“Indigenous Identity and Identification in Peru: Indigenismo, Education and Contradictions in State Discourse”

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Indigenous Identity and Identification in Peru: 
*Indigenismo*, Education and Contradictions in State Discourses

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Intellectual and State discourses in Latin America have often coincided in their attempts to use the Indian, or the imagined Indian, as an object to construct national ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983). At key moments, these discourses have overlapped and informed State policies, most notably in the realm of indigenous education. While education policies have affected different indigenous populations in a variety of ways, they have consistently exposed them, either directly or indirectly, to dominant notions of Indianness. Through the medium of education (and other) policies formulated particularly for indigenous populations, intellectual and State discourses have therefore contributed to the formulation of radically different articulations and expressions of indigenous identity throughout Latin America. For example, Brazil’s indigenous peoples constitute less than one percent of its national population, and yet are mobilized into approximately 140 influential social and political organizations (Ramos, 1997). In Guatemala, the Maya Nationalist movement has compelled the current Arzú government to create a ‘Bureau of Indigenous Affairs’, and thereby formally institutionalize the interests of the country’s diverse Mayan peoples, who comprise almost sixty percent of the population (Stein, 1998; Cojít Cuxil, 1997). In Peru, however, despite the fact that approximately thirty-eight percent of the population is ‘officially’ considered to be indigenous, there is a remarkable absence of institutionalized social or political organization around indigenous cultural identity (see Degregori, 1998).

I want to ask why there is nothing approximating an ‘Inca Nationalism’ movement in Peru. While acknowledging the obvious problems and limitations of trying to explain an absence, the general lack of indigenous identification with Indianness has clear antecedents. A fundamental part of the answer to this question may be found by examining the way in which Peru’s rural population has been interpellated by and exposed to the intellectual and State discourses which have intersected in their contemplation of the so called ‘problem’ of indigenous citizenship, and sought to address that problem through the forum of public education. Of particular importance are the indigenous educational initiatives which have been implemented from the mid-1940s to the present. This investigation has three parts. In the first part, I examine conceptual and theoretical questions of identity and identification, and how they relate to both intellectual discourses of *indigenismo*, and State policies of education that have been formulated specifically for Peru’s indigenous population. The second part
examine how these conceptual and theoretical considerations may be contextu-
alized by reference to two decisive moments in the history of Peruvian educa-
tional policy. I first examine the tenure of a prominent indigenista in-
tellectual—Luis E. Valcárcel—as Peru’s Minister of Education during the 
mid-1940s, and then move to Juan B. Velasco’s military regime of the late 
1960s and early 1970s. During both periods, the State initiated revolutionary 
social and educational reforms that would have profound consequences for Peru’s indige-
nous populations. In the final part, I suggest that the blatant contradictions of 
these sequential reformulations of indigenous education policy point to a preven-
tent, underlying intellectual belief in the ephemeral properties and superficiality of ‘Indianness’ as a cultural marker. The notable lack of identification with ‘Indianness’ in the Peruvian sierra (highlands) may therefore be understood, in 
part, as a response to the misrepresented or inconsistent policies that have sought to interpellate indigenous peoples as social and political subjects during the 
tenet century.

Indigenismo, Education and the State: Identity or Identification?

In a comparative investigation of indigenous political participation in the Andes, 
Carlos Irvin Degregori observes that movements that define themselves in 
ethnic terms do not arise automatically” (Degregori, 1998, p. 204). The uneven-
ness in the relative strength of indigenous movements in different countries 
points to corresponding differences in the cultural significance of ‘Indianness’ as 
a social and political concept. As noted earlier, for example, “being Indian” in 
Brazil and Guatemala has provided some ground for the social and political 
mobilization of indigenous peoples, while in Peru, the perceived need to negate ‘Indianness’ has apparently impeded the organization of the indigenous popula-
tion for collective interests around a shared cultural heritage or common set of 
cultural practices.

