On Their Own Terms:
The Competing Militarization and Politicization of the Coca Leaf

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1. **Introduction: Coca, History and Truth**

*The role of historicity*

It is the intent of this paper to offer some thoughts concerning the recent social trajectory of the coca leaf in Bolivia, the complexity of the institutions that are intertwined with it, and the perceived import of the decade of the 1960s with this story. I see these mutually co-existing spheres of “coca ideology” combining today, in order to enact a complex role that constantly generates its own social and cultural reproduction, as an integral component of both indigenous life—social, cultural, economic—and of the political reality that the Bolivian nation-state is compelled to confront in today’s world. Based upon both personal observation and readings, I intend to present the coca leaf here as a multi-sited object; it is, thus, necessary to track it across its many diverse incarnations throughout time, as it becomes a shifting focal point for questions of identity, control, and power throughout Bolivian society.

What was it about the 1960s that lends itself to the present coca debate, one of the defining themes of Bolivian reality in the last thirty years? In regards to coca, cocaine, and the coca leaf farmers (*cocaleros*), the history had, of course, already begun long before this particular decade, springing from a variety of diverse “sources” within the many strata of national society. However, in Bolivia the decade was a critical defining transitional phase: it became juxtaposed with the power struggle between two competing ideologies and social structures, both of which were to indelibly affect the development of what was to become known as the “war on drugs,” and the eventual creation and fortification of the cocalero movement. First, sovereignty and social control, of both the Bolivian state itself, and from outside forces (primarily the United States); and second, the definitions of indigenous identity, resistance, and autonomy. These competing phenomena found their practical articulation through a series of initially independent events on the international (and later national) political, economic and social scene: namely, the “rediscovery” of cocaine as a recreational drug in the United States (and, to a somewhat less significant degree, Europe), and the subsequent commodification of coca on a scale previously unheard of—thus, allowing the particular (and peculiar) history of the “war on drugs” and its social aftermath to unfold. The decade may be seen from this perspective as forming part of a non-linear and fractured continuum, extending back in time while tracing a myriad of different paths and directions which had previously existed in alternative forms in Bolivian society—and, it must be added, also in countries that would indelibly affect the development of the coca/cocaine spiral, most prominently the United States. These paths interacted in a variety of ways, branching off unpredictably, and yet somehow came together during a defined time period—the 1960s—into a unique confluence of events, the effects of which are still with us today. At stake were issues of cultural identity, oppression, resistance, and power.

I concur that it is, ultimately, impossible to create a definitive framework of analysis that can purport to explain the “origins” of any given set of circumstances, events, mechanisms of power relations, or truths. The search for a single, essential “source” is likely to prove fruitless and frustrating at best, and exclusionary and essentialist at worst; rather than adopting an approach bordering on the teleological, more important is the identification of the actual ideas and motivations that allowed history to unfold, and to become connected to power relations. As
were the new tools of scholarly investigation themselves that increasingly came upon the scene during the 1960s, the very decade was one of agitation, ferment and multiplicity; both the birth and the culmination of differing sociological and ideological movements; it was a similar situation in Bolivia. It is widely recognized that, until beginning in the late 1980s, the coca leaf producers were not the important social force that they are today, a contemporary status resulting from the strategic importance (economic, political, military) that coca has attained in recent years. However, to partially historicize the coca leaf, and the social movements within the Bolivian context that have it at their core—to, in a sense, remove it from its current vantage point and representational position as a symbol of struggle, resistance and local agency—is in no way to depoliticize what is very much a political (as well as cultural) phenomenon. The objective is, rather, to concentrate investigation upon the historic background of the present-day sociopolitical struggle of the coca farmers, and in this manner to analyze the specificity of certain power mechanisms which (co)exist on the current scene, locate their apparent (and unapparent) connections and extensions, and to thus construct a basis of strategic knowledge—this rather than simply a formulation of theory concerning the “origins” of the violence revolving around the coca/cocaine dichotomy, and the social movement which has emerged in reaction to it.

The reinvention of the coca leaf

The Andean coca leaf is, it cannot be denied, most definitely pre-modern. It would be difficult to find many things more pre-modern than this hardy little shrub, growing in the deep sub-tropical valleys and on the humid plains of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, used traditionally by the indigenous populations for millennia and beyond, in a variety of guises. In addition, the coca leaf maintains within our time its iconographic status as a symbol of indigenous Andean identity; in Bolivia, as in other Quechua and Aymara regions stretching from northern Argentina and Chile and throughout Peru, it is an intrinsic component of local ethnicity. Yet, interestingly and paradoxically, coca has managed to insert itself, in a strikingly prominent manner, into the malleable framework of modernity—or rather, and perhaps more accurately, other social forces and actors, extraneous and challenging to this so-called “traditional” history, have been the ones to do the inserting, in what has often been a controversial, if not violent, fashion. For the coca leaf is without a doubt a forlorn victim of modernity: once the inquisitive eye of science first cast its empirical gaze upon it, eventually isolating a previously unknown alkaloid that was appropriately dubbed cocaine, the identity and relative positionality of the leaf shifted dramatically on the world stage, and certainly not always in a positive fashion for those with the greatest vested interest in it—namely, the indigenous peoples of the Andes.

The “historical facts” of the cocaine story—the actual people, events and timeframe, and thus the ultimate unfolding history—are straightforward and well documented: the early enthusiasm about cocaine, in the late 19th century and early 20th century; the gradual “rediscovery” of cocaine in the late 1960s, and the subsequent “cocaine boom” of the 1970s; the concurrent development of the “cocaine economy” and the “war on drugs,” which began in earnest in the mid 1980s, continuing until the present day in one form or another; and the phenomenon of the cocalero unions, leading to its status as a catalyst in national social development. Yet, the conventional history and the current reality of coca, cocaine, the “war on drugs” and the subsequent rise to prominence of the cocalero movement, offer starkly differing “official” versions of the same story, depending on precisely who is doing the telling. For the
Bolivian government, as influenced and dictated by United States foreign policy and funding concerns, the “cocaine problem” originates at the “source”: that is, the supply side, with the coca leaf growers and the economy of production (i.e., Bolivia, Peru and Colombia), and the drug traffickers (national or international) who profit from it; the resulting policy has been framed as a criminal one, of interdiction and military control. From this vantage point, the coca growers, as local producers of the materia prima, their sindicatos and their movement, become conflated with the economy of illicit narcotics, and are typically considered as equally culpable, “the other side of the same coin”—at least implicitly, if not overtly; and who may also be accused of smelling like old-fashioned “agitators” and dangerous ‘Leftists,” if not actually “communists” (a lingering regional vestige of the discarded Cold War); or of being new-fashioned “terrorists” (a local harbinger of the vaunted New World Order).

