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Faith Based Organizations and the Neoliberal State:
Creating Resistance in Northern Argentina

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Abstract

One of the fundamental tenets and practices of neoliberalism in Argentina was the withdrawal of the state from providing a range of social services to its citizens. The economic imperative of reducing spending coincided with an ideological push to limit the size of the state. Faith based organizations (FBOs) were among the actors who stepped in to fill the gap left by the retraction of services such as basic education and health care. In Argentina, the Catholic Church failed to offer opposition to years of military dictatorship but was effectively mobilized a decade later in resisting neoliberalism. This paper uses a case study of two faith based NGOs in northwestern Argentina in the late 1990s to consider some of the ways in which these organizations effectively became the primary social service agencies in remote rural communities. Drawing on the ideals of liberation theology, these FBOs went beyond providing services in poor communities to draw attention to the failure of the state to meet the needs of its people. Their status as religious organizations lent this critique a moral authority and legitimacy that the state itself, widely seen as uncaring and out of touch, lacked. This case study, based on over twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork, illustrates how these moral voices came to be of central importance as Argentina's neoliberal government unraveled.

Keywords: *Neoliberalism, Argentina, economic development, religion, Catholic Church, faith-based organizations, NGOs*

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During an election campaign in 1995, President Carlos Menem paid a visit to a small city in northwestern Argentina. More than a year later, his comments there still provoked irritation and even outrage among many people in the north. My friend Betty, a high school teacher, described his visit to me:

They want to pretend that Argentina is a first-world country. [Menem] was talking about a super airplane that would go from here to Japan in one hour. That shows so much insensitivity, so much ignorance. Not just to want to make that plane, but to say that here? It would be one thing if people weren't so poor, but here in the north, there are so many things that people need.... Now, I've never been to the first world. But I have been to Peru, which is not the first world. And I have been to Bolivia, which is not the first world either. And the south of Brazil, not the first world. And here, it's the same – we are not the first world.

Betty's comment captures the disconnect that the working class felt from the neoliberal strategies of their national government. Argentines saw neoliberalism not just as a set of economic policies but as a set of social and political strategies implemented with utter disregard for the real needs of the people in the country.

One of the key elements of neoliberalism, in Argentina as elsewhere, was the shrinking of the state from the provision of social services. In part, this shift was an attempt to reduce state expenditures, primarily through budget cuts and the elimination of government employees. Beyond simply reducing state spending, neoliberalism was driven by an ideological impetus to shift the responsibility for individual welfare from the state to the private sector (Ortner, 2011; Harvey, 2005). Whatever the intentions of the Argentine government, the liberal faith based NGOs that are discussed in this case study proved to be resistant to the ideologies of neoliberalism. Not only did they step in to bridge the gap in providing social services, they also offered a strong critique of the state's neoliberal policies, becoming a moral voice of opposition.

This article examines the role of faith-based NGOs in mediating the complex position of indigenous communities in the neoliberal period. The period immediately preceding the economic collapse and political reconfiguration of the Argentine state highlights the struggle between the particular version of indigenous rights and ethnic identity promoted by the neoliberal state and a more radical, if implicit, vision of a pluricultural society as envisioned by the faith based organizations. This paper argues that the religious NGOs constructed a vision of the indigenous communities as an alternative to the one they saw as a product of the rapacious nature of the neoliberal policies of the state. In this, the religious organizations were acting as critical cultural brokers (Bartolomé, 1997; Weinberg, 2014); they were in a unique position to criticize the state based on their position of moral authority as religious institutions, their long history of work in indigenous communities, and the role that they played as constitutive of civil society. While this argument is in some ways confined to a particular historical moment and series of events, it has larger implications for understanding indigenous and ethnic identity and the role of non-state actors in the post-neoliberal context in Latin America.

Neoliberalism under Carlos Menem's administration, as in many other regions, included an effort to politically and legally incorporate indigenous groups in ways consistent with liberal ideologies of multiculturalism (Richards, 2013; Hale, 2005; Richards & Park, 2005). In Argentina, constitutional changes in 1994 included, for the first time, recognition of indigenous populations and the granting of certain rights to indigenous communities, including the establishment of the legal status of indigenous communities, the affirmation of their rights to land and to bilingual education, and conferring upon them the right to participate in the

management of natural resources. This was a significant step forward for a minority population that had not only been disenfranchised but subjected to decades and centuries of policies aimed at assimilation. While these reforms were a major step forward, they also served to define and essentialize – both by the state and by indigenous groups themselves – what it meant to be “indigenous,” as members of these communities sought to meet legal requirements and state expectations in order to gain access to resources that would otherwise be unavailable (Briones, 2005; Carrasco & Briones, 1996; Gordillo & Hirsch, 2003).