In an interview with César Lévano entitled ‘The Indian: Does Not Exist,’ 
anthropologist William Stair observes a general rejection of ‘Indianness’ by 
Peru’s rural population, and therefore considers the term ‘Indian’ to be a 
misnomer in the Peruvian case. Referring to his experience working with 
indigenous people in the community of Vicos, he notes: ‘[They] didn’t like the 
word Indian. It was an insult. ... It’s a word that hurts, and (I think) Andeanists 
should stop using it’ (Lévano, 1996, p. 42). He also affirms: ‘If no Peruvian wants 
to be an Indian, no Peruvian should be an Indian. And if any Peruvian wants 
to be an Indian, well, so be it’ (Lévano, 1995, p. 41).2 Stair’s observation, like point to an important lexical dichotomy that transcends linguistic considerations and 
has profound social and political consequences for Peruvian society, especially for 
that thirty-eight percent of the population, which is often marginalized by 
the State as indigenous. We can frame this dichotomy according to the distinc-
tion that Stuart Hall makes between identities and identifications. Identities are 
articulated by social actors when their own notions of subjectivity correspond to, 
and are reflected in the discourses of practices that attempt to interpellate them 
as social subjects. Identifications, however, refer to the instances in which 
external interpellation fails to correspond to the social actor’s own notion of 
subjectivity (Hall, 1990). Adapting Michael Walzer’s (1994) terminology from his 
discussion of the ‘thickness’ or ‘thinness’ of moral discourse, ‘identities’ may be 
posited as interior and ‘thick’, while ‘identifications’ are ‘better understood as 
exterior and ‘thin’. Identification is ‘thin’ because it denies or ignores the 
profoundly local and historical, as well as the immutable aspects of cultural 
difference, and instead propounds cultural universalism and the possibility of transculturation. The ‘thickness’ of identity conversely points to the limits of 
cultural universalism, and therefore circumscribes the possibilities of transculturation.

The domination of Indian Identification over Indian identity in the realm of 
policy making forces a disjunction between what Alcida Rita Ramos has called 
the ‘fresh and Good Indian’ and the ‘personified’ or ‘model’ Indian, thereby 
relegating indigenous populations to ‘a remote source of ideological raw ma-
terial’ (see Ramos, 1994, pp. 156–161). Consequently, the needs and desires of 
indigenous populations have often been subordinate to, or subsumed by the 
needs and desires of the State, non-governmental organizations, or their benefac-
tors. In the Peruvian case, the domination of identification over identity pro-
duced an ideological fusion of the two concepts which has shaped the education 
policies and programs that have sought to determine the position of indigenous 
peoples within national society. These concepts must therefore be uncoupled if 
such policies and programs are to achieve their stated objectives.

The relative absence of indigenous political and social movements in Peru has 
been noted by other scholars, who like William Stair point to the rejection of the 
label ‘Indian’ in the Peruvian sierra. Degregori (1998) indicates that the lack of 
identification with ‘Indianness’ is related to indigenous efforts to hurdle the 
ethnic barriers that have historically impacted their participation in national 
society. Marisol de la Cadena (1998) demonstrates that within the complex 
Peruvian social hierarchy—a meritoriness of sorts—racial and ethnic ‘obstacles’ 
can be ‘overcome’, or are subsumed by considerations of class, culture and education. The lack of non-compulsory identification with ‘Indianness’ (i.e. ‘Indian Identity’) in Peru may also be seen as a complex indigenous 
response to the discourses which have identified them as social and political 
subjects, most notably, educational policies.

Indigenous populations have been interpellated, by, on the one hand, intellec-
tual discourses of indigenismns, and on the other hand, State discourses regarding 
education, that have tried, through a game of policy formulations, to figure out 
what to do with them. In Stuart Hall’s (1995) terms, indigenous peoples have 
been contempated as objects to be ‘identified’ and dealt with from ‘above’ rather 
than as subjects capable of understanding and reconceptualizing their own problematic 
positions within national society. Following in a tradition of criticism that has 
questioned the treatment of indigenous peoples within academia, Carlos Irvin 
Degregori suggests that the very concept of the ‘Indian problem’, mistakenly 
implies that indigenous peoples are homogeneous ethnic subjects—constructed 
as radically distinct and counterposed against the West—whose only attitude 
tends to be resistance to the State ... and does not appear to have changed since the 
discourses, the quandaries of indigenous citizenship have most often been 
posited as a ‘problem’ for Latin American States and for those who dominate 
them, and only secondarily as a problem for indigenous peoples themselves. 
Such a framework is clearly not acceptable if we are to avoid the pitfalls of 
homogenizing and merely ‘identifying’ the Indian subject. Differing articulations
and expressions of indigenous identity must therefore be understood neither as a result, nor as a defiance of intellectual and State discourses, but rather as a collection of local responses to the questions of citizenship and national identity that have been central to those discourses. To borrow Marc Zimmerman's framework, the State is simultaneously central and secondary; there are 'resistances to the State, but also resistances to resistances. ... The view of Indians as products of the State or resistance thence disavows into a much more complex picture' (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 39).

