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SILVIA RIVERA CUSICANQUI



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SILVIA RIVERA CUSICANQUI

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui is a Bolivian sociologist and activist of Aymaran ancestry, with links to the indigenous katarista movement and to that of coca growers, as described in this [biographical profile](#) written by Verónica Gago. Along with other indigenous and mixed-race intellectuals, in 1983 she founded the [Andean Oral History Workshop \(THOA\)](#), a self-managed group which focuses on orality, identity and the indigenous and popular social movements, particularly in the Aymara region. She was especially involved in the exploration of the communitarian and anarchist dimensions of indigenous struggles, thereafter influencing popular movements, including the self-organised movement of Ayllus (family groupings) in Western Bolivia, as she herself explained in a [dialogue](#) with Oído Selvaje.

She is currently a member of the self-managed [Colectivx Ch'ixi](#) group, which promotes the rights of people with disabilities and raises awareness on discrimination suffered by them, through documentary films, workshops and [events](#). In the last few years she has also been involved in the setting-up of [El Tambo Colectivo](#), a cultural centre in La Paz which aims to combine academic knowledge, manual work and environmental practices.


Her long academic career includes over two decades as a lecturer in Sociology at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés in La Paz (UMSA). She has also been a visiting lecturer at the Universities of Columbia (New York, USA), Austin (Texas, USA), La Rábida (Huelva, Spain), Jujuy, and the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (Quito,

Ecuador). She obtained a Guggenheim scholarship in 1990 and became an Emeritus Professor at UMSA in 1993. She is also an Emeritus Professor in Andean Human Rights at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar.

For a good overview of her career and reflections on her life and work, in the broader Bolivian context, this [talk](#) with Boaventura de Sousa Santos provides a good starting point.

She is the author of several books, including *Oppressed but not Defeated: Peasant Struggles among the Aymara and Quechua in Bolivia, 1900-1980* (1984); *Los artesanos libertarios y la ética del trabajo*, co-authored with Zulema Lehm (1988); the collection of essays *Debates postcoloniales. Una introducción a los estudios de la subalternidad* (1997), edited with Rossana Barragán, which is considered to be one of the earliest translations of fundamental texts of Post-colonial studies into Spanish; *Chi'xinakax utxiwa, una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (2010); and *Violencias (re)encubiertas en Bolivia* (2010), where several of her articles from the 1990s are collected. She has also been involved in the production of several videos and feature and documentary films.

A significant part of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's work addresses continuity in the domination affecting indigenous identities and cultures, including in those contexts where diversity and the value of indigenous cultures have been officially recognised. In her view, 'internal colonialism' operates as a structure of habitus (in the sense of Bourdieu's) – that is, as history internalised by individuals. When analysing the symbolic, material



and historical mechanisms of domination, Rivera Cusicanqui has identified the 'illusion of mixed race' (la ilusión del mestizaje) as a hegemonic, patriarchal and colonial construct, since, far from integrating diverse identities, it contributes to consolidating a culturally-determined hierarchical structure. Through the 'myth of mixed race' and the discursive, ideological construction of 'citizenship', indigenous peoples were excluded from public space, as explained by Luis Martínez Andrade in his [analysis](#) of *Violencias (re) encubiertas en Bolivia*.

In the current context, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui perceives a continuity of long-term colonial structures, which remain in people's minds and are reproduced through social, economic and political structures. This is well described in this 2009 [presentation](#), in line with her work since 1980. Furthermore, this [article](#) by Verónica Gago stresses Silvia's critique of the 'reformist appropriation of the "pluri-multi" by a generation of intellectuals', as an example of the 'rhetorical abilities of the elite and their immense flexibility to turn collective guilt into minor tweaks and amendments within a framework of domination which retains its colonial dimension.' In the light of this, attending a [meeting](#) at the University of Chile she highlighted that indigenous identities are also part of modernity, representing 'a process of conflictual interaction with a range of colonial powers, at different levels.' On this basis, she also rejects the 'miserabilist' discourse of ethnic memory, suggesting that a vision which respects the 'agency of indigenous subjects' should be affirmed instead. As discussed in this [interview](#) with Rolando Carvajal, the political discourse around the notion of "vivir bien" ('good living') is, in her view, mainly rhetorical and has not involved true support for communities or a recognition of their autonomy.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's work has also addressed the relation between indigenous and feminist struggles, highlighting the shared underpinning dynamics between Westernisation and patriarchy in gender systems. The latter, as Luis Martínez Andrade stresses in the [analysis](#) of *Violencias (re) encubiertas en Bolivia*, may be perceived as one of the elements which has historically reinforced 'internal colonialism'. Therefore, the relevance of

her work beyond the Andean region can easily be understood, since it provides for an understanding of 'the socio-economic and political-cultural development of Latin America in general and Bolivia in particular.'

Her work has involved a wide range of formats and genres, including essays, documentary films, art criticism and curatorship. Indeed, in the 2010 catalogue-book [Principio Potosí Reverso](#), she presented an alternative view to the mainstream curatorial vision of the Principio Potosí exhibition, which was being presented in Madrid at the time. Her alternative view highlighted the subordinate nature of colonial painting with regard to local communities.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has also reflected on the communication of knowledge ('you should speak after listening, because listening is also a way of looking, and a mechanism to generate understanding as empathy', as [described](#) by Verónica Gago when addressing Rivera's work). She has also devoted seminars to the sociology of image, where de-colonial images and practices are combined and where she highlights the potential of visual culture to, as described in her [presentation](#) at the University of Chile, 'contribute to the understanding of the social context' and to 'update many unconscious elements of the social environment'.

