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### The clientelization of ethnicity: party hegemony and indigenous political subjectivities

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## THE CLIENTELIZATION OF ETHNICITY: PARTY HEGEMONY AND INDIGENOUS POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITIES

On three different occasions between 2003 and 2007, Channel 13 from Buenos Aires aired on Argentinean national TV investigative reports that were highly critical of the ruling party in the province of Formosa, the Partido Justicialista (PJ), also the governing party at the national level and heir to the legacy of Juan Domingo Perón in the country.<sup>1</sup> Produced by the 'Telenoche Investiga' show, these TV programmes brought to light the various patterns of intimidation and manipulation carried out by candidates and activists of the PJ in order to secure the votes of indigenous people prior to and during elections in Formosa. This included the 'purchase' of votes in exchange for money and goods, locking people up in warehouses to make sure they were available to be transported to the polling stations on election day, and the temporary withholding of the ID cards required to cast a vote (that were returned to the voters upon entering the election booths with the 'right' ballot to be cast in the box).

While some of these practices are common elsewhere in Argentina, the public impact of these shows on the Buenos Aires public opinion was relatively high. This response was largely due to the fact that the main victims of the practices presented on these programmes were indigenous people, who in the national capital are often viewed as the most marginalized subjects in the country. This perception was accentuated by the fact that most middle-class people in Buenos Aires see themselves as descendants of European immigrants and imagine Formosa, located in the north of the country in the Gran Chaco region, as a poor, politically backward geography.

The airing of these programmes contributed to making visible in the public arena aspects of the political reality of a province that rarely reaches the Argentinean national media. In this article, nonetheless, I want to begin by critically examining the representations about indigeneity condensed on these programmes, in order to subsequently make a broader analysis of indigenous political subjectivities in Formosa: that is, of the identities, loyalties, meanings, values, and dispositions that people create and mobilize in their political demands. In this regard, in addition to exposing a situation of political exploitation and manipulation, the image of the *aborígenes* (indigenous people) that prevailed on the 'Telenoche Investiga' reports was that of powerless, passive victims of forces and relations external to them. The notion of externality is particularly important here. These TV programmes, in this regard, portrayed the political apparatus of the PJ as a structure that was imposed, from an alleged spatial and social-cultural distance, upon indigenous people who had no attachments to it. And the latter were presented as a homogeneous block of individuals leveled in their shared oppression. This view, however, results from a superficial and

ultimately patronizing gaze, which reproduces old discourses (in Argentina and elsewhere) that see the aborígenes as remnants of an archaic past, disconnected from current political identities and practices.

In this article, I examine some of the practices through which indigenous groups in Formosa are actors that participate in the production and critique of the political and party networks currently hegemonic in the province. In highlighting the agency of these actors, I do not intend to downplay neither the power relations that place them in spaces of political subordination nor the practices presented on 'Telenoche Investiga.' Rather, I aim to analyse how these power relations are constitutive of indigenous political practices and subjectivities and how, in turn, the aborígenes participate in the production, reproduction, and critique of clientelism: i.e. of relations of dependency based on the exchange of votes for favours, goods, and resources (see Auyero 2001). This means that actions like those exposed on 'Telenoche Investiga,' such as the withholding of ID cards or the 'purchase' of votes, are conducted not only by non-indigenous politicians but also by indigenous activists and leaders who are fully aligned with different factions of the PJ. In other words, the dynamic of political clientelism in Formosa is far from opposing, on the one hand, 'the aborígenes' and, on the other hand, the *criollos* (non-indigenous settlers), the ruling party, and the state. Rather, in this province patron-client relations are so strong and widespread that in many cases the opposition between 'aborígenes' and 'criollos' is blurred by other cleavages that come to the fore in electoral periods, such as the one dividing pro-government and opposition factions in relation to the current administration of Governor Gildo Insfrán (as we shall see).

This dynamic and, in general, the salience of political clientelism among indigenous groups are certainly not exclusive to Formosa and are common elsewhere in Argentina and Latin America. Yet most anthropological studies of indigenous political practices in Latin America have tended to focus on indigenous-led organizations and movements that articulate, primarily, an ethnically-defined agenda (Turner 1991, Ramos 1998, Sawyer 2004, Warren and Jackson 2002, Conklin 1997, Warren 1998). In this article, I want to examine a relatively under-analysed aspect of indigenous political experiences on the continent: the immersion of indigenous actors within mainstream national political parties, which is significant in countries with powerful party structures such as Argentina or Mexico. Along these lines, I believe there is something specific about the province of Formosa in terms of what I would call 'the clientelization of ethnicity': the relative success of the PJ to channel and agglutinate most of the indigenous political energies in the province since the return of democratically-elected governments in Argentina in December 1983. By 'success' I do not mean the neutralization of protest or dissent but the capacity to define the main fields in which forms of accommodation and resistance take place. This requires elaborating my use of the concept of 'hegemony.'