In turn, the cocaleros and many others have customarily focused their attention on the social and the cultural realm of the Andes, pointing out that the persistent conflict and sporadically flaring violence is much more a product of the demand side; i.e., the consumers in the U.S. and Europe who have created such a lucrative market for cocaine. Consequently, the precipitous rise and dramatic strengthening of the cocalero movement is a natural and inevitable reaction to the official policies and mechanisms of oppression that are integrated into the interdiction efforts, and a popular discontent with and rejection of the official Bolivian governmental strategy in the Chapare, in association with the United States. In this way, the cocaleros are popularly perceived—by the popular classes—as a legitimate social protest movement, and one that is entitled to an increasingly significant degree of political recognition and respect. (It is not my intent here to belittle in any way the cocalero movements of the La Paz Yungas, by not devoting time to it; their cause is equally important, and their recent historical trajectory is rapidly merging in many ideological and practical ways with the Chapare movement. However, for all purposes, this paper deals only with the Chapare phenomenon, seeing it as unique due to its “non-traditional” status, in both historical time and legal jurisdiction.)

Thus, in approximately the last decade in Bolivia, this identity has taken on a new and revitalized social and political significance. It has transcended the historically “cultural” character of the coca leaf itself, while simultaneously incorporating and exploiting it, in ways that have proved to be both negative and positive—for very specific social groups, and for the nation as a whole. The “cocaine boom” and the subsequent “war on drugs” have dramatically and irrevocably altered the lives of those who are closely tied to coca, in many different ways. In this manner, it is possible to speak of the parallel, and symbiotic, phenomena of the coca leaf’s multiple identities: militarization and politicization, and while never neglecting the historical catalyst of another crucial facet within the coca narrative, a form of mediation between the two: its commodification. Whereas the state sanctioned repression and violence that have accompanied militarization may be critically analyzed and pointedly condemned, at the same time the fervent social organizing and assumption of an active national leadership role by the coca producers, and the remarkable consolidation of a recognized voice in state policy formation which has accompanied politicization, may be appropriately lauded. And yet, while both of these concurrent trends are simultaneously independent of the other, determinedly maintaining their resolution in opposition, they are also paradoxically dependent upon one another, partners in a parrying dance whose power may just as well be strengthened as weakened by the previous
move of their opponent. “On their own terms,” in this sense, assumes something of an ironic connotation: the respective terms and demands of each player are mutually joined in common reliance and dependence, a counterpoint in which one cannot exist without the other, no matter how strenuously both parties may stress the primacy of their own cause.

Through the specific agency of given social actors, both inside and outside of Bolivia, then, there has been forged for the coca leaf in recent years a determined duality, if not hybridity: both as the representation of traditional Andean cultural identity that it has always been; and as a symbol of ongoing militarization—the “war on drugs”—coupled with a mounting and increasingly potent, vibrant, national politicization. The commingling of these distinct and opposing ideologies, encapsulated in the lowly coca leaf, owes itself to a genealogy that extends further back than the more recent rise to political power of the cocaleros, culminating in the group’s current importance as the leading social movement on the Bolivian scene, and as the most prominent democratically elected voice of opposition in national government today: it extends further back than the U.S. financed “drug war” itself; and, indeed, prior to the start of the original “cocaine boom” of the early 1970s.

2. Tracing the Trajectory: Historical Dualities

The coalescing ideas and motivations that were discontinuously occurring, re-occurring and coalescing in the Bolivia of the 1960s, as manifested in a series of historical events and trends, represented a complexity of contingencies, subjectivities, and vested interests. As the antecedents to the ongoing saga of the “drug war” (militarization) and the subsequently re-vitalized coca producer social movement of today (politicization), there has prevailed a certain interconnectedness between these concurrent histories, identifiable through the mutual relationship of two dominant themes: the nature of the state and state power, including their relationship with the competing power bids of other social actors; and the deepening search for new degrees of indigenous identity and autonomy.

Identity and autonomy

Coca is a well-studied, well-documented and integral focal point of Andean cosmology, ritual and daily life; the traditional “cultural” context for the coca leaf remains an extremely valid interpretive symbol of Andean ethnicity. However, this has for centuries been fringed by, if not in many instances actively amalgamated with, a functionally economic role, even in those previous epochs far distant to the much more extensively analyzed economics of the “cocaine boom” years, beginning in the 1970s. With the current case of the coca leaf producers in Bolivia, the crucial sociocultural dimension of coca here in question—while still very much a widely recognized reality—has in many ways been overtly supplanted by the manifestly political economy forces and developments of recent years.

By the waning days of the 20th century, the coca leaf as symbol had long since transcended the Andean cultural relevance that it has held for millennia—and still does hold, to this day. But coca has also become, in its own way, a kind of cultural trope, implicitly acknowledged as such by many coca farmers themselves, however it might be conceived in their
minds. There is, then, a more convoluted form that the coca debate and the “war on drugs” each takes on; just as coca is a key economic issue in Bolivian society, it is also an extremely charged political one. This does not refer only to the large scale, geopolitical game played between the Bolivian government and (primarily) the United States that revolves around issues of coca, economic dependency, and hegemonic control, usually involving U.S. economic coercion and military might, in order to “cut off drugs at the source,” and to maintain the foreign aid flowing. It also refers to the politics played out within Bolivia, by the coca growers themselves, as part of their relationship with, and within, the state.

With differing degrees of intensity and forms of articulation—typically depending on both the Bolivian administration in power, and the fluctuating degree to which the U.S. perceives its international drug policy as a form of political control—the growers have lobbied the Bolivian government to permit coca cultivation, for the obvious reasons of their own economic survival and unique position within the world economy—one example of what Eric Wolf (1982) would refer to as the “wider linkages that must be investigated if the processes at work in the periphery are to be understood.” While the government would customarily negotiate with the growers on a number of specific points, the bottom line was always that, ultimately, the coca had to go. This dialogue has also been fractured, contentious, and frequently violent, undergoing frequent shifts in political perspective. This varied in different ways: from the different degrees of “narcocracy” collusion prevalent during the military regimes, including the period of the 1960s (until 1982); to the half-hearted and sporadic attempts at interdiction, control and alternative development during the governments of hyper-inflation plagued Hernán Siles Zuazo (1982-1985), economic shock treatment Víctor Paz Estenssoro (1985-1989) and so-called “coca diplomacy” Jaime Paz Zamora (1989-1993)—at least in appearance recognizing the need to comply with U. S. pressure, while simultaneously allowing the cocaine dollars to prop up a highly unstable economy; to the increasing vigilance and hard-line police tactics of the first Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada administration (1993-1997); to the no-nonsense and all-out eradication of Hugo Banzer’s “constitutional” return to power (1997-2001), continued by Jorge Quiroga (2001-2002); and, finally, the still ill-defined coca policy within the reality of a radically changed political environment occupied by the second and current Sánchez de Lozada government. In this context, as international pressure (again, overwhelmingly from the United States) dictates it, and national politicians—and even, reluctantly, the cocaleros themselves—echo it, there has never been much debate that the great majority of the national coca crop goes for the production of cocaine. Consequently, the growers and their leaders have needed to come up with further justifications for the cultivation of the leaf, besides the very obvious and patently coherent economic ones alone—which have, nevertheless, constituted a rationale which would only get them so far with either the Bolivian or the United States government, despite its apparent logic.

