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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Decolonising education. An exploration in Bolivian–German relations

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**Abstract** In this article I aim to contribute to a more multifaceted picture of what decolonising education can mean. I do this in the form of a case study of selected and intertwined Bolivian–German discourses and practices directed at the decolonisation of education in the wide sense of the term. First, I introduce Indigenist and 'Indianist' proposals, which are shaped, not least, by Nietzschean ideas. In a second step, I turn to some examples of German 'Bildungsromane' that are deeply entangled with Bolivian phenomena. Hence, the first part of the article is about decolonising the formerly colonised via education, whereas the second revolves around decolonising the former colonisers, but without the possibility for or the wish to identify completely clear-cut boundaries. It will thus become clearer how decolonising education can be understood as a relational phenomenon.

**Keywords** Relationality · Indigenism · 'Indianism' · 'New Left' (West Germany) · Trikont publishers

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## Bildung dekolonisieren. Eine Untersuchung bolivianisch-deutscher Beziehungen

**Zusammenfassung** Das Ziel dieses Aufsatzes ist es, zu einem vielgestaltigeren Bild dessen beizutragen, was es heißen kann, Bildung zu dekolonisieren. Dies wird im Sinne einer Fallstudie dadurch geschehen, dass ausgewählte ineinander verflochtene bolivianisch-deutsche Diskurse und Praktiken im Hinblick auf die Dekolonisation von Bildung in einem weiten Sinne fokussiert werden. In einem ersten Schritt werde ich indigenistische und indianistische Vorschläge vorstellen, die nicht zuletzt von Nietzeanischen Ideen beeinflusst sind. In einem zweiten Schritt werde ich mich exemplarischen deutschen „Bildungsromanen" widmen, die stark mit bolivianischen Phänomenen verschränkt sind. Folglich ist der erste Teil des Textes auf die Dekolonisation von Bildung für die ehemals Kolonisierten gerichtet, wohingegen sich der zweite Teil um die Dekolonisation von Bildung für die ehemaligen Kolonisatoren dreht. Dabei ist es nicht möglich oder auch nur gewünscht, vollständig klar gezogene Grenzen zu identifizieren. Zum Schluss soll nicht zuletzt deutlicher werden, in welchen Hinsichten die Dekolonisation von Bildung als ein relationales Phänomen verstanden werden kann.

**Schlüsselwörter** Relationalität · Indigenismus · ‚Indianismus' · ‚Neue Linke' (Westdeutschland) · Trikont-Verlag

Bolivia was the last country in South America to become independent from Spain in 1825. However, this independence often did not entail quick structural changes and the field of education was no exception. Efforts to decolonise education can be identified right from the beginning of the republican period. In the pre-republican era, however, there was resistance to colonial power in this field. The history of Bolivian education is, like Bolivian history in general (cf. Klein 2011), complex—as is the history of efforts to decolonise education in Bolivia. Therefore, I will have to limit myself to only a few central discursive and practical efforts. Moreover, I will adopt a rather particular—although hopefully fruitful—perspective that focusses on Bolivian–German relations. I will focus on selected Bolivian and German discourses and also practices in their relationality. The main aim of the article is to elucidate further the question of what decolonising education can mean and in what respects it can be understood as a relational phenomenon.

## 1 Franz Tamayo's Nietzschean indigenism

Franz Tamayo (1879–1956) published a small but highly influential book, *La creación de la pedagogía nacional* (*The creation of a national pedagogy*) in 1910 (Tamayo 2010 [1910]; for an extract in English, see Tamayo 2018). A politician, lawyer, landowner and poet, Tamayo directed his book against liberal efforts to build up an educational system in a Western sense. He harshly criticised attempts to implement European educational ideals and programmes in Bolivia on the grounds