Much has been written about the lack of a precise definition of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci (1971 [1929–35]), the author who most contributed to popularizing the concept. Yet it is clear that for Gramsci 'hegemony' does not imply simply consent; rather, for him it is something for which subaltern classes ought to fight for with the aim of creating a new hegemony that would replace that of the ruling classes. A growing number of authors have drawn on this line of argument, focused on the dynamism and contingency of political struggles, in order to highlight that hegemony

never neutralizes dissent and contestation (Williams 1977, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997). One of the most original contributions in this regard has been that of William Roseberry (1994), who has argued – following Gramsci – that the concept of hegemony should be used not to analyse consent but rather political struggles; that is, how the symbols, values, and practices that subaltern actors deploy to negotiate and eventually resist their domination are shaped by the very process of domination.

In the case of Formosa, this implies viewing the accommodation and resistance by indigenous groups in relation to the Justicialista Party not as actions that are ‘external’ to power relations but constitutive of them (see also Moore 2005). What is notable about this province is that the hegemonic relations woven by the PJ have so far prevented the rise of autonomous indigenous organizations that challenge the provincial status quo. Elsewhere in Argentina this is not the case. Putting aside the differences that exist among them, organizations such as (among others) Lhaka Honhat in Salta, the Consejo Asesor Indígena (CAI) in Río Negro, or the Asamblea del Pueblo Guaraní (APG) in Jujuy emerged originally from without party structures, in many cases through links with NGOs, the Anglican Church (in the case of Lhaka Honhat), or ENDEPA (the indigenist NGO of the Catholic Church, in the case of APG). This has allowed these organizations to constitute themselves as forces of relative opposition to their respective provincial political apparatuses, even if some of their leaders are not free of party influences and alignments and even if the NGOs mentioned above have constrained their practice.

In Formosa, beyond some exceptions I refer to in the conclusions, no similar organizations have emerged. There is no interethnic organization such as Lhaka Honhat (that includes Toba, Wichí, Chorote, Nivaclé, and Tapiete, but with a strong Wichí preponderance) or a group that expresses the political radicalism of the Mapuche leaders and activists of the CAI. However, and reassuming my previous line of argument, this does not mean that in Formosa indigenous political struggles have less power or salience; rather, it means that they are usually channelled through the cleavages and disputes that take place within the party structure of the PJ. This does not mean either that in this province there are no local indigenous civic associations independent of the Peronist political apparatus, as the civil associations (*asociaciones civiles*) that have been granted legal land titles illustrate. However, these associations usually focus on local issues and concerns, and when their leaders put forth broader demands on the provincial government they usually act politically within the PJ factionalism.

Before exploring these political fields ethnographically, it is important to present a brief overview of Formosa’s history. Located on Argentina’s northeastern borders with Paraguay along the Pilcomayo and Paraguay Rivers, Formosa was initially a federal territory that, while formally created in 1884, was until the early twentieth century largely under the control of politically-autonomous indigenous groups, primarily Toba, Wichí, and Pilagá. These and other groups elsewhere in the plains of the Gran Chaco had resisted state encroachment for centuries. Yet this resistance was broken down by large military campaigns conducted by the Argentinean army in 1884 and 1911, which opened up the region to colonization and state and capitalist investment. By the time Formosa was granted status as a province in 1955, official discourses highlighted a provincial identity based on the idea of a relatively recent frontier society, produced through military campaigns against the ‘wild Indians’ of the Chaco and forged by peasants who

migrated from Paraguay and the Argentinean northeast (in the east of the province), criollo cattle-herders who moved in from Salta (in the west), and European immigrants. From the start, nonetheless, these new actors had to interact on a daily basis with a numerous indigenous population that had been partially or substantially deprived of their lands and was the target of ongoing state violence until the 1930s and 1940s. For several decades, these groups lacked full citizenship rights and hence political rights and were largely excluded from the province's political life, in a context in which civilizing narratives dominated provincial discourses. The rise of left activism in the 1960s and early 1970s began challenging this model, and by the time the 1976–83 military dictatorship ended indigenous groups in Formosa began participating in the province's political disputes in altogether new ways.