Thus, as indicated, the trope that was commonly applied, at least superficially, was the historical-cultural one. Alongside of other symbols of indigenous pre-Conquest culture and colonial resistance (the wiphala, the figure of Tupac Katari, etc.), the “sacred leaf of the Incas” was revalorized, revitalized and repackaged for mass consumption, thereby taking on renewed meaning and reinforced weight. Consequently, the objections put forth by those in disagreement with any sort of increased forced reduction, let alone eradication, of coca (ranging from the cocaleros themselves, to human rights advocates, to academics and intellectuals, to opposition
political parties on the left), was that it was wrong on the grounds of coca’s status as a national patrimony, an historical right, and a cultural necessity.\textsuperscript{20} Again, all of these rationales were, and remain, accepted as accurate and legitimate arguments. However, even among many of those groups who actively oppose domestic and international anti-coca policies, and the social destabilization and violence wreaked by the “drug war” and its perpetrators, and who promote whatever legal and lucrative economic channels and applications can be found for the leaf, in Bolivia or in other countries—and who themselves also advocate for the historical, cultural and endogenous rationale for preserving cultivation—it may be perceived that at times there is a certain degree of disingenuous promotion going on. As much as one might accept the cultural angle of coca protection as true and good, the economic logic implicit in the empirical reality of the final destination of the overwhelming amounts of leaf production (now more, now less, depending on current government policy in reaction to U.S. pressure tactics) is hard to get around, at least without bringing up the valid arguments for legalization, or simply swallowing hard. Within this context, the dilemma presented to both the cocalero and to the outside observer is the proper stance to assume in an attempt to best gain insight into the management of current events, and how the “historical” path has been a many bifurcated one, a series of diversely interpreted understandings and explanations.\textsuperscript{21}

My central hypothesis here is that, for the most part since the decade of the 1960s, “traditional” cultural indigenous identities in Bolivia—the realm of the internalized private sphere—are ultimately proving to be instrumental in the assertion of both social and political legitimacy and the demand for collective rights (civil and human) from the state-structured public sphere; this is occurring despite (and perhaps because of) a long history of internal, and internalized, official oppression and state colonialism (as will be discussed later). The dilemma of the coca farmers in many instances as the demonized “nemesis” of the state, justifying the greatly increased levels of foreign (primarily United States) intromission in domestic affairs, has further deepened the generalized climate of police and military violence. However, whereas this has not only affected the persistent spiraling down of indigenous society into ever-deeper unrest and violence (as will also be dealt with in greater detail in the succeeding section, concerning sovereignty and social control), it has also, paradoxically, provided the potential mechanisms for lifting the social dynamic into one of potential intercultural coexistence; within this context there is a resurgence and revitalization of cultural pride and ethnic identity, and the increasingly astute appropriation and adaptation of established Western political models, in order to “play the game” by the official rules—and thus to influence and subvert it, stretching and pushing it to its own extremes.\textsuperscript{22} The coca leaf producers—the group which has historically suffered profound levels of social stigmatization and violence, and which exists and persists within the context of an “illicit” economy and state repression—has thus emerged as one of the most culturally regenerated and politically sophisticated and active forces on the Bolivian scene today. The coca leaf itself must thus be seen as a culturally and historically powerful symbol, the state’s symbolic acceptance or rejection of which can influence the outcome of these social processes.

The reinvigorated role of the coca leaf, then, is associated with these sociocultural and sociopolitical trends, and the representational aspects of them, that were already tentatively circulating in the decade of the 1960s. One of the most influential of these, for purposes here, was the growth of the katarista movement, focusing on issues of Andean indigenous identity and a stress on present-day ties to the racial-cultural-historical heritage of the pre-Conquest Andeans,
as a clear distinction from the European descendents who had ruled Bolivia for hundreds of years. Although much was made of the cultural trappings of indigenismo; such as the Pachamama and the legacies of Tupac Katari and others—and the use of the ritual coca leaf—equally significant was the increasing political orientation and organization of the different movement factions: for example, Fausto Reinaga’s Partido Indio, and the later formation of MITKA (Movimiento Indio Tupac Katari) and MRTK (Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Katari). In this sense, Bolivian indigenismo began to assume its own trope-like status, a reification of aspirations that were increasingly moving between both the cultural and political realms.

It is notable, however, that these indigenous rights and cultural revalorization movements were, first, Andean based (Quechua, Aymara), and were thus non-inclusive of the as yet poorly organized (politically) lowland and Amazonian ethnic groups, a status which would persist among the latter groups for approximately another 20 years; and, second, were campesino based—that is, non-urban, and with only tenuous relationships with the most active protest movements in Bolivia at the time, those of the miners. Thus, while katarismo itself was not yet to develop its own influential brand of political strength for another decade or so, what was significant during the 1960s was the incipient and gradual spread of its sociocultural sway of ethnicity throughout the campesino labor movement in general. The coca leaf was (and is) the paradigmatic “traditional, cultural” crop, and these highland peasant groups were precisely the earliest to undergo the transformation into “colonos,” and perhaps “cocaleros,” during the tropical colonization projects, both spontaneous and government sponsored, to the Chapare and elsewhere, which initiated slowly but steadily in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, eventually increasing greatly with the “cocaine boom” of the 1970s. (However, while the indigenista discourse gave a certain ideological tint of “traditional” culture to what would become the cocalero movement, as will be discussed below in that it pertained to relations with the Bolivian state, radical politics were infused in great part by the relocizado miners: they may have been proportionally fewer than the predominantly cochabambino peasants who had migrated to the Chapare, but they were to have a disproportionately great and lasting effect in the tropics.)

These are all, inherently, questions of identity. The social actors of 30 to 40 years ago in Bolivia, which were to become the highly political cocalero movement of today, incorporated several currents of disparate ideologies and agendas which, over the years, coalesced into the discernible interest group that can today exert a pronounced weight on the national scene. First the campesinos, and later the miners, of yesterday—whose children are now neither, but are, rather, simply identified as the new generation of chapareños—in the early years of colonization in the Chapare had little, if any, political agenda; for them, it was already an economically oriented project. Indeed, collaboration with the established parties of the Bolivian Left was hampered significantly by the fractured nature of the Left itself, impeding any meaningful encounters; representative of this was the disarray in the wake of the miserable failure of Ernesto Che Guevara’s guerrilla, and the lack of any true understanding or dialogue between the competing leaders of the Left circling around the experiment, in addition to the wide distance between the respective levels of enthusiasm of the mining centers and the campesino backlands where it actually occurred. (Unfortunately, the legacy of this “revolutionary” infighting is still present today, as evidenced by the lack of love lost between the leaders of the most important
indigenous movements—cocalero and non-cocalero, highlands and lowlands—and their respective political parties, often only a coalition of convenience in the Congress.)

However, questions of cultural identity in Bolivia that contributed to the later outcome of the coca phenomenon, and identity politics revolving around the critical components of indigenous resistance, may ultimately be conveniently observed through the lens of international trends occurring at the time. During the 1960s, the influence of the decolonization process in Africa and Asia was felt throughout many other countries of the “Third World,” perhaps distant in kilometers and historical trajectories, but not distant in issues of social dominance and dependency. Moreover, while the actual process of decolonization had direct effects only upon a specific country and the immediate region, the theoretical framework of postcolonialism which was developed around it extended beyond the immediate geography, and had ramifications felt in many parts of the world—including Latin America, most of whose countries had technically already undergone decolonization 150 years earlier, yet who often persisted in mental states of colonial rule.

