

The cultivation of coca in Bolivia: Symbol of life and death

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The coca leaf ritual

1. The lens through which one looks

Usually analysts of acts which generate conflicts and violence, particularly in mountain zones, resort to the characterization of a series of factors of an instrumental type, such as the ineffectual attitudes of the current government, the incapacity of the poor to become part of the modern world, the inadequate mechanisms of development politics, etc., in order to be able to explain the emergence --more and more worrying-- of these problems of social upheaval.

If we attempt an analysis, stripping ourselves of the prejudices which modern scientific thought and the philosophical principles which sustain it have up to now shaped the way we conceive of the universe and of life, we will be able to recognize that it is a question of dealing with a problem the causes of which refer more to the cognitive sphere than to the instrumental, that is, which has more to do with the way of perceiving reality than with the order or adjustments that can be established within a scheme itself. It is the incapacity

of the system of hegemonic knowledge to accept that there can exist other rational interpretations of a complex multidimensional world that in essence causes confrontation and conflict.

In the same way that new concepts of quantum physics give rise to a profound change in our vision of the world, determining the need to pass from a mechanist Cartesian and Newtonian description to a new holistic and ecological vision, these phenomena which generate conflict and violence are no more than facets of a single crisis, which is essentially of the perception of a reality which can no longer be understood under a fragmentary and stagnant vision of knowledge; of a vision, which as A. Touraine (1997,21) says, promotes a dissociation between the symbolic world of cultures-values and the instrumental world of techniques and the economy; a dissociation between the day to day experience of the individual ego and the structure of the social system.

The historic conflict generated in Bolivia surrounding the cultivation of coca at heart reveals these causes; between the perception of a State which, subject to the economistic view of the modern Western world, is not able to comprehend the complexity of historical cultural Andean thought and the perception of a native population which, on not being interpreted, comes to the surface with signs of violence and confrontation.

2. Coca in the holistic vision of the Andean world: food, medicine and ritual in traditional and modern community practices

As we mentioned, coca leaf is part of the traditional consumption of Andean people from time immemorial and its production and consumption have always fulfilled a diversity of roles and functions in strengthening the community practices of Quechua, Aymara and Amazonian groups in Brazil, Ecuador and Colombia (Carter and Mamani, 1986; Arce Quintanilla, 1990).

The crisis of modernity, translated into the dissociation between cultures-nationalisms and political and economic instrumentality, sweeps away every fundamental and right principle of peoples who have in coca leaf, a basic fundamental of their cosmic vision and traditional knowledge, where, in addition to its great nutritional qualities, comparable to milk and soy (Asociación Chamánica y Ecológica de Colombia [Shamanic and Ecological Association of Colombia], 1998) it is also used with therapeutic objectives from a whole vision of health (mind, body and spirit) "contrary to the positivist medical vision, which, sustained by fragmentary and mechanistic principles regarding the human being, establishes that the consuming of coca is the ingestion of cocaine and that cocaine, being toxic, is evil; therefore the person who uses coca is a cocaine addict, a drug addict" (S. Rivera, 2000).

Besides, it is affirmed that it is a question of an indigenous vice linked to underdevelopment where the indigenous person chews coca leaves, uses coca or drinks, because he lacks food or because he has excessively hard work conditions. Nevertheless, because of the current research of the Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera, we can establish that a consumption pattern has developed which is not restricted to traditional cultural use, but encompasses more and more the middle and upper layers of Bolivian and Argentinean society.

In Bolivia, particularly in the cities of the altiplano and the valleys, the consumption of coca in the middle and upper classes is more frequent than that which has been reported; the first Friday of every month, businesses, companies and various institutions have recourse to chewing coca leaves to consummate a ritual of *sahomerío* [incense] which cleans energies and brings prosperity, nor is it incidental to see in meetings of intellectuals or of prosperous businessmen, coca being offered alongside fine imported liquors. Similarly, in the provinces in the north of Argentina, middle and upper classes chew coca as a status symbol, sometimes it is offered with illuminated signs on the streets. This "modern" way of consuming coca, establishes that the chewing of coca leaf or using coca is not exclusively of a ritual character, but also recreational, as a stimulant, the equivalent of the "coffee break, etc.," (S. Rivera, 2000).