Mounted on their relative visibility and especially on their demographic weight within the provincial electorate, Toba, Wichí, and Pilagá leaders organized, with the support of several NGOs, an important political mobilization demanding the legal ownership of the state-owned lands occupied by indigenous villages. Because of the bargaining power granted by their electoral strength and the populism and indigenism of the Justicialista administrations of the mid and late 1980s, this mobilization succeeded in forcing the government to implement a widespread distribution of collective land titles in much of the province. The granting of land titles by Governor Floro Bogado, the current vice-governor of Formosa, neutralized an important source of conflict and had an enormous impact on the consolidation of the Justicialista hegemony among the indigenous population. Currently, it is common to hear many Toba, Wichí, and Pilagá men and women explain their support for the different PJ factions with phrases such as 'Peronism gave us the land titles.'<sup>2</sup> And this titling disarticulated the land conflicts that led to the rise of indigenous organizations in other provinces, such as Lhaka Honhat in Salta, which was created in 1992 to demand for the titles of large tracts of state-owned lands on the Pilcomayo River, a demand that is still unresolved (see Carrasco and Briones 1996, Gordillo and Leguizamón 2002).

As part of these processes, and sustained in part by the massive mobilization of the indigenous electorate, Formosa has been uninterruptedly ruled by Justicialista administrations since 1983, in a process in which the importance of opposition parties has been gradually reduced to a minimum expression. The hegemonic power of the PJ in Formosa is clear, for instance, in that in the 2003 and 2007 elections Governor Gildo Insfrán was re-elected with more than 70% of the votes. In the western districts (*departamentos*) of the province, where the salience of the indigenous vote is highest, the percentages obtained by the Insfrán-Bogado ticket were particularly overwhelming: 91.75% (Matacos), 88.75% (Ramón Lista), and 87.75% (Bermejo).<sup>3</sup> These landside victories were to a great extent the result of well-oiled patron-client networks that were very effectively deployed at the time of elections, targeting the indigenous and criollo population through practices such as the ones exposed by 'Telenoche Investiga.' However, the political relations forged by the PJ in indigenous villages, rather than creating a seamless consensus on the Justicialista administrations, are subjected to pressures and demands and must be reproduced through multiple actions and negotiations, which involve indigenous and non-indigenous actors.

In what follows, I examine how these processes affect and in turn mobilize indigenous political subjectivities by looking at two examples from my fieldwork in the west of Formosa. The first case involves a 2003 meeting organized to elect the eventual

authorities of the Instituto de Comunidades Aborígenes (ICA, Institute for Indigenous Communities), the agency for indigenous affairs in Formosa. The second example alludes to political alignments and electoral strategies within Toba villages. Subsequently, I analyse how despite the Justicialista hegemony, the manipulation of clientelistic networks by indigenous actors has allowed them to create spaces of empowerment and relative autonomy. The case of Formosa, I argue, questions a widespread common-sense view that assumes that indigenous actors in Latin America act politically, primarily, through an ethnicity imagined as opposed to, rather than intertwined with, the state and party politics.

### A meeting in Barrio Obrero

In June 2003, representatives of over sixty indigenous villages participated in a meeting in Ingeniero Juárez, the largest town in western Formosa, which I attended together with Toba delegates from that region. Gathered in a wide open space in the Barrio Obrero, one of the most important Wichí neighbourhoods in town, they were to elect a candidate for the presidency of the provincial agency for indigenous affairs, the ICA. While the vast majority of delegates were men, a handful of female Toba activists from the provincial capital were also present. The Formosa government was about to reform the provincial constitution, and as part of the promises made to indigenous leaders to garner their support for the reform, Governor Insfrán had made a verbal commitment to consider replacing the non-indigenous president of the ICA with an indigenous leader. Up until that moment, the ICA included indigenous representatives only under the mostly decorative, bureaucratic figure of *directores* ('directors'), one for each ethnic group in the province: Toba, Wichí, and Pilagá. These men were elected every other year by the members of their respective ethnic groups but held little power in shaping state policy. This is why the request that the ICA presidency was granted to an indigenous leader was part of an old demand in the province.