Indigenismo is a body of literary, socio-political and linguistic discourse that problematizes indigenous citizenship and can be understood as a post-colonial response to the historical subjugation of indigenous peoples, and to their omission from the national imaginaries of the nation states in which they live. Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima has argued that indigenismo, as an analytical, rather than a historical category, should be considered 'a set of ideas and ideals concerning the incorporation of Indian peoples into nation-states' (de Souza Lima, 1991, p. 229). Debates over indigenous education which question dominant notions of Nation, State and citizenship are intrinsically related to the major concerns of what I call 'radical' indigenista discourses, which may be seen as defining the extreme positions on the opposing ends of the complex, and often times contradictory spectrum that Peruvian indigenista discourse represents.

Radical indigenismo comprised two primary positions vis-à-vis Peru's indigenous population during the period under investigation, both of which came to be central to indigenous education policies. The indigenistas who adopted the first position idealized the Indian race, and sought to isolate 'pure', 'uncorrupted' Indians from the rest of Peruvian society in order to project their intrinsic goodness and nobility into the core of an imagined national identity. For the indigenistas who identified with the second position, the solution to Peru's social problems was instead to be found in the 'redemption' of the Indian individual and the gradual disappearance of the Indian race, which would ideally be accomplished by the biological fusion of Indians with mestizos and Whites. The individual Indian was therefore seen as the mechanism by which the cultural difference of Indians and his subsequent acculturation into dominant Peruvian society. A subset of the proponents of this position similarly sought to redeem the Indian by raising his social and political consciousness. Those Marxists indigenistas did not, then, strip away Indianess; instead, the 'thickness' of 'Indian' cultural difference was negated by choosing to see indigenous peoples through the lens of class, as peasants or serfs, rather than as Indians. While Peruvian intellectuals and politicians understood Indianess in different and fundamentally contradictory ways, they consistently posited 'Indian' and 'rational citizen' as incompatible, or even mutually exclusive categories. The State's indigenous policies were inadvertently caught up in their debates, and were therefore saddled with inconsistency and contradiction.

In the remaining parts of this paper, I examine two periods during which 'solutions' to the so-called 'Indian problem' were configured and implemented through the field of education in very different ways. As part of these solutions, the Peruvian State created, legitimized, and imposed labels—identifications—onto its indigenous peoples in a move that both objectified them and limited their ability to posit themselves as subjects and creators of their own political, social or cultural identities. This dispute over labels—particularly the debate over the word 'Indian', and its appropriateness as a classification for Peru's indigenous population—contributed to the implementation of inconsistent and oftentimes contradictory configurations of cultural identification for Peru's rural inhabitants within twentieth-century State discourses. The polemics ultimately served to undermine the development of indigenous political movements in modern-day Peru because it contributed both to the rejection of 'Indianness' by indigenous peoples, and to the prevalence of anti-indigenous attitudes and behaviours.

Valcárcel goes to Lima: Indigenismo as State Discourse

Early twentieth-century debates over the role of the Indian in Peruvian society, and over the merits and desirability of biological and cultural mestizaje (mixing), divided Peruvian indigenistas into two major camps, those who equated mestizaje with degeneration, and those who embraced and advocated it as a positive social force. The two major influences driving each of those 'schools' were Luis E. Valcárcel and José Uribarri García, respectively. Valcárcel led Peruvian sereno intellectuals (those from the highlands) in reproducing cultural mestizaje as degeneration, and therefore identifying mestizos as 'disfigured' and 'deplured' Indians. The local, performative terms for mestizo and miscegenation—ch'ula and ch'lliñac'í (becoming a ch'ula, or in other words, degenerates)—demonstrate this point quite succinctly. 'Indigenista ... intellectuals ... portrayed ch'ulas as inconceivable types, unfit cultural hybrids who had left the countryside, but could not adapt to the city' (de la Cadena, 1998, p. 156).