In Argentina, the Menem administration built upon earlier efforts to advance the cause of indigenous rights and cultural recognition, though—one might argue—largely as discursive window dressing, effectively part of a political project of cultural recognition that served to diffuse the more radical demands made by indigenous activists (Weinberg, 2014). This benevolent discourse about rights, to borrow the words of David Harvey, masked “the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial [centers] of global capitalism” (Harvey, 2005, pp.118–119). The multiculturalism promoted by neoliberalism endorsed a nod to the notion of acceptance of cultural diversity but entailed no redistribution of economic resources or political power (Richards, 2013, p. 102). In Argentina, as struggles over land rights and cultural representation shifted to the fore, faith-based NGOs were leading actors in pushing for a more radical conceptualization of the nation, as one part of their wider critique of neoliberalism itself. If, as David Hale suggests, “The great efficacy of neoliberal multiculturalism resides in powerful actors’ ability to restructure the arena of political contention, driving a wedge between cultural rights and the assertion of the control over resources necessary for those rights to be realized” (Hale, 2005, p. 13), the NGOs discussed here endeavored to refocus attention on resources and political autonomy.

Neoliberalism in Argentina

For this study, ethnographic research was conducted in Argentina in 1996 – 1997, just when neoliberal policies were arguably at their strongest, under the government of Carlos Menem. Menem, who was first elected in 1989, pursued an economic agenda that made Argentina a poster child for neoliberalism, privatizing the country’s extensive state-owned utilities and industries, sharply curtailing spending on social programs, and liberalizing international trade (Levitsky & Murillo, 2003; Shever, 2012). While this program was successful in controlling inflation, it also led to painfully high rates of unemployment and, ultimately, the social unrest of the *piquetero* movement in the late 1990s. Vivid images of street protesters were seen as symbolic, even emblematic, of the failures of neoliberalism to provide economic growth in ways that were equitable and socially sustainable; these protests and social upheavals led to the displacement of neoliberalism. While the international media focused on civil unrest in the national capital, Buenos Aires, the historically marginalized northwestern part of the country was notably involved as well.

... [M]any sectors of the population got organized and took the streets, initiating a cycle of social protests that would become symbolic of the era. Collective actions organized by the emergent social movements were aimed at rethinking power relations, authority, the role of the state and society, and their practices and discourses. The [Northwest region of Argentina] became emblematic of social unrest responding to neoliberal reforms in the nineties.... Unemployment levels

reached catastrophic levels, and social upheavals followed shortly thereafter. Uprisings and roadblocks of major and minor routes continued for many months.... Police repression provoked serious [damage], injuries, and even deaths, in both the north and south of the country. (Weinberg, 2014, p. 71-72)

Ultimately, neoliberalism created a sense of disenfranchisement and anger that boiled over into demonstrations, strikes, and chaos that resulted in a change of government and a radically retooled political landscape (Wylde, 2012).¹ Many groups, organizations, and grassroots movements played crucial roles in the transition away from neoliberalism, including, as noted by Mariano Féliz, trade unions, university students, public sector workers, and the unemployed (2012, p. 107). Less attention, however, has been paid to the role of religious organizations like those detailed below.

In direct response to the crisis of the state from the late 1990s through about 2002, a shift in state policies were aimed, quite deliberately, at containing social unrest (Feliz, 2012; Grugel & Ruggirozzi, 2007). By the end of 2000, widespread dissatisfaction with neoliberal policies led to a period of political and economic crisis, resulting eventually in the election of Néstor Kirchner, who ran on a platform of rolling back neoliberal “reforms.”² By early 2002, as a result of massive social and political unrest, “Argentina abandoned its place as the International Monetary Fund’s most brilliant pupil to join the neo-developmental crowd” (Feliz, 2012, p. 106). Like other countries in the region and elsewhere, economic policy in Argentina shifted from that of neoliberalism to what many have called “neodevelopmentalism,” or at least, “post-neoliberalism,” referring to policies that reflect the state’s recognition of and the making of concessions to the power of the working class: post-neoliberal states tend also to give greater attention to the well-being of their citizens and re-insert government into economic activity and development within the framework of the global capitalist economy (Féliz, 2012, 2015; Grugel & Ruggirozzi, 2012; Ruggirozzi, 2010; de Sousa Santos, 2010). In Argentina, this post-neoliberalism overlaps with a long political history of Peronism,³ which both bolsters traditional political parties and filters economic policies through a distinctive populist lens (Calvo & Murillo, 2012; Wylde, 2012; Levitsky & Murillo, 2008).