The possibility of finally electing '*un paisano*' (a fellow indigenous person) to lead the ICA created intense expectations in the Toba, Wichí, and Pilagá villages but also, and almost immediately, heated negotiations and disputes over who would hold that position. And these tensions came to the fore at the meeting in Ingeniero Juárez. Organized for the most part by Wichí leaders based in that town, the meeting attracted numerous delegates from the west of the province – mostly Wichí from around Ingeniero Juárez, Pozo de Maza, and the Bermejo River but also Toba from the area of La Rinconada, on the Pilcomayo – a Pilagá leader, and some Toba delegates from the east of Formosa. And the gathering brought the light the various ways in which ethnic and party identities are deployed and blend in this province.

Sitting around a circle formed by dozens of plastic chairs, the first delegates who spoke highlighted the common identity of the attendees as 'aborígenes' united to challenge their exclusion from the ICA power apparatus and to demand Governor Insfrán the fulfillment of his promise to open up this institution to the indigenous leadership. Since the meeting had received no financial or logistical support from the government, however, some men subsequently pointed out that the absence of representatives of villages who had been unable to attend could eventually undermine

the legitimacy of any decisions made there. They therefore suggested that any vote should be postponed to another, larger meeting, with the aim of preserving ‘the unity of the aborígenes’ of the province. This proposal, however, was turned down by most of the delegates, on the grounds that it would be very difficult to congregate delegates from all over Formosa and that those who had attended had already incurred in considerable expenses. After a prolonged debate, it was decided that the assembly should elect the eventual ICA president that same day. When the delegates began debating who the candidates would be for such position, however, the previous declamations about a shared aboriginality faded and the participants began deploying other alignments and identifications.

First, behind the round of chairs, various clusters of delegates improvised heated meetings that eventually led to the selection of the two men who were to compete for the presidency: a Wichí leader from Ingeniero Juárez and a Toba leader from the city of Formosa. The agreement was that only certified delegates could vote, and that they would do so publicly by adding a mark on a blackboard below the name of their chosen candidate. When the delegates from different villages stood up one by one and headed toward the blackboard to mark their vote, it was clear that the eastern and western Toba unanimously supported their fellow Toba leader, and that most (but not all) of the Wichí delegates voted for the Wichí candidate. The Wichí leader ended up carrying the vote by a relatively narrow margin. Superficially, it seemed that the competition had been purely ethnic-based, defined by the opposition between ‘the Toba’ and ‘the Wichí.’

At the end of the meeting, however, this ethnic-political dynamic shifted considerably. Once the result was announced, the atmosphere grew tense and it soon became apparent that party factionalisms had been an important component of the voting pattern. Instead of making conciliatory speeches about ‘the unity of the aborígenes’ (as I had naively expected), some delegates of the losing camp began challenging the result, on the grounds that the vote was illegitimate because the Wichí from El Potrillo (the main village in northwest Formosa), the Pilagá, and the eastern Toba had been underrepresented. As we have seen, this had already been mentioned as a potential problem early on at the meeting, but the main leaders (including those on the losing camp) decided to move on with the vote nonetheless, calculating they could carry it. As the meeting was unravelling and small groups of delegates and activists were discussing the implications of the vote’s result, the losing candidate told his followers, visibly frustrated, that he would personally talk to ‘Gildo’ (Governor Gildo Insfrán) so that he did not recognize the validity of the meeting. With an ironic smile on his face, he emphasized several times that ‘Gildo’ would never recognize the Wichí leader as the ICA President. The main reason was that this Wichí man was part of ‘the opposition’ within the PJ and, therefore, that he was not ‘trustworthy’ for the governor.

What does this all mean in terms of my previous discussion? First, these practices and identifications show that what initially looked like a purely ethnic dispute between ‘the Toba’ and ‘the Wichí’ for the ICA presidency included more complex alignments, which were to a large degree shaped by the tension between the two main Justicialista factions in the province. The Toba candidate responded directly to Governor Insfrán, and the support he garnered among the western Toba was the product of a finely-tuned clientelism woven over several years rather than of a primordial ethnic loyalty. In fact,

the Toba from the east and west of Formosa are culturally, linguistically, and historically distant from each other and on several occasions Toba leaders from the west have tried, unsuccessfully, to be recognized by the ICA as 'a distinct ethnic group,' separate from the eastern Toba. The Wichí leader who won the vote at the meeting, in turn, represented the opposition within the Formosa Justicialismo, which resisted Insfrán's constitutional reform and his attempt to lift term limits for elective positions. That at the meeting in Barrio Obrero most of the Wichí and Toba delegates voted, respectively, for candidates identified with their most immediate ethnic marker was certainly also the product of solidarities read through an ethnic-based lens. Yet these alignments were also traversed and conditioned by party and factionalist loyalties that are currently fundamental in any attempts to influence the provincial government's agenda.