that doing so would neglect the Bolivian soul (Tamayo 2010, for example pp. 7–9). Tamayo perceived Western education as a danger to the strength of the nation and in particular its most vital element, the *Indio*, whom he sees as the repository of the vital energy of the Bolivian nation (ibid., p. 54). Tamayo asks: 'What does the *Indio* do for the State? Everything. What does the state do for the *Indio*? Nothing!' (ibid.). For Tamayo the *Indio* was the real, the true Bolivian, whereas *criollos* (the descendants of the Spaniards and other Europeans) and mestizos (descendants of *Indios* and Spaniards) were mere parasites (ibid., p. 106). Western-style educational efforts would only alienate the *Indios*; it was necessary, rather, to keep them away from such efforts in order not to corrupt their deeply rooted identity. He supposed this to be characterised by patience, tenacity and moral integrity (ibid., pp. 158–160). Influenced by vitalism and (his idea of) Nietzschean philosophy, Tamayo argued against an education too strongly rooted in intellectualism. Instead, he favoured strengthening the *Indios'* self-esteem and returning the dignity that had been taken from them by the Spaniards and their descendants (ibid., pp. 119–121). Because 'historically the *Indio* is a great will and a small intelligence' (ibid., p. 116), rather elementary intellectual skills would suffice. Beyond that, the *Indios* should instead learn practical things.

The discriminatory essentialism of these last reflections is more than obvious, but essentialism, sometimes seemingly intended as benevolent, is a general characteristic of Tamayo's book, as the preceding summary has shown (cf. Mansilla 2015, pp. 54–57).

## 2 Fausto Reinaga's and Wankar's 'Indianism'

One of Bolivia's most influential 'Indianists' was the lawyer, politician and prolific writer Fausto Reinaga (1906–1994). *La revolución india* (*The Indio revolution*), published in 1970, is considered his magnum opus (Reinaga 2007 [1970]; for an extract in English see Reinaga 2018). In this book, one can find thoughts on what one might call an 'Indianist' pedagogy (Kölbl 2020a) directed, for example, at the function of schools in Bolivia (Reinaga 2007 [1970], pp. 318–333). In this respect, Reinaga mainly asks and tries to answer three interconnected questions. What does the Bolivian school do for the *Indio*? What does literacy mean for the *Indio*? And finally: what should education be like for the *Indio*?

What did the Bolivian school do for the *Indio*? Nothing good, for Bolivian schools only followed Western models. Moreover, the *Indio* children met their torturers in school, where the teachers were their former landlords and their lackeys. School would inculcate self-hate in the mind or psyche of children: hate towards their names, their blood, their religion, their skin, themselves; in sum, hate towards their race and culture. And to what end? In order to make the *Indio* a Europeanised *mestizo*, which would ultimately signify the extinction of the *Indio*. As for literacy, Reinaga's answer was also negative. Literacy would destroy the psyche of the Indio, for it would be directed towards replacing *Indio* thinking with that of the Spanish conqueror. This would destroy not only the individual but also the collective psyche of the *Indios*, along with their culture. As for how education *should* look for the *Indio*, Reinaga

comes back to the issue of literacy, emphasising that he is by no means against literacy in itself but only against the use of the coloniser's language. Therefore, he advocates literacy in indigenous languages, such as Aymara or Quechua in the Andean area.

However, educational reforms in a narrow sense of the word would not suffice, according to Reinaga. What was needed, in his view, were educational reforms that were embedded in radical political changes in which power was taken by the *Indios* themselves. Those political changes would also encompass a revalorisation of indigenous languages, indigenous culture and history. As for history, Reinaga wanted to establish an *Indio* counter-history—a historical narrative running counter to the Bolivian master narrative, which constantly marginalised the national majority (ibid., pp. 205–296). This counter-history would focus on *Indio* heroes and heroines from pre-Hispanic time up to the republican present (in those days Bolivia still was a republic; since 2010 Bolivia has been denominated a plurinational state).