While pointing out that the colonial experience began with foreign (generally European) imperialism, postcolonial theory postulated that the lasting effects of colonialism went beyond mere practical and political relations. Fanon (1963, 1967) states that by means of an ongoing process of oppression, devaluation and violence (structural and overt), the colonized person becomes dependent, alienated and beset with low self-esteem, even a kind of self-hate. Consequently, one’s identity loses its own individuality, is molded by the beliefs and values of the colonizer; eventually, the oppressed person ends by actually identifying with the oppressor, attempting to (re)create him/herself in the other’s image. The psychological effect of this is that there can be no true recognition of the reality of any ongoing domination, and thus the inability to adequately struggle against the dominator. For his part, González Casanova (1976) describes how colonialism often continues latent within a country and a people, even after the outside power has supposedly departed: due to the centuries of domination and oppression, weakened minds and spirits remain subjected to an internal colonialism. This involves both the co-existence and the clash of cultures within a “dual or plural society” based on domination and exploitation between heterogeneous cultural groups, which goes beyond a Marxist explanation of class exploitation: it involves the lasting results of feudal and capitalist relations; and systems of racism and segregation, of humiliation and dehumanization of the colonized.

While recognizing the psychological profile of internal colonialism, González Casanova says that it is, ultimately and more importantly, a cultural phenomenon and a structural problem, or structural violence: that is, mechanisms inherent within a critically flawed society, which subtly yet inexorably assault, debilitate and diminish the population—poverty, hunger, racism, sexism, unchecked illiteracy, inadequate health care, unjust wages, etc. For her part, Rivera Cusicanqui identifies racism as the most insidious, for the socially hegemonic effect it can have, due to the profound psychological power of racism (particularly in the veiled shapes of cultural racism) and its capacity to invalidate insurgent actions, neutralize and disqualify the subaltern population and introduce into them a reproduction of the subjugating framework of the dominant culture—in effect, a counter-revolutionary force.

If a colonized population—either overtly or internally—is able to muster resistance, and then to maintain that condition, there is a better chance to avoid the profundity of colonialism, at
a spiritual level; this may be at least a mentality of struggle, if not actual physical resistance. In this, the Bolivian situation is worth noting. Indigenous resistance and rebellion have been frequent throughout Spanish colonial, Republican and modern history, revealing the deeply rooted ideals of struggle within a population prepared to demonstrate its agency to determine its own future; this is applicable to the campesinado as well as to the mining population, although, as discussed, the latter has frequently had a more prominent influence in the case of the social movements, including the coca producers. However, it is still apparent that these roots are planted in the midst of a field equally fertile with lasting internalized colonialism. Recent years of economic “restructuring” have inevitably had marked social consequences, in a country which has perennially suffered the whims of the world economy—of which coca and cocaine are only the latest example. Rivera Cusicanqui affirms that, in this manner, the interconnected ties between the “modern” Bolivian colonial state and the indigenous subject are revealed as the roots of a social and cultural crisis, “a means of domination sustained in...long-term colonial structures, converting them into methods of internal colonialism which continue to be crucial for explaining the internal stratification of Bolivian society;” a key figure in the chain of oppression, and in a certain way also a victim of it: located in the middle of an endless “continuum,” someone simultaneously dominant and dominated, the protagonist of internalized colonialism.

Within this volatile national context, questions of identity, which can easily assume militant approaches for achieving autonomy—as, for example, with the miners previously, and the cocaleros today—are both vulnerable and critical. In their search for increased autonomy and political power, the cocaleros have reclaimed and reaffirmed vital cultural facets of their selves; and, as previously indicated, the coca leaf is perhaps the most central of these. Within a scenario that is, nevertheless, predominantly political and economic, coca is used as a cultural metaphor for attaining precisely those political objectives. It is to play the game of the (internal) colonizer, and to play by his rules, yet to simultaneously subvert the game to new and divergent ends. The form of cultural resistance played out by the cocaleros, as they find themselves now in the halls of the National Congress is, on the one hand, based upon the old models of the 1960s indigenous/campesino/proletariat experiences; and, on the other, an adaptation, beyond merely resisting. It is, again, subversion: by incorporating themselves into the dominant culture’s system, by accepting its tools and methods, the cocalero movement has taken the original indigenous revalorization of 30 years ago a major step further, by challenging the established norm, by provoking, by actively seeking confrontation in the elite’s territory. The “clandestine nation” thus comes more above ground; the “parallel Bolivia” slowly merges with the other; and the “subterranean culture” is less and less subterranean. In this sense, power becomes increasingly diffused throughout society; the cocaleros actually absorb more power from the dominant order, by their acting in reaction to it. “There is no power without resistance,” says Foucault, and thus the search for indigenous identity becomes a mutual, quasi-symbiotic give-and-take of forces, each group gaining in their loss, and vice-versa: the very fact of the “war on drugs” means increased oppression and intensified internal colonialism on the part of the state and the foreign power which sustains it; yet it also means decreased internalized colonialism, as the cocaleros fortify themselves in their struggle, take what they can from the experiences of the last few decades, adapt themselves to the new realities, and realign their “traditional” culture to both their own needs, and to the new possibilities.
Yet, is there a downside? Is this newfound cultural-political identity, the product of trends that have played themselves out in the valleys and mines and high plateau over the past 30 years, and now come to merge on the coca fields of the Chapare, a false “agency” that has been attained? In creating their political movement, and sensing a (re)birth of autonomy, is it possible that the cocaleros have boxed themselves into a corner, still pawns in a larger game without realizing it? There are potential parallels with the postcolonial experiences in Africa and Asia during the 1960s: in many instances (as described by Mamdani), the newly “educated natives”—on the surface, the traditional, entrenched elite’s worst nightmare—actually achieve only a pseudo-liberation, and a false independence. By organizing around specific, specialized issues, and then attaining autonomy over these within the state framework—apparently a success for ethnic rights—the dominant elites have managed to divide and departmentalize the resistance, to create “permanent minorities,” and thus to merely re-orient the old system of “indirect rule”—the natives believe themselves to have achieved autonomy, but in reality they remain subservient to the system which they have attempted to co-opt, still beholden to the white man’s laws, hoodwinked on the playing field without even realizing it. Thus, as seen through this dark lens, the cocaleros find their hard fought social agency and identity undermined: without the “war on drugs,” there would have been no cocalero movement to resist it, no development of a new sociopolitical force. “Created” by the “cocaine boom” and then the “drug war,” they discover that they are not the actual initiators of their own history after all, and that they only exist through their own antithesis, their oppressors themselves, in the guise of UMOPAR or the Policía Ecológica or one Expeditionary Task Force or another. If the bottom were to fall out of the cocaine market, or if there were international legalization, where would they stand then?

But, I repeat, there is no power without resistance. It works both ways: if the cocaleros were not the cocaleros, if their struggle and their (re)claimed identity were other—still back in the mines, say, or in the high valley, or on the altiplano (where it actually is these recent years, somewhere out in Kollasuyu)—then that struggle for identity and autonomy would likely be the same, just as it has been, for centuries. Perhaps it is true that the state and the elites would simply continue to find other forms of resistance, to justify and exercise their power in other fashions. But, it works both ways: the cocaleros have indeed attained certain degrees of formal power. The state continues to resist them, and the identity politics they have been playing for decades, thereby creating new channels for power—and, anyway, the game isn’t over yet.