A few days after the meeting in Ingeniero Juárez, the way this factionalism had played out in the voting patterns became even more apparent. Upon returning to the Toba villages and talking about the assembly, many people who were critical of Governor Insfrán questioned that their leaders had voted for the Toba candidate from the city of Formosa. Further, many Toba told me that they would have supported the Wichí candidate for being part of 'the opposition.' Shortly after, news began arriving that Wichí leaders in El Potrillo, who had been underrepresented at the meeting, opposed the result, even though the winner had been a Wichí. It was clear that for them the 'Wichí' identity of the winning candidate was not a determining factor in their political allegiances. What mattered in this case, and what guided their decision, was that they were part of the pro-government faction and did not favour that a member of 'the opposition' was chosen as possible president of the ICA. This cleavage was also shaped by local rivalries between different Wichí sub-groups, such as those of the Bermejo River (which predominate in Ingeniero Juárez) and the Pilcomayo (which dominate El Potrillo). In those days, the consensus in the Toba villages was that, had they attended the meeting in Ingeniero Juárez, the Wichí leaders from El Potrillo would have for the most part supported the Toba candidate on the grounds of his 'pro-government' stance. Soon after, Governor Insfrán overruled the voting's results for 'not representing' the majority of indigenous villages in the province, and the conflict around the ICA presidency was not resolved. The governor was able to reform the provincial constitution and up until today the ICA President is a non-indigenous person who responds to the provincial Executive.

This example, in short, illustrates how ethnic identities in Formosa are inevitably intertwined with political identities linked to party factionalism, and how markers such as 'Wichí' and 'Toba' do not necessarily imply the political loyalty of members of the same ethnic group. These ethnic markers, in fact, are interwoven with political identities of a different sort. In moments like the ones created at the 2003 meeting in Barrio Obrero, party and factional affiliations became in fact crucial in the production of political loyalties. But what role then does ethnicity play in these processes? Is the ethnic variable 'secondary' in relation to other forms of identity? To the contrary. Ethnic identifications are in fact central in shaping these negotiations and tensions, but they are deployed in ways that confirm the historical-political, rather than primordial, character of ethnicity. And in order to illustrate this point further I turn now to my second example.

### Aboriginality, clientelism, and electoral strategies

The political-electoral fields of contention within the Toba villages in western Formosa complicate what was examined earlier even further, and this requires returning to the previous discussion about the relationship between hegemony and ethnicity. And here I turn to the importance of the marker 'aborigen' and its diverse meanings. Anyone who spends time in indigenous villages in Formosa, especially in the west of the province, will note that many people refer to themselves as 'aborígenes' more often than as 'Toba' or 'Wichí.' Certainly, this does not mean that the latter markers are not important, especially when members of these two groups interact with each other. But in their conflict with the criollos (often over land use) or with politicians and officials from the provincial government, the generic term 'aborigen' is deployed by Toba and Wichí people with a salience that often displaces other, more specific ethnic markers.

The reasons for this must be traced back to the historical production of ethnic relations and identities in this region of Formosa. In the late nineteenth century, before the arrival of the criollos and the army, no similar ethnic markers existed in this region. Rather, the western Chaco was a mosaic of groups with differentiated linguistic and political-cultural identities that were often the product of armed confrontations among them. When in the early twentieth century these groups began migrating seasonally to work on the sugar plantations of Jujuy and (later on) Salta, this situation changed. As I have argued elsewhere in more detail (Gordillo 2004), Wichí, Toba, and Pilagá men and women were inserted in ethnicized labour hierarchies that put them all together, with the other groups from the Chaco (Chorote, Nivaclé, Tapiete) under the same labour category: 'indios' (Indians) or 'aborígenes.' When in the 1930s the peasants from the Argentinean and Bolivian Andes became the main cane-cutters on the plantations, the 'aborígenes' from the Chaco were downgraded to an unskilled, overexploited labour force (hired to clear sections of forest, plant cane, cut firewood, and dig up canals) sharing similar labour conditions that set them apart from the rest of the workers. After sharing the same camps on the plantations over several decades, the Chorote, Wichí, Toba, and Pilagá developed a strong identity as 'aborígenes' that did not exist before, and that in being produced by the labour experience in the cane fields acquired clear class dimensions. This experience continued until the late 1960s, when the plantations mechanized production and stopped hiring seasonal labourers from the Chaco. Shaped by the memory of their work on the plantations, the term 'aborigen' became an ethnic marker spatially anchored in the Chaco but also a class marker which Wichí, Toba, and Pilagá people associate with being 'poor' (see Gordillo 2004). This identification was in turn highlighted by the action of state agencies, NGOs, and several churches that over several decades addressed these groups as 'aborígenes' defined by a collective experience of marginalization.