*La revolución india* was distributed massively during the last government of Evo Morales in Bolivia, with thousands of copies given to Bolivian students. Moreover, numerous events at which the book was 'discussed' were organised by his Vice-Minister of Decolonisation. A number of such 'discussions' have been uploaded to the internet (see, for example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyv7dvBfcD8). The structure of these events is always very similar. Often, someone in 'traditional' *Indio* clothing presents a sort of abstract of the book. Sometimes, selected passages of the book are read aloud, especially passages that recount heroic tales about the *Indio* past and the misdeeds of the Spaniards as well as their descendants in the colony and denounce the republican era. This is accompanied by heated and aggressive criticism of the alleged colonial structure of the Bolivian state, which will now at last be overcome. One of the central psychosocial functions of these events—and also of *La revolución india* as a whole—seems to be fostering a collective *Indio* identity via heightening *Indio* self-esteem and *Indio* combativeness. Those events and the book as a whole may sometimes also promote a sort of inverted racism, or at least an inverted essentialism.

'Wankar' is the *nom de plume* of Ramiro Reynaga Burgoa (1939–2022), one of Fausto Reinaga's sons. Ramiro also published some writings, including the 1978 book *Tawantinsuyu. 5 siglos de guerra qheswaymara contra España* (*Tawantinsuyu. 5 centuries of Qheswaymara war against Spain*, cf. Wankar 1978). This book also contains a chapter on education (ibid, pp. 372–376). Like his father, Ramiro vehemently criticised the Bolivian school, denouncing it as a tool to colonise the mind of *Indio* children and accusing it of imprisoning them. By educating them in Spanish along Western values and norms, he asserts that the Bolivian school alienated the *Indio* children, destroying their language and culture. Instead of honouring *Indio* heroes and heroines, the school honoured the murderers of the *Indio* nation and made *Indios* forget their communal wisdom. After going to school, *Indios* knew less about their plants, heroes, landscapes: in sum, pupils actually did not learn in school—quite the contrary! The Bolivian school was directed at making Bolivia and its inhabitants into a mere copy of European nations. Instead of learning about, for example, *Indio* communities' achievements in stoneworking, making deserts flourish or integrating humans into cosmic harmony, the *Indio* child had to learn how many

lovers Napoleon had. To be a cultivated person in the Andean region—according to the younger Reynaga—just meant that you were an invaded person. The goal of Andean education was not to educate. It was rather to promote hate against yourself and admiration for the oppressor and his continent. What were needed instead were radically different schools, schools which would promote communal education and wisdom, matching the necessities of life, schools with textbooks in native languages that contained the truth about indigenous life and cosmology rather than omitting or distorting it.

Let us now leave La Paz, Bolivia, and cross the Atlantic towards Germany, turning first to the city of Detmold and then to Munich.

## 3 Rupprecht Weerth's approach to Andean Cosmovision[1]

In the small German city of Detmold, a 13-year-old named Rupprecht begins to develop an interest in Andean music. It is the 1970s and opportunities to hear this kind of music in Germany are rather scarce. A rare chance opens up when the Bolivian folklore group *Los Ruphay* passes through Germany on tour. Rupprecht attends a concert of the group with his father. He is enthusiastic. During the intermission, Rupprecht approaches one of the musicians, Mario Gutierrez. A few days later, he gets a letter. Gutierrez writes that the group is in search of friends of their culture and that he got the impression that Rupprecht's interest was authentic. With the letter, Gutierrez also enclosed a short text about life in indigenous communities, indigenous culture and music. As Rupprecht's parents considered themselves open-minded, they invited the whole group to their house.