The conventional acceptance of Laancarán's genetics during the early twentieth century led Peruvian intellectuals, both indigenistas and their critics, to believe that acquired physical traits, shaped by environmental factors, could be inherited (de la Cadena, 1998, p. 146; Stepan, 1991). When exposed to 'appropriately' cultural influences—for example, a properly indigenous education—once could be 'improved'. Conversely, the corruption of pure Indian culture through contact with the 'outside' world would lead to racial degeneration. Like other sereno intellectuals who believed in the race-improving capacity of education, Valcárcel advocated indigenismo as a project that could 'improve' indigenous peoples without removing or detracting from their pure 'Indianness', thereby allowing Peru's leaders to construct (or imagine) their nation upon the foundation of its 'glorified', pre-Colombian past (de la Cadena, 1996, pp. 144-151).

For Valcárcel, himself a biological mestizo, the term mestizaje indicated cultural rather than biological hybridity. As proponents of cultural purity, Valcárcel's school of indigenistas enunciated 'pure' Quechua over the 'tainted' versions spoken by the ch'ulas who had moved out of rural areas and into burgeoning urban areas—the lamented and disdain'd 'pochachos mestizos' (Valcárcel, 1927). Valcárcel's 'pura', indigenismo was a radical position, and differed fundamentally from the versions touted by many of his contemporaries. When he was appointed to the Ministry of Education in 1945 by President Bustamante y Rivero, Valcárcel's indigenismo was transferred out of intellectual discourse and into the realm of official State policy.

State-sponsored indigenismo under Valcárcel perpetuated his characterizations of mestizaje as degenerated Indians. The administration attempted to thwart the expansion of what it considered to be undesirable cultural hybridity with
policies that transformed the Peruvian educational system, especially in rural areas. One of the most significant changes was the establishment of rural schools called ‘Núcleos Escolares Comunitarios,’ which were financed with the collaboration of the U.S. (Morillo, 1994, p. 397). Through these new schools, the Ministry of Education implemented an educational policy infused with a purist, anti-mestizo ideology that sought to forge a State out of two physically and culturally separate nations that would ideally never have to meet. In his memoirs, Valderrama wrote:

Our project was founded on ideas that were very different from those which had dominated public education until that time. For us, the confrontation between two cultures was a fundamental problem, and we rejected the idea of ‘incorporating’ indigenous peoples into occidental civilization. It was not admissible to seek incorporation of the Indian into ‘civilized life,’ and we had to position ourselves from the opposite point of view (Valderrama, 1981, pp. 350-351).

Valderrama’s term as Minister of Education lasted for only 2 years, but his influence on rural education endured much longer, as the Núcleos Escolares Comunitarios remained steady in place until the end of the 1960s.

Education in the Núcleos Escolares Comunitarios mandated first, that Indians were to stay in what was considered by Valderrama’s school of indigenista intellectuals to be their own proper place—-the syllis (the Quechua word for Indian community)—and second, that they should maintain the customs, ideas, agricultural technologies, arts, feasting, beliefs and perhaps most importantly, the native language that distinguished them from what he referred to as ‘occidental Peru’ (Valderrama, 1981, p. 350). Valderrama’s educational ideology did not therefore seek to transform or assimilate Peruvian Indians through education, but rather, to improve them by establishing strong links between the school and the indigenous community. The schools were intended to educate Indian children for what they inevitably ‘would become,’ not, in the case of the adults, to improve what they already were (Morillo, 1994, p. 350).