Not surprisingly, the subject position 'aborígenes' plays an important role in the clientelistic disputes that take place within the Toba villages in western Formosa. In my early fieldwork among the Toba in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was surprised and intrigued by the fact that their leaders never presented a sole candidate when preparing for municipal elections. Since the local Toba population make up the majority of the electorate voting for the mayor of the small town of Pozo de Maza (in relation to the local criollos and Wichí), Toba voters and leaders were in a position to place one

of their own in the mayor's office. However, they never formed a common, ethnic-based electoral front. Rather, different Toba candidates who responded to different *sublemas* (factions) of the PJ competed against each other for mayor and for positions in the local municipal council.<sup>4</sup> Because of the regional weakness of the main opposition party (the UCR, Unión Cívica Radical), for these leaders it made little strategic or political sense to participate as candidates of any other party other than the Justicialista.<sup>5</sup> These Toba candidates, certainly, created the web of their most immediate followers through kinship relations anchored in their own villages. But by recruiting supporters in other Toba villages, these candidates, and the divisions created by the PJ factions, produced political loyalties that were diverse and multi-layered. Because of these divisions within the Toba electorate, up until that moment most of the Pozo de Maza mayors had been criollos and Wichí, who had in turn enjoyed the support of a notable number of Toba voters. In those days, my anthropological common sense assumed that people's ethnic identity as 'Toba' should almost by default predominate in the production of political loyalties, and as a result this fragmentation puzzled me. My initial attitude was to explain this as the product of a 'false consciousness' of sorts, created by the clientelism and factionalism of the ruling party, which fragmented 'the Toba' politically and prevented them from seeing that their 'true' interests depended, at the local level, upon forming a common electoral-ethnic front as 'Toba.' Yet I gradually came to realize that this interpretation was actually based on a misleading, shallow, and ultimately patronizing reading of people's political practices, which overlooked the salience of the historical experiences that have constituted, and constitute today, indigenous subjectivities in this region.

And this takes me to my earlier discussion of aboriginality in western Formosa as a subject position that is as ethnic-based as it is class-based. In this regard, the main reason that many Toba gave me for not supporting some candidates of their own ethnic group was that the latter were becoming 'rich' through 'politics' (*la política*), and that this wealth somehow betrayed the public morality, sharing practices, and poverty that ought to define them as 'aborígenes.' Consequently, several people told me that if through clientelistic favours (such as the distribution of packaged food, pension plans, social assistance, or eventually a public-sector job) they obtained more resources from Wichí or criollo candidates, they had no problem voting for them instead of supporting 'rich' Toba candidates (Gordillo 2002). The subject position that mattered to them in those moments was, therefore, an ethnic identity: but not an identity as 'Toba' but as 'aborígenes,' which in being associated with poverty has class components that defines well-off Toba leaders as people who have distanced themselves from their aboriginality.

The paradox, then, is that this class-based ethnic identity made many Toba support non-Toba Justicialista candidates, either Wichí or criollos. Kinship-related local rivalries among different villages and among rival leaders within each village furthered this fragmentation. This web of practices was, in turn, manipulated and deepened by the network of *punteros* (mid-level activists) and officials responding to different Justicialista factions. As part of this multi-layered political landscape, the Toba and Wichí candidates who competed for local positions identified largely as candidates of *el oficialismo* (the pro-government faction) or *la oposición* (the opposition) within the PJ rather than claiming to push for a specifically 'Toba' or 'Wichí' agenda. Rather than being blinded or misled by a 'false consciousness,' ordinary people made their political

decisions about whom to vote for trying to take as much advantage as possible from these locally-constituted fields of power. As part of these practices, the withholding of ID cards days before the elections and the attempts by different candidates to secure votes through the distribution of package food, cash, or promises of pension plans were recurrent. The manipulations, false promises, and deception associated with these practices made most Toba voters have particularly negative, cynical views of party politics and of the clientelism created by the Justicialismo. But this did not prevent them, at each election, to try to use the relative bargaining power granted by their vote to obtain at least some, mostly short-term, benefits.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the hegemony of the Justicialismo in these villages was parallel to the production of local forms of accommodation and dissent, through which ordinary people tried to manipulate the internal divisions of the ruling party to their benefit. This feature of patron-client relations is certainly common elsewhere in Argentina (Auyero 2001, Iñigo Carrera 2001). Yet what I want to highlight here is that, in the Formosa case, these experiences are constitutive of political subjectivities, in a process in which ethnicity, class, and party factionalism come together to produce a historically-specific type of indigeneity.