State sovereignty and social control

The questions addressed above naturally lead into other questions: those pertaining to state security, a central issue that currently holds great sway over the enduring, and seemingly endless, “war on drugs” in Bolivia—and, indeed, has done so for the duration of the conflict, since it began to seriously heat up in the mid-1980s. In this, the role of the United States (and, to a lesser degree, the respective United Nations bodies most concerned, such as the UNDCP), has been critical: beginning in the 1970s, it was an issue of national security from the perspective of virtually every country, except those of the Andean Region, involving the reprimanded figure of international narcotics trafficking. This concern has continued to the present, and is the fundamental essence of the “war,” at least as far as it involves Bolivia: that of controlling cocaine “at the source.” However, there have also been other, more domestic, issues of
“security” revolving around the cocaine debate: actual state collusion (via the participation of the military and the generals), from subtle and tangential forms (e.g., under the Banzer regime, from 1971 - 1978), to the more blatant incarnations of association and corruption (e.g., the “Cocaine Coup” and “narcocracy” of Luis García Meza, from 1980 – 1981). From these extremes, the semi-acknowledged narco collusion has shifted, since the return of parliamentary democracy in Bolivia (1982), to a matter of (supposedly “official”) national disassociation from the international illegal narcotics trade—to no small degree, the result of the emphasis placed on the problem by the U.S., and the intimate ties between Bolivian cooperation in the “war on drugs” and dependency issues connected to (much relied upon) financial assistance.

Yet, a fundamental question—especially as it was to, and still does, relate to the very nature of the “war on drugs”—is that of the ultimate nature of the “state” itself, especially as it concerns an “undeveloped” country such as Bolivia. Whether in democracy or in dictatorship, the state is a superstructural entity that holds (at least in theory) a forceful and enigmatic authority over its subjects, an abstract concept designed to establish a framework of sovereignty and social control mechanisms over the population. “Abstract” remains a key defining term in this case; indeed, the state, it has been posited, does not in reality tangibly exist, and therefore must attempt to make itself appear to be. Philip Abrams (1988) conceives of the state within such a context as little more than a collection of theoretical, nebulous, hidden power relations: “there is a state-system: a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centered in government and more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society…it starts its life as an implicit construct; it is then reified…and acquires an overt symbolic identity progressively divorced from practice as an illusory account of practice.”

The state, then, within this context, and also following Taussig (1992), is a quasi-magical and sacred structure, which derives much of its power from its very mysteriousness and secrecy—and which must, in order to exert its (intangible) controlling authority over society, firmly establish its sovereignty. “Sovereignty” (and thus the state itself), as it was in turn maintained by Schmitt (1985), “resides in deciding this controversy, that is, in determining definitively what constitutes public order and security,” by dint of an unassailable fact: “sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”

Thus, the overriding question remains that of the moral right and imperative of the state to decide upon that given exception, exactly what constitutes it (based on a perceived threat, public or otherwise), and exactly under what circumstances.

In Bolivia, these issues of the state, state authority, and the determinate nature of both were to take on a renewed and very real resonance during the decade of the 1960s, which would later trace a strong lineage to the “war on drugs.” With the gradual re-arming and re-constitution of the armed forces after its virtual dissolution following the Revolution of 1952, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing on into the early 1960s (and quietly promoted by the United States), the military regained its previous strength, and indeed superceded it, finally consolidating its regenerated power with the coup d’etat orchestrated by General René Barrientos Ortuño, against the weakened and by then virtually discredited revolutionary MNR (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario) government of Víctor Paz Estenssoro. In a sense a return to previous (pre-1952) configurations of sovereign power and authority, the reconstituted military in politics, organized on the framework of a state built around the concept of “national security” and owing much to its existence during overwhelming politics of the U.S.–U.S.S.R.
Cold War, was to implement during the 1960s a firm control over the unruly, and frequently fragile, state that would later find itself confronted by the “drug war.”

It was precisely the Cold War that was to become the dominant motif for the establishment of the military apparatus and a renewed vision of state sovereignty, and Bolivia-United States relations were the definitive paradigm for the construction of the military. In the wake of the 1952 Revolution, 1953 Agrarian Reform, and vague U.S. fears that Bolivia might swing too far to the left (and into the influence of the Soviet bloc), the perennial history of U.S. intromission in Latin American affairs entered the beginning of a new long (and still active) role in the affairs of the Bolivian state. Ranging from a subtle, structural involvement—power over the national budget, the economic development programs of the Alliance for Progress (and later USAID, the United States Agency for International Development), the Peace Corps (both prior to its expulsion by the Torres regime in 1971, and after its return at the invitation of Paz Zamora, in 1989), and overall U.S. Embassy might and influence in Bolivian affairs of state, including (especially) the “war on drugs”—still “concretely” and symbolically reflected today, as exemplified by the immense structure which serves not only as the embassy, but also the center for intelligence gathering in much of the region, colloquially referred to as the “bunker.”

In terms of actual military involvement, the participation of United States forces in effectively aiding in the liquidation of the Guevara ‘foquista’ guerrilla in 1967, and the American fear of “another Cuba,” was to clearly presage the military maneuvers yet to come, in the still future “drug war.” In all, the international oppressiveness at the height of the Cold War in the 1960s provided both a context and a pretext for the fortified and steadily intensifying militarization of the Bolivian state, and the variations in the U.S. influence within it, which was to constantly seek new outlets of expression for decades to come; once installed at the behest of the U.S., it was a military model resistant to change—and it has been maintained until the present day, the Rangers replaced by UMOPAR, and the furtive guerrillas replaced by the advancing and retreating cocaleros.

Yet there still remains to be discussed a palpable and definitive element within this integral nature of the state—present (as in so much of Bolivian, and Latin American, history) from the Spanish Conquest itself, to the present day: that of violence, as a mutable force. In an abstract form, this may assume the guise of what has been discussed as structural violence; however, it is the overt violence that is the most apparent in considering the situation of coca and cocaine in Bolivia—or, at least, the most blatant. Yet, the style of outright violence most on view and most consistently criticized in the current “war on drugs,” for nearly the last 20 years—forced eradication, detentions, torture, rape, and murder—is, sadly, hardly a recent phenomenon—the historical violence of the state-peasant and state-worker (especially state-miner) relationships have hardly passed unperceived; it is, also, certainly the most apparent and noteworthy, and most observed, facet of the coca-cocaine quagmire in the Chapare, in its present-day manifestation.

Yet, although the violence of the Bolivian state’s confrontations with the campesinado and the proletariado has a long history, the Barrientos/Ovando version of the “security state” during the 1960s was a different process: the transitional experience, within the Bolivian context, between previous violent social control based on an erratic and ad hoc system run along the lines of entrenched caudillismo; to that of the coming systematic repression and violence as a
structural *modus operandi* of the state—an institutional and systemic implementation. This incipient shift can, perhaps, be seen as a reaction of the (militarized) state (again, from within the framework of Cold War tensions, and United States pressure) to what it perceived as the ever-present threat of a confrontational violence emanating from the then most militant segments of the populace, the miners.\(^39\) Although historically an important opposition to the state—both before and after 1952, especially as evidenced by such sweeping challenges as the 1946 Thesis of Pulacayo—the mining sector, as emblematic of the radical Left in Bolivia, was to intensify its role as the vanguard of resistance to the state in the 1960s, the result of such external factors as the volatile world political situation (the Cuban Revolution, the decolonization movements, the competing camps of capitalist and socialist countries, with the latter bitterly divided due to the Sino-Soviet split); and internal factors (the overthrow of the nominally revolutionary government, the repression of labor leaders, the increased U.S. military role, the Guevara guerrilla). Thus, in something of a Bolivian chicken-or-the-egg scenario stretching back in time, each social actor reacted to the other in a growing spiral of violence (the most famous example of which is the 1967 “Massacre of San Juan”), which steadily entrenched it for the first time as an institutional methodology of the state, passed down to the “war on drugs” of later years.