Afterwards the whole family started to learn Spanish. Moreover, Rupprecht, his younger sister and a friend who lived in the neighbourhood started to learn to play Andean music and made flutes and drums suitable for this kind of music. Rupprecht also began to organise concerts for *Los Ruphay*. After some years, Gutierrez came to Germany with some of Fausto Reinaga's books and asked Otto Weerth, Rupprecht's father, if he could help him to finance a French edition of *América India y occidente* (Reinaga 2014 [1974]). Otto agreed and even offered to translate the book into German himself. Gutierrez put him in touch with Reinaga and the two became friends. Nevertheless, they did not meet in person, as both considered themselves too old for the long journey between Bolivia and Germany.

The one who did travel, however, was Rupprecht—from his adolescence onwards. He also became a member of the group *Los Ruphay*. Between 1979 and 1982, he met Reinaga several times in La Paz. During these visits, Reinaga invited him to stay for some days in one of his two houses in La Paz and always told his son Kolla to keep Rupprecht company during his stays there. Rupprecht Weerth remembers Reinaga as already elderly, fragile and tired, but also as a proud, a bit arrogant and distanced person with a scholarly mien, who knew the truth and did not tolerate contradiction—quite different from the affable Mario Gutierrez. Rupprecht Weerth

[1] My special thanks to Rupprecht Weerth for his generosity in sharing his personal story, which is the basis for the following narrative (cf. Kölbl 2020b).

deplores the fact that his Spanish was not good enough then to speak to Reinaga in more detail. In any case, Reinaga still considered Rupprecht more of a child than an adult, which Weerth concedes was probably true. Besides being involved in Andean music, Rupprecht Weerth (who later on studied pedagogy and eventually became a psychotherapist) also offered seminars on 'world-view, life and music' of the Aymaras and Quechuas (Weerth 1988). In any case, Otto Weerth offered the manuscript of his completed translation personally to Herbert Röttgen (also known as Victor Trimondi) of the Trikont publishing house, who released it in 1980 (Reinaga 1980). This book belongs to Reinaga's 'Amautic' phase (cf. Macusaya 2015), which is—I would argue—somewhat but not totally different from his 'Indianist' phase in a stricter sense of the word, offering more a 'cosmic vision' with spiritual elements and not so much a vision of radical political struggle: *amautas* were the 'wise men' at the time of the Incas.

## 4 Trikont publishers and two kinds of Bolivian revolution

Herbert Röttgen, who would later call himself Victor Trimondi, founded the Trikont publishing house with Gisela Erler in 1967. Both were members of the SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* or Socialist German Student Union) back then. One of the first books they published was Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's Bolivian diary. Trikont was originally a publishing house committed to the agenda of the APO (*Außerparlamentarische Opposition* or Extraparliamentary Opposition). Over time, Trikont shifted towards publishing feminist, indigenous and spiritual authors, all still anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist in a more-or-less strict sense of the word. Increasingly, Trikont came to be known as a 'New Age' publishing house (Bochinger 1995, pp. 158–170). It went bankrupt in 1986, after which Rowohlt, another German publishing house, bought the rights to some of Trikont's books, among them Guevara's Bolivian diary.

It seems to be no accident that Reinaga's book *América India y occidente* was published by Trikont in 1980. That was the year in which the publishing house changed its name to Trikont-Dianus, which can be read as an indicator of the shift in its mission from a publishing house that belonged to the militant left to one more interested in anti-occidental spiritual matters. Reinaga's book fitted this interest perfectly: here was a rebellious *Indio* author who called himself an *amauta*, who was militantly anti-western and who promised to present a new cosmic thinking capable of contributing to the salvation of the whole of humanity.

Readers of Trikont books could already find the name Reinaga in Guevara's Bolivian diary, published in 1967: Aniceto Reinaga, one of Fausto's nephews, fought alongside Guevara as a guerrilla, one of those who were killed at the very end of the war and secretly buried with him. He was a fighter of Aymara descent. Eusebio Tapia, another Aymara who participated in the guerrilla war, wrote a book in 1997 dedicated to his own experiences and those of three other Bolivians (Tapia 1997, for an extract in English see Tapia 2018). They became part of a subgroup forming the rearguard, which Guevara condescendingly called '*la resaca de la guerrilla*'—the hangover, scum or the dregs of the guerrilla force.