### **Conclusions: ethnicities, hegemonies, counter-hegemonies**

The case studies analysed above confirm what many anthropologists have pointed out for some time: that ethnicity as a marker of identity is a product of relations of power and domination (Bourgois 1988, Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, de la Cadena and Starn 2007). But these cases also show that, contradicting the stereotypes that often circulate about them in the media and in some academic discourses, indigenous groups constitute (like any other social actor) contradictory and heterogeneous political actors, which are far from forming homogeneous blocks articulated politically only by their ethnicity. As these examples illustrate, many indigenous leaders and voters actively participate in the reproduction of the hegemony of the PJ in Formosa and deploy political identities defined by the disputes among different Justicialista factions, creating a thread in which party politics and ethnicity are very closely interwoven.

On the one hand, the salience of these clientelistic and factional networks have left few spaces that allow for the emergence of relatively-autonomous indigenous organizations like the ones that exist in other Argentinean provinces. Yet this hegemony, rather than neutralizing dissent, has implied that criticisms of the government and resistances to its policies are usually channelled from within the ruling party. In other words, an ethnographic analysis of the hegemony of the PJ among indigenous groups in Formosa allows us to understand, rather than the existence of an alleged 'consensus,' the particular cultural-political dynamics that dissent acquires within its fields. In fact, the demands by aborígenes emerging from within the PJ have forced various provincial administrations to adopt indigenist discourses that celebrate 'our aboriginal brothers and sisters' and, more importantly, to implement policies that aim to reciprocate, at least partially, the political loyalties created in the provincial geography. In this regard, it is worth noting that some of the indigenist policies in Formosa, especially regarding land and bilingual education, have had a more 'progressive' component that in neighbouring provinces such as Salta (where on the Pilcomayo River, for instance, old territorial demands remain unresolved). But far

from being the result of the government's generosity, these policies have been to a large degree the product of the recurrent demands that myriad indigenous actors impose through clientelistic and party relations.

However, it is important to highlight that being a contested field, the hegemony of the PJ in Formosa is shaped by tensions that at certain moments bring to light, on the one hand, the contradictions and repressive components of official policies and, on the other, the creation by indigenous actors of spaces of greater autonomy from such party.

An example of the former is the massive police raid conducted in August 2002 on Barrio Namqom, an indigenous settlement on the outskirts of the city of Formosa. The day before, a police officer had been shot dead on a private ranch located about 20 kilometres from Namqom, allegedly as a result of a clash with Toba hunters from Namqom. In response, about a hundred officers swept through the barrio, forcefully taking whole families out of their homes and beating up dozens of men while screaming 'an Indian has to pay for this!' The indiscriminate nature of the raid, targeting a whole collective because of its indigeneity, brought to light the racism and violence constitutive of state power in the province, as well as the complicity of the political elite with the provincial judiciary (which legitimized the raid and the detention and subsequent conviction of several Toba men) and the media (which overwhelmingly supported the raid and revived old imaginaries about indigenous savagery) (Vivaldi 2007). Another example of the official double-standards is that the provincial constitution reformed in 2003 did not include several items demanded by indigenous leaders, such as the inclusion of Convention No. 169 of the International Labor Organization (which had been previously adopted by the national government and recognizes important political and cultural rights to indigenous groups). At the time, this made several leaders criticize in public the Insfrán administration for failing to fulfill its alleged commitment to indigenous rights.

As a counterpoint to these processes, it is important to briefly mention two examples that show how indigenous activists and leaders in Formosa have managed to create, despite these constraints, some spaces of relative autonomy in relation to the PJ. The Comisión de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Cuenca del Pilcomayo (Working Group for the Indigenous Peoples of the Pilcomayo Basin), created in 2001, is one such example. This organization draws on a similar group (Comisión del Río Pilcomayo) organized in 1996 in western Formosa to respond to the drought that had been created on the Pilcomayo because of the sedimentation of canals built by the governments of Argentina and Paraguay in the northwestern corner of the province. Back then, the Comisión successfully lobbied the government so that new canals were built to guarantee the flow of water on Formosa territory (Gordillo and Leguizamón 2002). In 2001, the Comisión expanded significantly through new meeting with indigenous leaders from the rest of the Pilcomayo basin: from the province of Salta and also from Bolivia and Paraguay. Renamed 'Comisión de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Cuenca del Pilcomayo,' this working group managed to galvanize inter-ethnic, inter-provincial, and international solidarities focused on the problems faced by the indigenous inhabitants of the Pilcomayo, such as the canals, water pollution, and the unresolved demands for land titling. And this has been a political space largely created, with the support of various NGOs, from without of the direct control of the Formosa Justicialismo.

