vivir Bien* had, therefore, become an extremely ambiguous term, accommodating diverse – and even contradictory – meanings. This coincides with Radcliffe's (2015b: 273) observation on Ecuador according to which ‘government policy did not encompass the full meaning and transformative potential [of *Sumak Kamsay*] either in its means or ends’.

Vaclav<sup>9</sup>, a former consultant at the Ministry of Planning, told me in an interview in 2017 that in the practice of government, *Vivir Bien* had turned into a mere ‘Westernized container of indigenous images’; according to him, the term as it was used in bureaucratic practice during his time of service did not originate from indigenous peoples’ own experiences. The same view was shared by Oscar Vega, a critical scholar, activist, and member of the intellectual group *Grupo Comuna* whom I interviewed in 2017. He said that during the time of the Constituent Assembly, the notion of *Vivir Bien* still reflected the real-life political efforts and struggles of indigenous organizations. In ten years of executive and bureaucratic practice, however, he suggested, *Vivir Bien* had been converted into ‘a depoliticized trademark’. Although the governing regime continues to operate through the notion of *Vivir Bien*, its political potential has been emptied: depoliticization has rather taken place. As my observations of state operations have been indicating, this was already an ongoing tendency during my 2008–2009 fieldwork.

## Micro-techniques of development as the practice of government

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<sup>9</sup> A pseudonym

In the second sectoral workshop at the end of November 2008, Flavio<sup>10</sup>, a young technical consultant from the Ministry of Development Planning introduced guidelines for monitoring and evaluation which he had elaborated with the approval of the ministry's political leaders. The well-structured technical toolkit that he presented to the audience of public servants resembled those used by development agencies and NGOs worldwide, a reflection of his many years of work experience in donor agencies and donor-funded projects in Bolivian ministries. He explained the logics of monitoring and evaluation and gave guidelines for the formulation of indicators. As had been the case with the formulation of vision, focus areas, and objectives, it was emphasized here that sectoral indicators should be simple, practical, reliable, and unambiguous. They should 'reflect directly and without ambiguity the progress made towards the chosen objectives'<sup>11</sup>. Flavio also said that they should be formulated in such a way that data on the progress of indicators could be gathered systematically. At the end of his presentation, Flavio gave an example of a desirable logical framework matrix that public servants were supposed to formulate.

Although logical framework analysis (LFA), objective trees, indicators, and other standardized development techniques had been criticized by many indigenous scholars as reflections of 'Western' linear thinking, they were, nevertheless, used in governmental practice. This was problematic as 'standard intervention models and project cycles are designed to take out history, to exclude wider economic and political analysis, and to isolate project action from the continuous flow of social life' (Long 2001: 32). As such, this governmental practice represented a contradiction in terms of policy discourses because at the level of principle, the notion of *vivir bien* was exactly rooted in tackling wider economic, political, social, and cultural issues. Flavio commented on this to me in an interview later in the following way:

These [sectoral] plans that are made now are not based on new solutions. There are some new interesting ideas that have been included in them but mostly there is nothing that is totally different from before. And, in my opinion, there shouldn't be. Standardized planning models have existed for long time... In theory, new things are nice but in practice what has happened is that many [sectoral] plans are copied from old plans. Only minor details have been added so that they would fit into the new structure [of *Vivir Bien*]. It is much easier to continue to do what one has always done than to change one's orientation.

This quotation reflected that there was a disinterest in creating new technical tools and planning mechanisms in response to decolonizing and democratizing policy agendas. In the practice of state

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<sup>10</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt from Flavio's power point presentation.

bureaucracy, it was convenient to lean on existing ways of doing things rather than challenging the prior forms of knowledge and technical expertise of public servants. Individual responses like this were symptoms reflecting more fundamental ways of how power functions at bureaucracies. Thus, the incorporation of radical decolonizing indigenous ideas into bureaucratic practice was very much a work in progress that was constantly challenged by the coloniality of state practices and internalization of expert regimes that had for long been imposed on such countries of the Global South as Bolivia by the global development industry. One of the program directors at the Ministry of Development Planning expressed this in a somewhat similar way when he stated to me in an interview:

At the moment, it can be seen that in those development plans that are being worked upon right now, such as sectoral development plans, we can explain the philosophical part [of the notion of *Vivir Bien*] very well. But when it comes to grounding these [philosophical ideas] in concrete and rational proposals that would still be within the framework of *Vivir Bien*, there emerges a rupture, a very clear rupture. Programs and projects are the same as before; they are conducted within the same traditions as always before. And, as we do not have indicators of *Vivir Bien* yet, indicators evidently continue to be the same; they are the traditional ones. So, you can imagine what kind of rupture exists between the paradigm of *Vivir Bien* and the reality [of bureaucratic practice]; the reality is different...

This commentary makes one wonder where to locate the rupture and abyss between concepts and practices. Was it the lack of technical expertise? To some extent, it appeared that when the notion of *vivir bien* was brought into state policy discourses, it did not respond to public servants' need for an identifiable problem that they could solve with specific technical means and with the technical expertise that they have. Neoliberal colonialism stated in the national development plan was such a wide problem that in addition to technical tools, it would require major political changes that were outside the repertoire of public servants. Such issues as the lack of indicators were an obvious source of disorientation among consultants and public servants, but not as crucial as the lack of knowing – or agreement on – what kind of transformation was sought. It seemed that the logics of the notion of *vivir bien* as state policy served specific political purposes, while the bureaucratic practices discussed here showed coherence and consistency within logics that continued to encourage institutional continuity and stability. Standard intervention models seemed to be overruling the indigenous policy discourses that new and inexperienced political leaders were trying to promote.

These kinds of techniques as micropractices of power seemed to reproduce neoliberal rationalities of governmentality by depoliticizing *Vivir Bien* as an alternative discourse for development. My observations paralleled those of Oscar Vega who commented to me in 2017 that 'neoliberalism continues to be still in force in contemporary Bolivia through governmental technologies, languages,

and words'. He said that it is common in Bolivia to perceive neoliberalism as part of a specific epoch that ended with the election of Morales and the MAS. However, as he suggested, neoliberalism does not have to be tied to a specific ideology. Its strength is rather in its capacity to live on and to do things through individuals, this time impoverished indigenous citizens, who, for example, have become targets of governmental operations through Morales' social programmes. "*Vivir Bien* has been converted into a logo through which neoliberal rationalities continue to function," Vega concluded.

### **Opposition and racism among public servants**

Until Morales' regime, it had been rare to see people in traditional indigenous dress in public sector offices, especially indigenous women (Poma et al. 2008: 46). Now public servants were faced with a situation in which the executive was led by an indigenous president and various ministers of indigenous origins who had traditionally been considered to be "below" the ranks of urban, middle-class public servants. This was not an easy change for many public servants. One program director at the Ministry of Health, however, noted that some positive changes had now occurred:

What has changed is that we now work more according to intercultural criteria. In job announcements, for example, we no longer restrict who can apply for the job. In the case of secretaries, for example, one of the requirements that we used to have was that the person had to have a good appearance (*buena presencia*) and as a result, women in *pollera* [indigenous dress] were eliminated from the candidates. Today, you can already find many secretaries in the ministries in *pollera*.

Despite remarks like this, my interviews and interactions with public servants indicated that disdainful attitudes towards indigenous peoples still persisted. Many, for example, complained that indigenous peoples had entered political positions without having any capacity to run the state and with little or no formal education. This was considered unfair by many public servants who had been trained in universities for years. There were fears that in the name of decolonization, uneducated indigenous peoples aligned to the MAS would take the place of those public servants recruited by previous governments. One of the public servants mentioned that their biggest fear was losing their influence and the respect they felt to be their due. Another public servant from the Ministry of Education described the change that had occurred in the following way:

Most public servants originate from the middle class. What is being attempted now is to have more social inclusion of those groups that have been denied access to public sector jobs before so that they would also have better opportunities to participate in the management of the state, to fulfil their needs according to the knowledge of their own realities. So, the public servant has to change his current thinking, and to open up his ideological horizon; to open up [his thinking] because he has been trained in the tradition of exclusion and the tradition of not attending to people in an equal way. This process has already begun and we have to continue with it, because we know that it is a long road to change the attitude of a public servant in such a way that he would want to serve a society that is composed of many cultures.