At the margins: Indigenous communities in northern Argentina

Research was conducted in the province of Salta, on the northwestern margin of the country, far from cosmopolitan Buenos Aires. By the mid-1990s, neoliberal policies had led to an official unemployment rate of around 20%.⁴ I began my ethnographic research at this time, when Argentines faced structural adjustment policies that were particularly painful in rural areas, where access to health care and education were, at best, uneven. At the same time that state cuts were enacted, many rural families also faced shrinking incomes. Rural workers throughout the north had depended on seasonal migration to sugar plantations to supplement subsistence production, and the mechanization of the plantations meant that migrant work was either unavailable or that workers had to travel much further to agricultural zones in the south to find available work.

I spent about six months in each of two very distinct regions in the province of Salta – Los Blancos, in the dry rangelands of the Chaco, and Iruya, in the Andean highlands. Each region is home to a different native population – the Wichí in the Chaco and the Kolla in the highlands – and each was served by a different NGO: Fundapaz and OCLADE, respectively.⁵ Though Fundapaz is not officially affiliated with the Catholic Church, both agencies had their

origins in the Catholic Church, stemming from a progressive Catholic concern with poverty and social justice, and both agencies worked primarily with the small indigenous populations.⁶ These small development organizations brought with them a set of assumptions about how the world – and the economy – work. They also functioned within certain constraints, some stemming from the need to gain funding and others from the limits of their own ability to effect change.

As a private non-profit organization, Fundapaz is not officially affiliated with the Catholic Church but sees itself as having “Christian inspiration” and maintains close ties with the church. Most of its funding comes from non-profit European development agencies, many of which are religious in nature. Other funding comes from government sources and large international agencies such as the World Bank. In Argentina, Fundapaz works with the Wichí, a lowland indigenous people whose economy was based on hunting and gathering until the middle part of the twentieth century (Occhipinti, 2005). Fundapaz promotes a range of projects aimed primarily at improving agricultural production and ecological sustainability in the Wichí and the surrounding *criollo* communities⁷ according to local needs and preferences as well as to practical project considerations. The NGO has also had a long term commitment to help local communities gain legal rights to the lands that they occupy, a struggle which took over fifteen years (see Occhipinti, 2005). In its promotion of development projects in the Wichí communities, Fundapaz faces formidable challenges. The material standard of living of the Wichí is much lower than elsewhere in the province or in the nation. Wichí communities generally have neither electricity nor a reliable supply of potable water. Public services such as health care and education are inadequate throughout the region. Household cash incomes range from virtually nothing to about \$150 per month. The economy of these Wichí communities is based on a precarious combination of wage labor, subsistence agriculture, and foraging. The organization portrays its work as that of a “bridge” between poor rural populations and the dominant society – a bridge upon which ideas travel in both directions (Fundapaz, 1989).

OCLADE is a non-profit NGO established and run by the Catholic Church of the Prelature of Humahuaca. The organization’s funding in fact comes from various religious intermediary organizations, both Catholic and Protestant, and from non-religious development organizations.⁸ OCLADE runs programs throughout the Prelature, which encompasses most of the puna (*altiplano*) of northwest Argentina, as well as the sub-Andean valleys directly to the east (including the departments of Santa Victoria Oeste and Iruya). This area may well represent one of the poorest geographical regions in Argentina, with high indexes of illiteracy, infant and child malnutrition, and unemployment (Occhipinti, 2005; Weinberg, 2014). Iruya, where research was conducted, is a scenic town in the high Andean valleys, a land of dramatic cliffs and swift rivers. The people of Iruya are known as Kolla. The local economy is based primarily on subsistence agriculture, and the typical Kolla farmer’s income is supplemented by meager sales of produce on the regional market and by migrant labor on plantations in the lowlands. The average Kolla household has a cash income of perhaps \$600 a year and holds less than a half of a hectare of land. OCLADE’s major programs focus on community organizing, economic development (mostly in subsistence agriculture), and various other projects aimed at improving health and education for women and children. OCLADE has also acted as an important conduit of material resources into the community; projects have provided materials to construct systems for drinking water and for irrigation and to build health posts. There have also been several attempts to create productive associations and cooperatives for both agriculture and crafts.