Whereas the texts written for non-indigenous schools portrayed urban contexts and varied themes, those created for indigenous school children depicted an idealized Andean reality that was enchantingly harmonious and free from social conflict. In one text—Pampa—for example, the protagonist’s sister is lauded as an exemplary Indian female: ‘what lovely braids fall over her shoulders. She has inherited her mother’s beauty, docility and love of work’ (Morillo, 1994, p. 350). For Valderrama and his followers, it was the government’s additional responsibility to determine exactly how much of the ‘outside world’ could be filtered into the indigenous community without threatening Indian purity. Referring to his plan for indigenous education, he affirmed: ‘It is the educator’s responsibility to determine which aspects of the mass of modern culture deserve to be admitted into indigenous culture’ (Valderrama, 1981, p. 350).

The Núcleos Escolares Comunitarios were evidently founded upon the notion that race could be improved through education, or degenerated through corruption. In this context of malleable racial categories and cursory cultural identifications, the labels, ‘Indian,’ ‘mestizo’ and ‘occidental’ meant, at the same time, nothing and everything. In other words, it was conceivable that three people who shared the same phenotype could be distinguished culturally, whereby one might be considered Indian, another mestizo or cholo, and the third White. At the same time, these racial categories—which were ironically not indicators of race in the biological sense—were central to Valderrama’s indigenismo, and therefore a crucial component of the State’s educational policies which had been founded upon his beliefs.

Valderrama’s vehement defense of the Indian may have been considered politically progressive within the historical context in which it was first developed, especially when compared to the radical indigenista discourses which were also prevalent at the time. In retrospect, however, Valderrama’s notion of Indians and the policies that were founded upon it can certainly be construed as racist. Furthermore, as it posited that Indians could be so easily ‘corrupted’ or ‘degenerated’ through mestizaje, by contact with the non-Indian, ‘outside world,’ Valderrama’s position represents the flip-side of the assimilationists’ belief in the ‘degeneracy’ or ‘superiority of Indian cultural difference. In other words, Valderrama lamented the same disappearance of ‘pure’ Indians that the assimilationists sought to achieve.

The Velasco Regime and the Shift from Indian to Peasant

In the second period under study, we move ahead to 1965, some 20 years after the implementation of Valderrama’s Núcleos Escolares Comunitarios, when Juan Velasco Alvarado overturned Belaunde’s founding government and replaced it with his own ‘revolutionary’ military regime. By the time Velasco’s regime was in place, the Marxist class rhetoric that began with Mariategui in the 1920s, and that later came to be associated with anti-Valderrama or pro-mestizaje positions in the 1940s and 1950s, had come to be more widely accepted within Peruvian intellectual circles. What had previously been referred to as race, culture and ethnicity by Valderrama and generations of indigenistas, was dismissed by Peruvian Marxists as ‘false consciousness,’ and subsumed into an all-encompassing class-based analysis (de la Cadena, 1998, p. 144).

The inheritors of Mariategui’s Marxist class rhetoric were not, however, the only group which sought to eliminate racial and cultural categories from social and political debates. Reversing Valderrama’s focus on the coalescence of pure Indians, by which he had aimed to ‘reappraise the greatness of the Inca empire’ (Valderrama, 1981, p. 290), the State would seek to avoid questions of race and culture altogether, and instead choose to employ class-based categorizations to govern Peruvian society. In 1969, Velasco announced his plan to implement the most comprehensive land-reform program in Latin America since the Cuban Revolution, disarming large estates into smaller, government-run cooperatives (Winn, 1992, p. 244). At the same time, he abolished ‘Indian’ as an official term to categorize Peruvian citizens, and replaced it with the term ‘peasant.’ On June 24 of that same year, what had previously been celebrated as ‘the day of the Indian’ was celebrated instead as ‘the day of the peasant’ (campesino), and the General declared: ‘Peasant! The landlord will no longer eat from your poverty!’ (Winn, 1992, p. 243).

The displacement of racial categorization on both ends of the political spectrum points to the centrality of education in isolationist, assimilationist and Marxist indigenista discourses. The power to create and impose labels—such as ‘Indian’ and ‘peasant’—was in the hands of
intellectuals who conferred upon Velasco’s regime the authority to establish a corporate State intent on disseminating social justice by eliminating racial and cultural differences. A semblance of social and cultural equity was therefore created in theory, and invested on paper, in order to accompany the concrete policy changes that would affect indigenous populations more directly in their everyday lives.