3. Coca in the network of cocaine and narcotics traffic: a gap in modernity?

The other side of the coin shows us this millenarian crop inserted into the cocaine network as a gap in the exigencies themselves that the international market operate dually in our socio-economic formations through national policy bowing to the will of the World Bank.

In effect, owing to the politics of structural adjustment imposed on the Bolivian State, traditional productive sectors of the national economy were reduced, with the consequent dismissal of large sectors of workers, causing internal migratory processes which flowed especially to the zones of the Chapare, attracted by the conditions favorable for agricultural exploitation found there.

The increase of the dominating narcotics traffic in past decades conditioned a large part of these populations to orient their efforts to the cultivation-considered to be excessive- of coca in this zone, providing the narcotics trader his principle raw material and obtaining in exchange a profitable activity.

The inexistence of policies and concrete actions of agricultural development on the part of the government completes a picture of conditions appropriate for the development of these illicit activities, which gave rise to features of violence for several years up until the present time.

Today the situation becomes more complicated all the time, a dialogue of the deaf, which on one hand, from the shortsightedness of a government subjugated by American international cooperation, suggests with excessive arrogance a policy of total eradication of this crop, after a long process of attempts to develop alternative products; on the other hand, from the desperation of the impoverished crowd the defense is stoically maintained of an activity which, outside of its illegality, makes their survival possible. This eagerness for a dialogue, which never manages to take shape in attitudes of spiritual disarmament, has even had its social representation in parliamentary negotiations, with the intention on both sides of legitimating or justifying before society their violent reactions.

So it is that the intention of a belated dialogue with a minimum predisposition to reach agreements almost always leads to violence and confrontations, comparing the number of dead on each side: one more death for the police and another for the coca producers, two more for the impoverished citizenry.

4. By way of conclusion

The aim of the preceding reflections has not been to establish a picture detailing the multiple facets the complex problem of production and consumption of coca leaf presents in Bolivia; but it was intended to call attention to the nature of the origin of the problem, which to our understanding has to do with the way of looking at the legality or illegality of the production and consumption of one substance or another within the framework of the established socioeconomic system. It is clear then, that the illegality of coca leaf has little or nothing to do with its physical or chemical properties, but rather with the relationships of power which finally determine what is legal and what is illegal. Thus we can observe, for example, that there are even drugs - such as tobacco and alcohol -- which are legal despite their known noxiousness; inasmuch as they correspond to the lifestyle of hegemonic social groups and are part of the image that we acquire as a social construct from "modernity and the civilized world".

The production and consumption of coca leaf becomes a problem when it escapes the control of the modernist vision regarding development and civilization, casting doubt on the dominant cultural patterns and North American double morality. But beyond the ideological aspects, it is also mercantile interest, since high profitability and competition impose a savage struggle for control of markets, for which the profitability itself offers means for the acquisition of violence, which ends up by being used as an answer to what the State seeks to impose with its repressive strategy.

Under these assertions, I consider that the origin of these social conflicts, which almost always lead to violence, are to be found in the arrogance and intolerance of a hegemonic system which does not find any other way to

legitimize itself socially that is not that of violent repression; thus manifesting the crisis not only of its political and institutional instruments but also of the way it conceives development.

The change must translate into the possibility of harmoniously integrating other ways of thinking and perceiving reality, consequently making possible the incorporation of the social actor based on the construction of a new social order, which has as its principal virtues tolerance and the open dialogue, not only in its instrumental dimension but also in its cognitive dimension. The first sensation of aggression in daily life, felt at not being listened to; the conflict is caused then as a product of misunderstanding and, more than once, we end up in attitudes of physical violence. The marginalization of the knowledge of native cultures, in the process of the construction of the present society, is that first attitude of aggression.

Notes to readers

This paper was a case study on Conflict and Peace in Mountain Societies.
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