For some, the contemporary process of state transformation was a source of astonishment and an awakening call, as if they had only recently come to realize how diverse Bolivian society is, and how each person, despite their background, should have equal rights. One public servant stated in an innocently surprised way that ‘we have only now come to realize that there are different cultures and worldviews in our country. Now they should all have equal rights and equality of opportunities.’ Others were more concerned to state that, in their opinion, indigenous ideas, such as the notion of *vivir bien*, signaled “backwardness and decay”. During a break in one of the sectoral plan workshops, a public servant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me that he does not have the slightest belief or interest in the notion of *vivir bien*. In his opinion, it was impossible that such a policy could work in the modern world; ‘Maybe it works in backward and static indigenous communities that do not have any development,’ he concluded. This parallels the remark that Goldstein (2004: 13) has made of racialized juxtapositions between modernity and tradition, and progress and backwardness according to which ‘the countryside, defined in terms of “Indianness” that is threatening and dangerous to whites, stands for the national past, contrasted with the urban centers that represent the nation’s future’. Yet due to his work, this public servant had to participate in the translation of indigenous policy into bureaucratic practice; in the design of a sectoral plan for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

These derogatory attitudes towards indigenous ideas as backward were further emphasized in the following quote from the public servant, mentioned above, who told me that he works for Morales’ government solely for the purpose of retaining a job. After an initial response related to the employment situation, he stated that many public servant suffered from the fear of losing influence and respect. Furthermore, he identified racism and fear as the main reasons for public servants to be hesitant and reluctant with the new policy framework and the decolonization process in general.

People do not know about *Vivir Bien* in the ministry and they also do not care. The first reason is racism. They do not like Evo. Or actually, this is an understatement; they hate him. They hate him because they do not want to be governed by someone who is not like them. Those who were under them have arisen. For them, *Vivir Bien* is part of Indian thinking and they reject it. The second is the fear of the unknown; the fear of losing influence and respect. Thirty years

ago, the middle class was purely white but nowadays it is changing. The middle class is experiencing the fear of losing influence. [Indigenous] people under them were earlier like dogs and now, suddenly, they are governing [the country].

Although he talked about “them”, it became clear that, as a public servant, he also shared these same fears and prejudices about being governed by “backward dogs”. This affected the relationships of such public servants with newly elected ministers resulting in considerable antagonism and suspicion between them. Húgo Fernández, the then vice-minister for foreign affairs, who himself is not from indigenous origins, nevertheless identified this ethnic dimension as crucial in the contentions and power struggles that had emerged within state governance:

The most important reason for [contentions] are the prejudices against indigeneity. These prejudices were always underlying in dominant thinking patterns [of public servants] but now they have become visible in this conflict for power. It is pure racism: a complete and systematic denial of indigenous values, worldviews, and ways to understand the world, combined with an exaggerated estimation of all that is Western.

What, therefore, impedes the implementation of bureaucratic practice through indigenous ideas is, in Fernández’ opinion:

[T]he dominant thinking that is thoroughly penetrated by pejorative and negative conceptualizing of indigeneity... This colonial legacy has been strengthened by [state] power mechanisms... that are maintained despite the clear demographic reality which is that indigenous peoples are a majority in this country. The only way to combat this reality is to declare [indigenous peoples] to be inferiors... It is not accepted that an *indio* thinks better or that an *indio* wins.