Like most small NGOs, both Fundapaz and OCLADE had an array of projects underway during the period in which research was conducted, including child feeding centers, agricultural

training, infrastructure improvements, such as the building of community centers and systems for delivering potable water, education, and health care. The diversity in the organizations' programming was intentional. Both organizations shared a long-term commitment to their host communities and strategically sought out projects that met specific local needs while "shopping around" for funding for short-term projects that were popular among funding agencies. For both Fundapaz and OCLADE, long term strategies and planning included projects and issues that were not part of the mainstream development discourse or neoliberal multiculturalism. Hale (2004) elaborates the notion of the *indio permitido*, or the "authorized Indian" (see also Weinberg, 2013; Richards 2013), the notion that there exists some sort of "acceptable" indigenous citizen that deserves particular rights. While recognizing cultural difference, however, this notion simultaneously suggests that "certain rights are to be enjoyed on the implicit condition that [the demand for] others will not be raised" (Hale, 2004, p.18), such as the demand for land reform, among others. The religious NGOs, in contrast, saw land reform and indigenous autonomy as foundational to the ability of the indigenous cultures to survive and to maintain their cultural distinctiveness in the modern world, foregrounding political autonomy and economic independence, a more radical, pluricultural stance.

One example may serve to illustrate the ways in which the NGOs tended to support what they saw as local cultural norms in resistance to the dominant neoliberal framework. Like many small NGOs, Fundapaz often created programs specifically in order to be able to tap into available funding sources. By the late 1990s, as microcredit programs became increasingly popular, the NGO began to develop project models designed along these lines. It offered several micro-credit projects for the *criollo* population in the region that primarily provided funding for households to construct water catchment systems, but the NGO hesitated to introduce similar micro-credit projects in the Wichí communities. In staff meetings, NGO workers expressed concerns that people in the Wichí communities did not understand credit and cited the difficulties that often arose – both within the communities themselves and between the communities and the NGO staff – when some individuals were seen as benefitting more than others from a given project; the staff worried that micro-credit lending would exacerbate such tensions. Underlying the staff members' concerns was an implicit understanding that there were not many avenues for "entrepreneurship" in these remote communities. The market for handicrafts was extremely limited and was largely already managed by other NGOs on an incipient "fair trade" model. The local whites also engaged in subsistence farming, and there was no significant local market for produce. Deep patterns of racial segregation persisted, leading to a situation in which few *criollos* would purchase anything from the Wichí. There was little cash within the Wichí villages themselves, and any activities that might fall into the "service sector" in other regions were enmeshed in networks of reciprocity and kinship. The NGO, whose staff was highly respectful of Wichí customs, was unwilling to disrupt this network.

However, funding patterns and trends continued to emphasize micro-credit as an ideal program. As such, in order to access this available funding, Fundapaz finally created a "microcredit" program for the Wichí. In doing so, however, the NGO deeply subverted the notion of entrepreneurialism embedded in the microcredit model. The "microcredit" program that Fundapaz created for the Wichí villages was designed to increase agricultural production. The program itself offered "loans" of seed, which were to be "repaid" in kind. The products that were included in the loans were already locally available, so in effect, the program represented an infusion of resources into the local economy. The seeds were given equally to all of the households that wanted some; quantities were plentiful and there were no discernible conflicts

over the distribution. The modest repayment took the form of produce that was to be given to the community child-feeding program (for children not yet old enough to attend school). Repayments were, in theory, to be spread out over a ten-year period. Ostensibly, this was to enable households to make their payment during a plentiful harvest season; in effect, I suspect that it was done because the funding model suggested a ten-year loan period and that its real impact was to allow the repayments to be conveniently neglected.

From the perspective of the community, the microcredit project did not appear to be, nor was it interpreted as, a qualitatively different kind of aid. Community leaders tended to regard Fundapaz as both a patron and as a font of resources.⁹ The seeds that were introduced into the community were welcomed and accepted but not as distinct from the goods supplied for other projects that had also provided tools, seeds, or other materials and equipment. The way in which this particular microcredit project was designed and implemented served to transform the notion of microcredit itself by shifting from an individual focus to a focus on the community. As such, the underlying logic of microcredit as a method of spurring entrepreneurialism was spurned. There was no notion, neither on the part of the NGO nor on the part of the beneficiaries of the project, that this particular project was aimed at developing commercial agriculture or even a notion of entrepreneurialism. I would suggest that the NGO itself was instrumental in this transformation. Fundapaz, as an organization, had a strong commitment to the idea of community. With a foundation in the ideals of liberation theology, the organization's discourse and practice focused on collective responsibility and shared labor. Furthermore, the NGO was careful to respect traditional culture, indicating that traditional systems of reciprocity and a subsistence economy were not only morally just but even preferable to global capitalism. By transforming the microcredit program into one in which the entire community benefitted from both the infusion of capital and the repayments of "loans," the logic of neoliberalism was fundamentally undermined, as the focus shifted to the community rather than the individual. This transformation likewise shifted the focus of micro-credit lending from the "individual-as-entrepreneur" to households as part of a larger community. Just as oil workers discussed by Elana Shever (2008) transformed the logic of neoliberalism into one of affective family ties, the recipients of "microcredit" in the Chaco reimagined its meaning in ways that fit their prior experiences and cultural values.