The second, more recent example involves the court-case promoted by the Federación de Comunidades del Pueblo Pilagá (Federation of Communities of the Pilagá People), and sponsored by ENDEPA lawyers, about the massacre of Rincón Bomba in October 1947 (near Las Lomitas). In that event, troops of Gendarmería Nacional (the Argentinean military border police) killed hundreds of Pilagá men, women, and children suspected of participating in an uprising (see Vuoto and Wright 1991). This court-case – parallel to one opened in the province of Chaco about the 1924 Napalpí massacre – led to a 2007 ruling by a Formosa federal judge that deemed the crimes involved ‘non-prescribable’ and hence susceptible to generating compensations from the federal government. Further, prior to that, and following a demand by the Federation, the judge had ordered a forensic survey in one of the several sites known by Pilagá elders to contain mass graves resulting from the massacre. Twenty-seven human remains were found, a discovery that had a relatively important impact on the provincial and national media. Because the court-case involves the Argentinean federal government, this move was not seen as a direct challenge to the Formosa government. Initiatives of this sort are nonetheless notable, for they imply an open criticism of state violence and of an institution like Gendarmería Nacional (which in Formosa is celebrated as a cornerstone of the provincial identity) and create the type of political practices that the provincial government has recurrently tried to prevent from taking place. These two examples, in short, bring to light some of instances in which diverse indigenous leaders and activists have managed to open up novel political spaces from within the interstices of party hegemony in Formosa.

To return to a point I made in the opening pages, the ‘Telenoche Investiga’ reports aired on national TV captured aspects of the political reality faced by the aborígenes in Formosa, but by overlooking – as it is often the case in coverage by the mainstream media – the ethnic-political complexities that exist within indigenous villages in this province. As I have tried to show, an ethnographic reading of the concept of hegemony allows us to examine some of these complexities, which include the active participation of indigenous actors both in the recreation of those power relations as well as in their critique. The diverse processes examined in these pages also show that counter-hegemonic practices can acquire very diverse, multi-layered expressions. Some of them, like the ones I just analysed, are produced by actors who try to limit the reach of the ruling party; but many others imply, rather than a frontal rupture from the hegemonic party relations in which they are immersed, an attempt to reconfigure the fields of force that define any hegemony and counter-hegemony.

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## Notes

- 1 One of the archetypical representatives of the twentieth century Latin American populism, Perón was president of Argentina in 1946–55 and 1973–74, when he died while in office.
- 2 Additionally, many aborígenes remember that it was in the first two governments of Juan Domingo Perón (1946–55) that they were finally recognized as citizens with full-rights and were granted the ID papers that symbolized such status. Yet in many parts of Formosa it was only in the late 1960s that the government implemented massive documentation campaigns in indigenous villages (Gordillo 2006a, 2006b).
- 3 <http://www.formosa.gov.ar/elecciones2007/resultados/index.php>
- 4 The so-called ‘lemas law’ that exists in Formosa allows each party (‘*lema*’) to present several candidates in each election, which then compete among themselves for elective positions such as mayors, city councilors (*concejales*), and provincial legislators, even if they all formally belong in the same party.
- 5 The exceptions were brief moments in the late 1980s, when a prominent Toba leader was for a few years a member of the UCR, and in 1996, when in order to protest massive layoffs at the municipality many Toba men and women quit the PJ and joined the UCR. Shortly after, however, most of these people realigned themselves with the PJ, given the little weight of the UCR in the province (see Gordillo 2002).
- 6 In spite of this, patron-client relations are not restricted to electoral moments. These relations have a long-term continuity and also emerge in everyday practices through which ‘punteros’ grant their followers a wide spectrum of ‘favours’ (for instance, giving them a lift on their pick-up trucks, or taking them to the regional hospital) that are later on activated to demand political loyalty at the time of elections (see Gordillo 2002, Iñigo Carrera 2001).

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