When Rowohlt bought the diary from Trikont and published it in 1986, it still included a preface written by Herbert Röttgen and Christiane Thurn (Röttgen and Thurn 1986). This preface is quite interesting in our context. In this short text, the authors first allude to their former fascination with Ernesto Guevara (and other revolutionaries) and then explain their later disenchantment with him. While doing so, they emphasise that today (i.e. 1986) new voices could be heard from the 'Third World', voices that were much more profound, that would generate hope and that were much more promising: voices of shamans who had access to ancestral knowledge and wisdom that could guide us out of the cosmic fatalism that human beings and nature had come to (ibid., pp. 8–9). At the end of their preface, the authors turn to a very prominent episode in Guevara's diary, the presumed betrayal of 'Che' (Guevara 1986, pp. 212–213). Röttgen and Thurn (1986, p. 9) claim that the old woman to whom the three guerrillas Inti, Pablito and Aniceto (!) gave money in order to dissuade her from betraying them, could be seen as the 'toothless witch', who intrigued against the 'revolutionary hero of the fairy tale' because he—the hero—was not able to acknowledge the volcanic force of the *Indio* spirit (the authors speak of '*Urkraft des indianischen Geistes*'). Without a doubt, Röttgen and Thurn's interpretation of why Ernesto Guevara was captured is rather remarkable. What is important in the present context is the characterisation of the ancient woman as a bearer of a supposedly primordial '*Indio-Urkraft*', a description that strongly recalls the thinking of Franz Tamayo, to which I referred at the beginning of this article.

So, the circle is now clearly coming to a sort of close. Before presenting some concluding remarks in the next section, let me only mention that, in the lines of the preface that I have just paraphrased, you can see once more why an author like Reinaga, who had turned into *amauta*, was so fascinating to Röttgen and Thurn after their disenchantment with revolutionaries like Guevara. Röttgen and Thurn—but also Rupprecht Weerth—seem to have taken the motto of *America India und das Abendland* quite seriously, for it says: '*Indio* thinking is cosmic. Each and every person—independent of the colour of his skin—who thinks cosmically is an *Indio*' (Reinaga 1980, p. 15)—a dictum, by the way, that can be found in the German edition of the book but not in the Bolivian one.

## 5 Concluding remarks, including some words on the relationality of decolonising education

Decolonising education is a relational project both by necessity and for more historic-contingent reasons. Already, the word decolonising demonstrates its inherent relational character. Where there never has been any colonising there cannot be decolonising. Decolonising education obviously can encompass many different things. As far as I can see, however, the perspective often is limited to those nations, groups and persons who have been colonised; besides, it is often limited to educationalists in the narrow sense of the word. By including both Bolivians and Germans—who are not all educators or educationalists but who all have something to say explicitly or implicitly about decolonising education—I hope to have broadened the view. By

also presenting two intertwined German '*Bildungsromane*', I wanted to include those who are—metaphorically speaking—on the other side of the spectrum too. These '*Bildungsromane*' represent trials of self-transformation—*Bildung* in the classic German sense of the word—but are also characterised by their striving to offer means of decolonising the minds and the behaviour of those who belong to the former colonisers. Neither the formerly colonised nor the former colonisers merely stick to 'their autochthonous worlds': they relate in manifold ways to one another—on conceptual but also on literally personal levels.

The aim of this article will have been reached if it has been able to contribute, even if in a slightly peculiar way, to a more multifaceted picture of what decolonising education might mean in its fundamental and historic-contingent relationality in a specific case. However, it is clearly beyond the scope of this article to subject the strands of decolonising education reconstructed above to a thorough political, moral and normative scrutiny (one that goes beyond cursory remarks here and there) in order to establish whether they meet certain desired goals or on the contrary head dangerously against them.

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