In other words, the state bureaucracy has historically functioned as a disciplinary power that segments different social groups into specific ethnically defined positions. The rise of indigenous peoples into the state administration and the adoption of decolonial state policy discourses have challenged the status quo between privileged and underprivileged groups and overturned ethnically defined hierarchical relations and structures that have been so deeply rooted in Bolivian state-society relations. This, together with conceptual insecurities, fear of losing social position, and plain racism, has led to opposition among public servants and the retention of bureaucratic practice as it was prior to the introduction of *Vivir Bien* in an endeavour to hold change at bay. To an extent, it has reflected the colonial experiences of the “racialization” of relations between colonizers and colonized’ (Quijano 2005: 56–7). In a political context of major change, the continuation of bureaucratic practice as usual has been a way to maintain the disciplinary power of the state bureaucracy over those that it governs.

## Conclusions

This article has examined how micropractices of power, such as standardized development planning techniques, impede, on their part, the construction of state governance through radically new kinds of alternative paradigms. Consequently, they tend to reproduce neoliberal rationalities of governmentality by depoliticizing *vivir bien* discourses that emerged from contestations and political uprising of social and indigenous movements. Thereby, the article has made the case for examining, through ethnographic scrutiny, the complexities of concrete bureaucratic practices to shed new light on what kinds of issues contribute to the failure of radical political transformations. It is not my aim to claim that bureaucratic micropractices are all that it takes to compromise such profound processes of change as the decolonization of the state. However, together with recent twists and turns in Bolivian politics over resource extraction and the contradictory emergence of state-led developmentalist notion of *vivir bien* (McNeish 2013; Ranta 2016a; Webber 2016) – an issue dealt in the context of Ecuador in this volume by Lalander and Merimaa – it enables the construction of a more nuanced understanding of how alternative paradigms of development function and articulate amidst state transformation processes.

I have demonstrated that many of the problems in implementation were visible right from the beginning of the revolutionary process. As my ethnographic examples from sectoral plan workshops in Bolivia indicated, attempts are being made to formulate a simple, concrete and unambiguous vision, focus areas, and objectives, as well as monitoring and evaluation systems, for different policy sectors according to the logics of the notion of *vivir bien*, an alternative paradigm for development. This has been a difficult process as the concept itself is very ambiguous. Rendering indigenous ideas technical makes them more accessible to public servants and consultants who are often less familiar with indigenous discourses than are representatives of social movements, indigenous activists, academic scholars, and political leaders. In a sense, the application of standardized technical tools for planning eases the unification of various perceptions under common technical frameworks. Yet, it also allows fragmentation because, as was explained, the content of the process of decolonization of the state through indigenous ideas is not clearly defined which makes the concept open to a variety of interpretations depending on specific, and diverging, interests.

Although Bolivia's process of state transformation through indigenous ideas has been a result of the practice of politics by social movements, indigenous organizations, and peasant unions – a critical challenge to neoliberal expert regimes – the formulation of a new style of 'practice of government' outside neoliberal governmentality introduced by international development apparatus has been difficult. Although the institutionalization of the new revolutionary beginning through indigenous ideas would require the construction of new democratic arenas for the participation and deliberation of social movements and indigenous organizations, indigenous discourses are rather compressed into the mode of pre-existing technical tools and frameworks. Absent from bureaucratic workshops that I described and analyzed in this article were discourses about indigenous peoples' own modes of governance, such as indigenous self-governance through autonomy, control of lands and territories, and even their physical participation. Local actors, such as social movements and indigenous organizations, were absent from forums aiming to translate their political discourses into state practice. Difficulties in problematization and in rendering technical have led to a situation in which the notion of *vivir bien* has not effectively become a new kind of radical decolonizing and decentralizing practice of government. The ethnographic examination of how this has occurred shows the kinds of tensions and contradictions amidst what state actors find themselves at. In the course of the events, there is a danger that new indigenous discourses legitimize the reproduction of neoliberal rationalities dominant in bureaucratic traditions and practices: the coloniality of the state constantly reproduces itself in the continuation of micropractices of power.

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