A critical aspect of this interplay is the very notion of the relationship between the state, and violence itself. Walter Benjamin (1978) makes the distinction of two distinct, yet complementary, forms of violence within the context of the state, in relation to law: “founding, law making” violence, vs. “preserving” violence. The latter maintains the validity of the state through whatever means necessary (police, courts, military), enforcing laws for the protection of the established structure. The former, however, may be separated into two opposing varieties: “mythic” founding violence, or that which creates from a previously stateless void; and “annihilating” founding violence, or that which destroys law and creates anew. Both are revolutionary forms of violence, but the second is obviously what the state fears most: a violence, in whatever form it might take, that can present itself with a claim to legitimacy, thereby deligitimizing the state.\(^40\) For Benjamin, the classic example of this founding violence is the right to strike: by its very nature, a general strike—or, by analogy, a hunger strike, or a road blockade, or a *marcha*—is an affirmation of a kind of violence directed specifically at the state and its very existence, with “the sole task of destroying state power;” indeed, it is anarchistic, although “as a pure means, [it] is nonviolent”.\(^41\) Against this challenge, is not the state justified in asserting its own brand of “natural law,” its own “law-preserving violence”? It is precisely at such an instance of a threat to the “public interest” (as defined by the state itself), says Benjamin, when the law becomes the most violent—and, from the perspective of the state, the most justified.

Thus, the tactics of “annihilating founding violence” repeatedly implemented in Bolivia (most notably, obviously, the 1952 Revolution itself), and promoted by the miners’ *sindicatos* over decades, was to for the first time come up against the newly institutionalized repression of the militarized security state in the 1960s. This prototypical and cyclical model of back and forth maneuvering that was forged at that time became, in later years, carried over into the new arena of the Chapare, by these same groups and their *sindicatos*, migrating from the highlands to the tropics following the world tin crash of 1985; the near total closure of the state mining corporation COMIBOL (*Corporación Minera de Bolivia*) and most of the mines, together with the state’s successful debilitation until liquidation of the miners’ union, the FSTMB (*Federación
Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia); and the New Economic Policy of Law 21060, promulgated by Paz Estenssoro. In this migration, then, there was the transformation of miner into cocalero.\(^{42}\) (Or, differently, the reversion of the miner to his/her true self: that of the indígena who works the land and brings it to produce, instead of descending into it and disemboweling its contents.\(^{13}\) In this sense, the relocalizado miners merely went from one environment of chronic (structural) violence to another: in the mines, from the daily violence of possible cave-ins, high silicosis prevalence and constant state military oppression; to, in the tropical Chapare, the violence of exposure to toxic pesticides used and misused in ignorance, unfamiliar tropical diseases, and—again—the military/police persecution on the part of the state, a component of forced coca eradication and the overall “war on drugs.”

Is not, then, the “founding violence” approach incorporated by the coca producers the same as that of the prior miners’ resistance movements—the blockades, strikes, marchas—as is also the increasing and overt threats, both veiled and direct, of actual violent armed resistance to the state on the part of the coca farmers, and the specter (or so it is threatened now and then, by a dirigente or two, at certain politically opportune moments) of a present day form of fiquista style guerrillas? And, finally, was it not that the threat of violence—real or perceived—by either the military security state or the miners, beginning in the 1960s and continuing throughout the succeeding years of dictatorships (and, in the nearly 20 years of conflicts between the restored constitutional state governments and the cocaleros), ultimately only served to strengthen either party, through a kind of mimetic exchange and the assumption of the right to claim either “legitimate” or “illegitimate” power in respect to the self or to the other? Yet, in the end, it is primarily the state that has seen its power inexorably increase—through both non-democratic and democratic governments, yet always counting on the assistance of U.S. patronage, whether originating in the Pentagon or the State Department—despite the apparent consolidation of the resistance movements since the 1960s.\(^{44}\)

In the end, the Bolivian state as such had no commanding or strategic interest in coca, until the “cocaine boom” of the 1970s. During the 1960s, eradication and control was approached with little genuine commitment; Bolivia is a signatory to the 1961 United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, which called for the complete elimination of coca throughout the Andean region within a period of 25 years (ultimately a futile endeavor, obviously; either a nightmare to enforce, or hardly taken truly seriously in the first place by the producer countries).\(^{45}\) Increased coca cultivation was overlooked, and actually tacitly encouraged, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, through the official state promotion and sponsorship of peasant colonization in the lowlands, including the construction of the Cochabamba-Chapare paved highway (1967). However, once coca assumed the status of a valuable commodity because of its integral connection to the international narcotics trade, and the United States began to see the “drug war” as the logical replacement to the waning (and soon to be effectively extinguished) Cold War, official state concern for coca picked up considerably. Whereas the miners remained the traditional focus of resistance (albeit not the only one) and the pretext for consequent state power moves from the 1960s into the 1970s, this model was losing significant strength by the 1980s—thus, the newly invigorated “drug war” picked up the slack, by providing a new source of state power. The new model of state control, however, was simply a continuation of the old, previous one—unchanged in structure, although with the replacement of a number of social actors, since its gradual inception more than 30 years ago.
3. Conclusion: The Social Construction of Coca

As we have seen, the coca leaf has long since lost its status as a mere leaf—it is a symbol, an iconic construction. It is now, in fact—and in ways that include, but go beyond, the age-old magic of rituals with the Tío in the mine or healing with the yatiri in the field—something of a fetish: a talismanic magic, the holder of a special power that emanates from within (not bestowed from without, or from above, or from below). The coca leaf has become an actual fetish of power itself: the power of identity, the power of political change, and—yes!—a commodity fetish, the power of money (although it has claimed that status at least since the days of the Spanish colony, when coca was traded from the backs of llamas along the trajín trail). It is many different things, to many different people, depending on the respective wants, needs and convictions—a vestige of an ancient, lost pre-Conquest utopia; a conduit to the gods; a miraculous healer; a reciprocal social gift; a respite from labor; a facilitator of the daily necessities; the path to political emancipation and liberation; a representation of self; the thing that puts food on the table each week; a national scourge and embarrassment; the pivot of persecution, suffering and violent death. It is proscribed and pursued, yet also a legitimate way to mainstream influence; outside of the system of elite power, yet the key that opens the very same door.