In the case of Fundapaz, the NGO itself was adept at appropriating the dominant discourse; as Marina Temudo noted in a study of an NGO in rural Guinea-Bissau, NGO staff "quickly learned to master [not only] the crucial performance skills needed to have their project proposals approved [but also] a clichéd language" (2005, p. 258) including terms like "participation" and "self-help" in order to benefit from the wealth of external funding available to NGOs. However, as seen in the case study of Los Blancos, these programs, like many development initiatives, may produce something other than the results originally conceived by the donors of such funds as the concepts underlying the initiatives are appropriated, redirected, and transformed by local "recipients" of such aid.

Religion and development

The religious discourse of development that these organizations offered diverged significantly from a mainstream development discourse shaped by neoliberalism. This distinction is particularly relevant because of the NGOs' focus on indigenous communities. While the neoliberalism of the Argentine state suggested a model of "citizen consumer" (Faulk, 2008), the

NGOs emphasized the indigenous communities as responsible for their own economic trajectories while simultaneously being economically restrained. Rather than understand the “poor” communities in which they worked as “backwards,” or “left behind,” or having failed to progress in some way, the religious NGOs saw indigenous communities as offering an alternative model to that provided by the dominant society and global capitalism. In this view, the indigenous communities are not simply a subset of “the poor” but a distinct population whose values and interests are not only genuinely different than other poor communities but also morally superior. The NGOs offered an alternative to what they envisioned as the corrupt, materialistic, and profit-oriented norms of neoliberal development and capitalist society.

Liberation theology arose in the 1970s in Latin America as way to address the role of the Catholic Church in society. It offered a model of radical change and ultimately, a vision in which the entire population would participate in political, religious, and economic life (Berryman, 1987; Boff & Boff, 1987). Liberation theology not only expressed theological concerns but also entailed a general and far-reaching critique of western society, capitalism, and the marginalization of poor. Although the Argentine Catholic Church has a well established reputation for being one of the most conservative churches in all of Latin America (Gimenez Béliveau, 2011), the case study undertaken here is located at the margins of society and represents an exception to conventional wisdom; indeed, the results of this study may provide reason to question the validity of some conventional assumptions, as radical theologies do persist at both grassroots and practical levels. The progressive ideas of liberation theology may, in fact, have grown in prominence because they offer an alternative to the ideologies of neoliberalism. In northern Argentina, the church, as one of few stable local institutions, came to be seen as a powerful ally in the struggle of daily life. Religious NGOs such as those studied here broadened the central ideas of liberation theology to include the ethics of cultural autonomy and self-sufficiency. The focus shifted to protecting the inherent value of local culture *against* rationalizing global forces. The local cultures themselves were understood as emphasizing values that resonate with Christian beliefs, rather than with market capitalism.

The two organizations examined in this study have different relationships with the Catholic Church, but in both cases, this relationship facilitated their grassroots critiques of neoliberalism. Fundapaz was established by a group of nuns¹⁰ in 1973. Initially, their efforts constituted an informal endeavor, as the sisters tried to respond to local needs and requests for assistance. The NGO was created as a way to both enable external funding and devote more time to the pressing problems of “the most destitute” (Fundapaz, 2012). The organization is autonomous from the church structure and has its own board of directors and legal status even as it maintains an identity as a faith based organization.¹¹ This gives the NGO a large degree of autonomy from the official Catholic hierarchy in the north, which tends to be conservative in its politics and paternalistic in its charity. For instance, the bishop at the time in Salta was described to me in this way: “He is very paternalistic. But you know, he never goes out to the poor barrios, or to the campo. None of them do. They have no idea of what the life is like.”