At the time they were implemented, Velasco’s reforms were considered a watershed in educational policy, especially as they related to rural education, and the role that indigenous languages and bilingualism were to have in the changes taking place. Ironically, at the time the regime sought to substitute class for race or ethnicity, displacing ‘Indian’ with ‘peasant,’ it simultaneously recognized Peru as a multi-cultural and plurilingual society. The ‘Organic Law of the Ministry of Education,’ which first passed in 1969, approved a comprehensive educational reform plan that would be implemented soon afterwards. This law, with its emphasis on the work of Valcarcel’s Niñoes Emocionantes—by officially recognizing the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversities of Peruvian society, and approving the implementation of several bilingual education projects in the country’s interior. A separate law was passed soon afterwards that made Quechua a language of the State, as well as a living language.

The 1972 reform addressed those problems that political leaders considered to be specific to rural education: rising illiteracy rates, systematic neglect of the poor, failure to give students a sense of rational belonging, patriotism or civic duty, intellectualism and the prevalence of poorly trained teachers. (Morelli, 1994, p. 4). Most significant for the study at hand, however, are Velasco’s reforms that subverted Valcarcel’s earlier ‘solution’ to the Indian ‘problem’—that is, his plan to make sure that the Indians stayed Indians, preventing their ‘classificatio’ and subsequent degeneration—by positit a radically different, perhaps even diametrically opposed ‘solution’. Whereas Valcarcel had implemented a program designed to protect what he had idealized as traditional Indian culture, by maintaining two separate Peruvian nations, the military regime aimed to do precisely the opposite. Velasco aspired to transform Peru’s rural inhabitants by dragging them out of their isolation and cultural ‘backwardness’, through educational reform. Only then could they be integrated into what was considered to be ‘mainstream national life’. The two policies were in direct opposition to one another. After having been taught by a paternalistic State for a quarter of a century that they were Indians, that their only salvation was in maintaining their ‘pure’ Indianness, Peru’s rural inhabitants under Velasco’s regime were told that the State had made a grave mistake in promoting that false identity. No, they were not really Indians (or if they were, they should not be); they had been peasants all along, and just had not realized it. 

Uncoupling Indigenous Identities and Identifications (Some Concluding Thoughts)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, positivist philosopher Javier Prado declared during his tenure as the Dean of Faculty of Letters at San Marcos University that: ‘thanks to education, the contemporary man can transform his physical milieu and even his race’ (quoted in de la Cadena, 1998, pp. 145-146).

Approaching the end of the twentieth century, conservative social critic and celebrated novelist Mario Vargas Llosa echoed a similar belief: Indian peasants live in such a primitive way that communication is practically impossible. It is only when they move to the cities that they have the opportunity to mingle with the other Peruvians. (Through a) remuneration of their beliefs, ... traditions and customs, and the adoption of the culture of their ancient masters ... they become rechristians. They are no longer Indians. (Vargas Llosa, 1960, pp. 51-52)

Although they span almost an entire century, Prado and Vargas Llosa’s statements point to a certain congruity in the way that Peruvian intellectuals have understood and positioned themselves in relation to their country’s indigenous population, and at the same time, indicate a shared belief in the possibility of racial transformation and more importantly, in the eventual propriety of ‘Indianities’ as a cultural marker.

I have tried to show that belief in the thickness or superficiality of cultural difference—particularly Indian cultural difference—has been reflected in a quagmire of labels and empty signifiers, and incorporated into an inconsistent State discourse, whose primary contact with Peru’s indigenous population has taken place in the context of a public education. Generations of Peruvian intellectuals and politicians have either tried to ‘fix’ or ‘remove’ Indianidades through social policies, and have been frustrated on both fronts. On the one hand, there is clearly nothing static or ‘pure’ about Peru’s indigenous peoples, who like their non-indigenous counterparts, have encountered and been affected by modernity, post-modernity, globalization and the forces of international capital. On the other hand, indigenous culture has not been erased through education, changing modes of production, geographic relocation, or superficial alterations of physical appearance, as had been suggested by the wide variety of ‘assimilatization’ individuates who have sought to transform Indians into what they considered to be ‘acceptable’ citizens, a process through which White and mestizo society would ultimately absorb and do away with Peru’s Indians. Returning once again to Hall’s terms, exterior and superficial changes such as these might be said to occur at the level of identification and not of identity. Significant indigenous cultural markers might be transformed, forced into hiding, or even lifted away, but they always seem to leave behind a residue—an impermeable trace, which testifies to the ‘thickness’ of Indian cultural difference.