So, coca has always been political, always been a commodity, always been a symbol of identity, and has also frequently been either a pivot or a pretext for state authority and force. Long before the “cocaine boom” of the early 1970s; before its international prohibition at the behest of international courts and congresses; before the fortuitous (calamitous?) chemical isolation of just one of those 14 alkaloids: for millennia, coca has meant money, power, good fortune, social control; the tangible representation of both repression and resistance. It is the element that can both hold people together, giving them community, culture and meaning; or it can tear them apart, bringing only dissension. There are thick forests of portentous signs: Those who were brought up close to coca, but have since lost contact with it, for whatever reason—urbanized? gentrified? cholo-ized? found religion?—may also be (somewhat unsurprisingly) those who have lost sight of their own ancestral culture, and who may shun the same social movements of their compañeros that elevate the leaf to such symbolic heights. There are deserts of failed opportunity: Those who are not part of its cultural heritage, yet who embrace it—for example, the middle class criollo who drinks the mate, or who perhaps enjoys a chew while at work—may often enough also be those who look down with ironic denigration upon the indio, or give little more than politically correct lip service to the Pachamama.

But, the history of the coca leaf extends beyond the borders of Bolivia, of course, and beyond the ranges of the Andes or the plains of the Amazon. During the course of the critical years discussed here, momentous events and trends were also happening in places other than just Bolivia. In the United States, the 1960s were also a decade of intense militarization and politicization, and also one of social ferment, repression and liberation, and the search for identity and autonomy. Indeed, it is a history that is much better known than the parallel events in Bolivia previously considered; also a time of revolution: cultural, sexual, gender, youth, drugs. The Baby Boomers, Vietnam, new technological innovations, the growing disenchantment of the middle class, old guard politics, unprecedented violence (assassinations, riots), the Cold War and its discontents: the ’60s, and suddenly (very neatly and cleanly, in the
year 1970), cocaine was “rediscovered,” and the demand went through the roof. The search for a “new drug” during those heady times found the perfect candidate in cocaine, which had never really gone away since its previous high point in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but had instead gone underground, become semi-forgotten, out of style, stuck in a bit of disrepute, favored (when it was favored) mostly by artists, jazz musicians, general social malcontents and bohemian types, and within some circles of African-American culture. Thus, it had the perfect image and cachet for a new generation of hippies, hipsters, anti-war protestors and social rebels—and when the well-heeled (but still disenchanted) middle class discovered it, cocaine really took off.

Two parallel and coalescing currents were about to collide, merge, and create something new. The U.S. social revolution; the military-industrial complex; ready-for-business narco-trafficking networks; long-time imperialism; and the demand for a specific product: all of these slammed into the “traditional” Bolivian campesino economy; internal processes of migration; labor unrest; guerrilla warfare; state dominance, control and structural violence; the search for indigenous identity; and the right raw material. The results were predictable: Cocaine Boom, Drug War, Cocalero Resistance Movement, and the origin of a unique, endogenous sociopolitical process. But that’s not quite right: not an origin, because the processes were already at work; from this vantage point in time, looking back, the decade seems more like a rupture, the final phase on a long, bumpy path before the really big Blow-Up, when everything really did change in some way, modernity burst forth, and nothing has been the same since. The coming of modernity to the coca leaf, and of a different kind of strife to Bolivia—in fact, it was a proto-globalization, and in a not very good kind of way.

The next phase, as we can see it coming on an all-too-near horizon, is a kind of Cold War Redux: a resuscitated and strengthened Left (in Bolivia, but more importantly in other neighboring countries, where it is suddenly in power: Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela and old stalwart Cuba). Rumblings from the suits in D.C., when they’re not preoccupied by more distant threats, and can find time for the folks down South. The rhetoric now, however, is not so much the “threat” of “communism,” as it is of the already established and convenient drug crisis, and the new catch-all of “terrorism.” Couched in issues of globalization and anti-globalization, privatization and anti-privatization, free trade and anti-free trade, the usual debt and dependency, and old reliable U.S. imperialism and hegemony, it is a process that, so far at least, seems far from over. New trends, but with familiar themes—and the pre-modern coca leaf begins to take on yet another of its many semblances.

But, there are no real “truths;” it is all a construction, and everything that is now certain, will later change. As an alternative “starting point” to the story of coca and cocaine in Bolivia, the decade of the 1960s seems appropriate enough, and indeed has a lot going for it. But it is still a story without an end, and those who are currently writing their own history, from the fields of the Chapare and the halls of the Congreso, are (as it is, in truth, possible to affirm at virtually any given moment) just getting started.
Notes


2 A typical coca bush produces one to two years after planting, three to fours crops per year, with a potentially productive lifespan of up to 40 years. See Plowman 1986.

3 This is considered by taking into account solely the historical role of the species *Erythroxylum coca* and *Erythroxylum novogranatense*; and, in the present Bolivian case, specifically that of *E. coca* variety *coca* (“Bolivian” or “Huánuco” coca), the type traditionally cultivated in the growing regions of the Chapare and the Yungas. Other non-cultivated species, and those varieties above which have been locally introduced by groups unconnected to any traditional usage, but rather especially for production related to the cocaine industry (e.g., in southern Colombia, beginning in the 1990s), are thus not considered here in a “traditional” culturally relevant perspective. See Loza-Balsa 1992; Mortimer 1978; and Plowman 1986.

4 For a very early treatise on the discovery of cocaine, see Martindale 1886; for a general history, see Kennedy 1985.

5 For social and economic accounts of the early history of cocaine, see Courtwright 2001; Grinspoon 1985; and Spillane 2000.


7 See for example Painter 1994, on the “cocaine economy.”

8 See Healy 1991; and Sanabria 1993.

9 The extensive literature includes, for example, Bagley 1994; Malamud-Goti 1992; and Walker 1996.

10 For example, see Arrueta Rodríguez 1994.


12 The ritual, medicinal, social-communal, and capitalist labor production history of the coca leaf is extensive. See, for example, such representational works as Allen 1988; Carter and Mamani 1986; Instituto Indigenista Interamericano 1989; and Mortimer 1978.

13 As Clifford Geertz would define this interpretive analysis, it consists of “cultural forms [that] can be treated as texts, as imaginative works built out of social materials;” and whose deeper significance for the comprehension of life’s daily ins and outs, by way of viewing it as a text, “is to bring out a feature of it…that treating it as a rite or a pastime, the two most obvious alternatives, would tend to obscure” (Geertz 1973:449)—which, in the case of coca, has to do with each person’s connection to the greater social body, reified through daily use. In this case, the coca text used thus may provide an important vehicle for understanding the epistemology of traditional Bolivian Andean life; a means by which to “read over the shoulders,” and to grant that such symbolic forms are capable of,

‘saying something of something,’ and saying it to somebody, is at least to open up the possibility of an analysis which attends to their substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them…One can move between forms in search of broader unities or informing contrasts. One can even compare forms from different cultures to define their character in reciprocal relief. But whatever the level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations (Geertz 1973:453).

14 For the colonial perspective on the early commodification of coca, see for example Glave 1989; for the late 19th century, Soux 1993.
The following instance is a personal example of this contemporary, gradual but marked, transformation of coca from a diminished abstract, cultural conceptualization within the popular mindset (even, if not especially, among the cocaleros themselves), to one of a greater and increasingly practical, political—which, indeed, realpolitik—import as a symbol of political resistance:

At a meeting of the largest of the Chapare based coca growers’ federations—the Federación Especial de Trabajadores Campesinos del Trópico de Cochabamba (FETCTC)—the assembled dirigentes, men and women, had gathered to discuss the ongoing issues affecting them as part of the all-consuming “war on drugs,” and the failures of government and United States policy in the Chapare; I was present as one of the representatives of an FETCTC inspired and jointly operated non-governmental organization in the Chapare. (The sole United States citizen with the project—a somewhat incongruous gringo—I was by then well familiar with the codified cry, in Quechua, that either opened or closed a typical union meeting, and which in my presence was usually accompanied by good natured and vaguely self-deprecating looks of ironically acknowledged sloganeering: Kawsachun coca! Wañuchunku yanquis! Long live coca! Death to Yankees!)