OCLADE, on the other hand, is tightly connected to the church, though it is located in a unique district, one that is not part of the Argentine national church hierarchy but is instead administered by the Claretian order.¹² Since the 1970s, the Claretians have administered the Prelature of Humahuaca, which extends across the rural highlands of northwestern Argentina. Father Jesús Olmedo, one of the priests who has been in the region for over twenty five years, wrote a book describing the region and the Kolla culture, in which he describes the role of the Claretians:

They found a people who were profoundly religious and receptive, open to transcendence.... Their radical simplicity and poverty made them able to understand the life of Jesus.... Human development was one of the key issues that they had to deal with. ...The missionaries learned to respect the Kolla customs and to value their ethnic, social, and cultural characteristics. They listened to the people and they interpreted their gestures and their silences. (Olmedo, 1990, p. 274)

The valorization of indigenous cultures reflects a movement in the Catholic Church sometimes referred to as the “theology of inculturation” (Orta, 2004). This theological approach draws on liberation theology but envisions indigenous communities not merely as one subset of the poor, but instead sees them as embodying Christian values and spirituality. Incorporating indigenous beliefs and practices, in the view of Olmedo and other priests working in indigenous communities, is not a just matter of incorporating multicultural styles but a deeper process of recognizing indigenous practices and beliefs – including those with origins dating from before the conquest and missionization – as authentic expressions of Christianity. That this movement was taking place in Argentina, where the Catholic Church was notably conservative, serves as a reminder that such large institutions continue to be heterogeneous at a local level.⁹

Father Jesús Olmedo is the brother of Pedro Olmedo, the Claretian bishop who was the parish priest in Iruya for nearly a decade, a well-known, “almost mythic” (Weinberg, 2014, p. 80) figure in the parishes of the north. Pedro Olmedo is widely admired in the villages for his willingness to share in the daily lives of his parishioners; one rural resident told me: “If they are eating potatoes, he eats potatoes. If they are eating *locro*, he eats *locro*. It is not important to him if it is the food he is used to. He sits right down with the people. There aren’t many other priests like that.” Olmedo has also taken a prominent public role in protests against government policies, leading numerous marches, protests, and demonstrations fighting for the rights of the rural poor and the indigenous peoples of the north (Laura de Arríba). It was in this spirit that the Claretians established OCLADE specifically to act as the development arm in the Prelature, where the bishop recently said that he “dreams of a Church even more committed to the search for justice and peace, for human dignity and equality in diversity, without poverty and with social inclusion. This is the path to true human progress. It is the other globalization, the globalization of brotherhood and solidarity” (Olmedo & Palentini, 2010).

Critiques of neoliberalism

Both organizations have a long history of operating at the margins of acceptance by the state. Of their persistence and success, it has been said that since their founding, “in spite of political persecution, some [faith based organizations] were able to sustain their projects and interventions.... Even in the most extreme years of military dictatorship, while their own members were persecuted, these organizations ran child care programs and soup kitchens, all of which were considered ‘subversive activities’” (Weinberg, 2014, p. 81). Promoting indigenous identity has been a long-standing issue for both OCLADE and Fundapaz, as it has for several other faith-based organizations active in the region (Carrasco, 2002). When OCLADE was founded, in 1982, its specific aims were to “raise the consciousness of the colla¹³ people, to valorize the human condition of all peoples and within all communities, and to denounce injustice”; the organization claimed an “orientation toward the defense of the rights and interests of native populations” (Olmedo, 1990, p. 278 my translation).

In conjunction with the social activism shown by these NGOs, one of the themes most emphasized by their work was a critique of capitalism and, by the mid-1990s, a more pointed condemnation of the policies of neoliberalism. Development projects that increased capitalist economic structures or that created strong ties to the market economy were frequently depicted as inappropriate or even impossible for the indigenous population. Both NGOs viewed participation in the larger capitalist economy – through commercial agriculture, herding, or wage labor – as culturally alienating for the indigenous groups. The indigenous societies were almost invariably understood as being *outside* of capitalism (and not as integrated at the lowest level). The focus of projects thus tended to be on *subsistence* practices – and as such, sought not more integration with the capitalist economy, but *less*. Both organizations respected and valued traditional subsistence practices – small-scale agriculture in the highlands and hunting and gathering in the lowlands. They organized projects around the needs and schedules of traditional subsistence, while other projects were aimed directly at improving traditional economic activities. In both cases, there was an effort to reduce risk and ensure the reliability of subsistence in communities seen as having precarious economies. The emphasis on subsistence accorded well with the theme that the indigenous societies were culturally vulnerable.

The indigenous alternative

As each NGO theorized economic development, the indigenous cultures' traditional lifestyles themselves represented an alternative model to global capitalism. The NGOs saw features of indigenous culture such as reciprocity, community labor, and even poverty itself as manifestations of Christian ideals. OCLADE, for example, stated in a publication: "The faith of the poor, the religious dimension that allows them to maintain their traditions, their ancient customs of respect for the land, solidarity, [and] openness to others, knowledge which is often forgotten, are the riches that the poor offer to a society that is bleeding to death from having forgotten these values" (OCLADE, 1996, p. 1); neoliberalism, here, is the force that is bleeding Argentina to death.