Recent years have seen the implementation of State-backed ‘bilingual-intercultural’ education programs that seek to valorize and promote indigenous languages and cultures, rather than to eliminate them (see Borgli 1992; Goddard 1992, 1996; and López et al., 1991; López, 1996). These programs could be interpreted as the opening up of theoretical and practical spaces for indigenous peoples to re-configure and re-articulate their own positions vis-à-vis the dominant national society. However, ‘bilingual-intercultural’ education might be nothing more than a politically correct gesture enabling the system to march on in its attempts to create and impose indigenous identifications. The conceptual and political implications of this development have not been fully realized, and certainly call for further analysis.

Raymond Williams has suggested that problems of social identity can never be resolved through formal definitions, as awareness of social identity depends
not on labels, but rather on actual and sustained social relationships. ‘To reduce social identity to formal legal definitions at the level of the State’, he argues, ‘is to collaborate with the alienated superiors’ (Williams, 1963, p. 195; quoted in Hall, 1993, p. 360). Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall have gone on to show that while social identity indeed cannot be reduced to formal legal definitions, such definitions do matter profoundly, especially for so-called ‘subalterns’ living in societies who identify and engage with them according to their skin colour, race, ethnicity or similar categorizations (Gilroy, 1987; Hall, 1993, p. 360).

The Peruvian case engages both of these arguments. Labels matter because the terms indio, mestizo and campesino have been employed and imposed by the Peruvian State to construct its discourse and promote social policies such as the educational initiatives I have discussed here. Labels matter because they have profoundly shaped people’s day-to-day lives. Ironically, those labels are in other ways utterly meaningless. Being told in Cuzco that someone is ‘indian’, a ‘mestizo’ or ‘White’ does not necessarily help an outsider, unfamiliar with the complicated relationship between race, class and ‘culture’, pick him or her out from a crowd. These terms correspond to Stuart Hall’s ‘identifications’, and may or may not correspond to the particular ‘identities’ of the individuals in question. In sum, the Peruvian State has historically failed to consider what might have been generated as non-compulsory articulations or expressions of social and cultural identity by indigenous peoples themselves. As a result, classification of indigenous peoples in Peru has historically been imposed from ‘outside’ rather than generated from ‘within’. Returning to the earlier considerations, then, of trying to understand indigenous rejection of ‘Indianism’, and the relative absence of indigenous social and political movements in modern-day Peru, we can begin to formulate a response by recognizing the problematic conflation of identity and identification. By pulling apart these concepts, we may then formulate a fundamental last question: How and why would any group of people construct an identity, or organize themselves on the basis of a ‘fairy’-conceived identification, that as Luis E. Valdiviec, Juan B. Velasco, and most recently, Mario Vargas Llosa have suggested, can be stripped away by moving to Lima, going to school or changing one’s clothes?

Notes

1. Josué Carlos Múntarić coined the phrase el problema del indio in his libro negro (1929), in which he argued for socio-economic solutions to what he understood to be Peru’s ‘Indian problem’, i.e. the absolute exclusion of indigenous peoples in its dominant national society.

2. Translations here and elsewhere, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

3. For example, some of these behaviours are intrinsically related to the politics of language. Indigenous languages have been marginalized in the extent that many Quechua-speakers, who have been forced by political violence to move to areas infrequently spoken by any substantial knowledge of their native language. Many insist that they are not Quechua-speaking, although their accent suggests otherwise. Bilingual parents often speak only Spanish to their children, and very few have any Quechua-speaking grandparents. Indeed, Quechua-speaking parents often relocate to urban areas only to learn that their children will be excluded educationally in Spanish.

4. De la Cadena notes: ‘This is not to say that Peruvians intellectuals had actually read Lasservice’s theories. Gould (1981) mentions that Lasservice, defined as the “inheritance of acquired characteristics”, was folk wisdom since the late eighteenth century’ (de la Cadena, 1984, p. 162).

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