Suddenly one of the men jumped to his feat from amid the rows of chairs, and began a loud, impassioned speech, bordering on a harangue. He demanded to know how the gringos, or anybody else for that matter, could dare to even talk about eradicating the coca leaf: a sacred plant, the patrimony of Tawantinsuyo, it was handed down through generations for the spiritual and physical well being of the common man and woman. A leaf given by the gods for the benefit of the human race; used by the Inca himself, sanctified by the High Priests; now and for nearly 500 years cruelly demonized and persecuted by immoral and bestial k’aras come from afar. With much fanfare, he exclaimed that “all of our culture, our very essence as a people,” is embodied in the coca leaf.

All well and good. Nobody present had much of a contradictory word to say; nobody interrupted or called for the compañero to stop talking and sit down. Indeed, it is quite probable that, for the most part, everybody gathered in the hall entirely agreed with what was being expressed, and knew the story intimately. Yet there was an audible snickering from many people during the intervention; there were those who rolled their eyes and shook their heads; there was the scuffling of feet, an air of impatience to get on with things. “There he goes again,” muttered one dirigente by my side, with a tone of derision and exasperation, “always with his same old line about the ‘sacred leaf of the Incas’.”

16 Except for specific quantities destined for traditional usage, as determined by the highly polemical 1988 Law 1008. See CEDIB 1992:114-155.
17 Figures for 1990 cited by Painter indicate the total annual production of coca at 123,235 metric tons, while the Law 1008 legal limit (primarily from the Yungas of La Paz) was at 10,000 metric tons per year (Painter 1994:45).
18 Following Wolf’s characterization (after Marx), the mode of production is constantly changing, constantly adapting itself to new and diverse challenges and opportunities. However, in the case of coca and cocaine, the situation is unique, in that this particular commodity happens to be an illicit one. The resulting paradoxical situation, for those who are caught up in it as the instruments within the process of a mode of production, continues Wolf,

... as adopted by the actual coca growers themselves, might even be seen as an ironic, almost converse, twisting of the peasant and indigenous dialectic described by Taussig (1980): instead of reacting to, and trying to understand, and thus articulate, imposed capitalist modes of production through both traditional and imported cultural norms, which as a result then created new and sui generis cultural manifestations, the cocaleros’
reaction to the overpowering dynamics of world economics and politics weighed against them was to invoke a traditional cultural history not as a means of comprehension, but rather as a means of justification and defense. However, the supreme irony in this case, as it may obviously be deduced, is that the capitalist system was not so much of an enigma and a threat in and of itself (as posited by Taussig); instead, the cocaleros merely played the game as it was supposed to be played, yet while suffering the bad luck of being dealt a valuable commodity which was legally proscribed and persecuted within the international market.

21 For their part, Marcus and Fischer, in considering that there are any numbers of parallel and crossing dimensions at work, and that it is ultimately necessary to be determinedly holistic, state that the issue is how to represent the embedding of richly described local cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy…what makes representation challenging and a focus of experimentation is the perception that the ‘outside forces’ in fact are an integral part of the construction and constitution of the ‘inside,’ the cultural unit itself, and must be so registered, even at the most intimate levels of cultural process (Marcus and Fischer 1986:77).

In this sense, the cocalero movement takes on new meaning, one much more in line with the world political and economic system and its reality, both affected by and effecting. Yet, in the long run, complexity of situation leaves little room in the present for pigeonholing one approach, or another.

22 Recent discussions of this political agency of identity have included Albó 2002; Gustafson 2002; and Healy and Paulson 2000.

23 For example, Albó 1987; and Rivera Cusicanqui 1983.


26 González Casanova 1976.


28 For a selection of representative works, see Albó and Barnadas 1990; Dunkerley 1984; Garcia et al. 2001; Lavaud 1984; Rivera Cusicanqui 1984; Patzi Paco 1999.

29 Rivera Cusicanqui 1993:30.

30 In respect to the notion of a continuum of internalized colonialism, I am grateful to Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui; personal communication, May 2002.

31 Xavier Albó, personal communication, August 2002.

32 See Mamdani 1996.


34 Schmitt 1985:5-6, 9.

35 See Dunkerley 1984.

36 For case studies and analyses of the depth of U.S. involvement in Bolivian affairs of state, including drug issues, see for example, Eder 1968; Gamarra 1994; Lehman 1999; Verdesoto and Ardaya Salinas 1993; and Wilkie 1969.
For example, Barrios Morón 1993; Dunkerley 1984; and Lora 1983.

For example, accounts, analyses and testimonies are provided in Aguiló 1992; CEDIB 1993; Condo 1994; Llorenti S. 1999; and Tarqui Jamira and Condo Riveros 1992.

For example, Dunkerley 1984; and Malloy and Gamarra 1988.

For a discussion and further development of Benjamin’s theme, see Derrida 1990.


Interestingly enough, the original cocaleros of the Chapare—the *campesino* migrants of previous decades, in addition to more recent waves of arrivals as a result of the El Niño caused drought of 1984—may be seen as much less militant and politicized, prior to the new influxes of ex-miners (relocalizados) in the 1980s. Although it also participated in its share of resistance struggles, during the 1960s much of the *campesinado* had, in its own stead, played more of a collaborationist/co-opted role with the Barrientos regime and the Bolivian state, codified in the Pacto Militar-Campesino. This relationship was to hold more or less firm until its definitive rupture by the Banzer regime, especially as a result of the Massacre of the Valley (1974).

An example, however, of how far the *compañeros* had strayed from the Pachamama of old: during the course of a workshop for cocaleros, in community health work and union strengthening (*sindicalismo*), we thought to use the agrarian cycle as a case study, in something or other. In response to the casual questions of what time of the year the local “*campesinos*” usually planted their corn, rice, manioc, etc., and when they would usually harvest it, we received a completely different answer from each person present. An argument broke out between the assembled group, as to when each crop should be worked, in whatever way. It became immediately apparent that we were dealing with a room full of *relocalizado* miners, who hadn’t a clear idea among them as to how to properly cultivate much of anything—except, of course, coca.

Following Gramsci and incorporating concepts of counter-hegemonic power, it would seem that it should be the coca producers who take the greater strength from the “revolutionary praxis” of confronting the repression of the state, thereby exercising their own agency and the creation of their own unique history. However, in the concept of the state “war machine” and consolidated power advanced by Deleuze and Guattari, external attack on the state ultimately serves to fortify its authoritarian aspects, as exemplified in what they characterize as the power of the “nomadic” war machine, which exists external to, and semi-independent of, the actual state apparatus, yet which is still part of it. See Deleuze and Guattari 1986.

See for example Machicado 1992; and Grinspoon and Bakalar 1985.
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