Given the very real concerns of poverty in indigenous communities, the NGOs believe in the need for economic change, but in a way that is sensitive to cultural difference. The forecast of each NGO predicts that indigenous culture, beset by an array of difficulties, cannot survive without economic change: that young people will leave their native communities in search of work; family ties and kinship networks will break down; norms of sharing and cooperation will be lost as each household struggles to survive. Eventually, in the worst case scenarios, under the flood of media images that glamorize Western culture, the scant attention paid to indigenous cultures by the educational systems or the dominant society, and the increasing ease of transportation and communication, the cultures will disappear, subsumed into the underclass of Argentina. Implicit in this well-intentioned argument, however, is an essentialization of what it means to be "indigenous" – *i.e.*, that it is to be poor, to adhere to traditional subsistence systems, to be isolated from global culture and technologies. This is a tension that is hardly unique to the position of the NGOs, extending to larger questions about indigenous identity and a multicultural society (see, for example, Richards & Park, 2005).

The NGOs paint an alternative to this grim scenario: that survival of the indigenous culture is linked with the ability of its communities to be self-sufficient. In this view, the market economy is seen at its base to be incompatible with the cultural values of the indigenous population and to be intrinsically threatening to their way of life. To the neoliberal state,

economic development is the goal, whereas to the NGOs working in indigenous communities, it is a means to an end. The NGOs oppose the neoliberal model not because it prioritizes the need for economic development and self-sufficiency. Rather, they oppose neoliberalism specifically because it does not address the needs of marginalized communities and their values. In fact, the totalizing force of an unchecked free market is seen as detrimental and destructive to these values.

Beyond their moral force as religious organizations, faith-based NGOs have another source of legitimacy as critics in their position as part of “civil society.” Deneulin and Rakodi suggest that religious organizations play a key role not only in enacting programs associated with economic development but in shaping people’s lives and engagement with the public sphere, as a basis for social and political mobilization (47; see also Rakodi, 2012). Because both OCLADE and Fundapaz have a long history of involvement in the communities in which they work, they gained a high degree of local trust, particularly given the skepticism of many individuals in both communities towards external interventions, which had often proved detrimental. At the same time, the discourse of neoliberalism itself privileges NGOs as “private” or non-state institutions, making them legitimate sites of “civil society” in the eyes of the neoliberal state itself (Fisher, 1997), even as they moved to oppose state policies. As such, these NGOs have offered a popular, or perhaps populist, counter to neoliberalism and unchecked global capitalism, becoming a legitimate voice of opposition. Rather than merely working to protect local cultures against rationalizing global forces, these NGOs rally around indigenous cultures as themselves containing an alternative, more socially just mode of social organization, modes that are envisioned as a model that emphasizes values that resonate with progressive Catholic beliefs, rather than with market capitalism – as a model that all Argentines should follow.

Conclusion

Karen Faulk argues that street protests against neoliberal policies “were . . . part of broader discursive struggles over the meanings of elements of social life, including ideas what constitutes rights of citizenship, human rights, legality, moral obligation, historical memory, and human dignity” (Faulk, 2013, pp. 1-2). The protests by indigenous groups and their allies were certainly a part of this discursive struggle as well, as illustrated here. As religious NGOs, OCLADE and Fundapaz draw heavily on the values and ideas of liberation theology and a progressive Catholicism. They frame pressing issues of local poverty in terms of the greater inequalities of global capitalism and neoliberal policies. They share the perspective that human dignity, not wealth, is the end goal of development. Development strategies of reducing poverty are merely a means to that end. Their solutions to problems of the poor communities in which they work employ the standard tools of development – microcredit, adult literacy, and the like – but do so within a discourse of morality and justice. As processes of neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism continue to play out in Argentina and elsewhere, a discussion of the ways in which local communities and organizations shape and transform discourses of citizenship, rights, and morality continue to be relevant. Although the research discussed here was conducted in the late 1990s, clarifying and understanding the sociopolitical transformations that took place help us to understand the role of social forces, in Argentina and globally. Additionally, neoliberalism included an “approach to cultural rights that at first glance appears highly counterintuitive . . . , [as] collective rights, granted as compensatory measures to ‘disadvantaged’ cultural groups, are an integral part of neoliberal ideology” (Hale, 2005, p. 12); neodevelopmentalism or post-

neoliberalism has the potential to retreat from this recognition of indigenous rights, or may, alternatively, be shaped to accommodate a truly pluricultural stance. Institutions, including I would argue, faith-based NGOs, can play “key roles in recognizing, encouraging, and opening the space for certain versions of cultural rights” (Hale, 2005, p. 13).

Religious organizations are in a position to bring a moral voice to the work of development, especially in their work in marginalized communities. In contrast, the dominant, secular discourse of development emphasizes technical solutions to issues that it defines in highly limited and circumscribed ways, confining projects to specific ends and means. The two NGOs examined here have proven tremendously successful in influencing the government, in conjunction with other NGOs and grassroots organizations in the region; the institutional power and moral force of the church was brought to bear on land issues and rights issues more generally. In the years since this field research was conducted, new indigenous organizations have been created and taken up some of the issues, as well as the position of cultural brokers, that were previously the terrain of the faith-based organizations (Weinburg, 2014, pp. 280-292). Particularly in the northern part of the country, the radical voices of the FBOs succeeded in shifting the dialogue, opening up a powerful critique of neoliberalism that eventually contributed to a rather messy transition to a more socially responsible central administration. These organizations drew on ideas of liberation theology, implicitly and explicitly, in order to oppose neoliberal policies and practices, and enact, at a grassroots level, a focus of attention on the poor and dispossessed. It is at this level, perhaps – at the level of the street and the village – that these theologies retain their most instrumental and crucial value; after all, it is at this level, liberation theology has argued all along, that the church’s attention should be.

Conversely, the geographic focus of neoliberalism is global in scope. To the extent that policies in Argentina, as elsewhere, have apparently shifted away from neoliberalism towards a more neodevelopmentalist stance, this shift may be more discursive than substantive, a strategic response to widespread protests and disruption (Féliz, 2015, p. 72). The neoliberal logic is the development of unfettered free markets and the generation of wealth without regard to the way that wealth is distributed or the consequences of this distribution on small-scale and marginal communities. In contrast, the NGOs discussed here understand that in a neoliberal system of winners and losers, it is the communities that they work in that are at risk. These two religious NGOs are working to shape the discourse and practice of development in a way that favors small communities. Their goal is to shift the focus away from wealth generation for its own sake and towards the cultivation of values like dignity. They seek a vision of development in which culture itself is seen as the creative force and something to be nurtured and cherished. Critically, these organizations also suggest a model of a larger society that is more like the indigenous communities in which they work.

Notes

¹ This ongoing shift has hardly come without further protest, and the Argentine context is one in which the use of violence – real, threatened, and structural – against the poor, particularly in periods of unrest and during street protests, is not only vividly remembered as a part of the *proceso* regime but also remains current, familiar, and real (Auyero, 2010).

² Menem himself was subsequently embroiled in a series of corruption scandals and other charges.

³ Peronism, the Argentine political movement based on the political philosophy of former president Juan Perón, has dominated the political landscape in Argentina since the 1940s. While Peronism itself espouses populist ideals of political sovereignty, economic independence, and social justice, the movement and its associated political parties

(the largest being the *Partido Justicialista*, or Justicialist Party) have incorporated a wide spectrum of both left-wing and right-wing factions with wildly varying policies and approaches.

⁴ The actual rate was probably much higher, particularly in rural areas.

⁵ In both communities, these faith based NGOs were the only agencies with any significant presence in the area.

⁶ About 4-5% of the Argentine population is indigenous, although official estimates may be somewhat low. As in most other countries, this population has been economically and politically marginalized for centuries (Gordillo & Hirsch, 2003), and only in 1994 did constitutional changes recognize indigenous rights. See Occhipinti 2003 for further discussion.

⁷ *Criollo*, or creole, is widely used in Latin America to refer to a person born in the Americas to parents from the “Old World.” In northern Argentina, however, the term is used colloquially to refer to the non-indigenous rural population.

⁸ About 25% of OCLADE’s total funding comes from some level of the government; the rest comes from NGO sources and direct support from the Catholic Church.

⁹ The NGO did not seem to be regarded as a qualitatively different agent, in this regard, than the state. However, members of the Wichí communities, particularly political leaders, evinced a high degree of cynicism about the state at various levels, and did not generally expect that the state would, in fact, provide services or aid.

¹⁰ Sisters of the Sacred Heart

¹¹ This is more apparent on the local level than it is in the NGO’s publications and webpage, an issue I have discussed elsewhere.

¹² The Claretian order (formally named the Missionary Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary) was founded in Spain in 1849. It is a missionary order that emphasizes service to the poor and outreach on issues of social justice and peace.

¹³ This alternative spelling of Kolla was frequently seen in Argentina before about 2000; the contemporary spelling uses “k” rather than “c” to reflect preferred Quechua orthography. Throughout the 1990s, the term Kolla itself was not universally accepted in the Argentine highlands (Occhipinti, 2003), but it has been widely adopted over the last ten years as the preferred ethnonym.

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