

MRG Human Rights Symposium Abstract

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Title: Indigenous Rights in Bolivia: Citizenship or Human Rights?

Abstract: What makes indigenous rights a human rights concern? That is, under what circumstances are the rights of indigenous peoples considered questions of citizenship and under what circumstances are they considered human rights? Are these strategic or analytic differences? Hannah Arendt famously argued that people only fall back on their “humanity” (i.e. their human rights) when they are stripped of the protection of the nation-state. Does this mean that people must be in a “bare life” situation vis-à-vis the sovereign state in order to claim human rights? When can citizens in liberal democracies make such claims? What does colonialism add to this question? That is, does colonialism put indigenous citizens into a special category as human rights claimants or bearers? Does human rights offer a kind of justice missing from citizenship? I will trace indigenous struggles in Bolivia over the last few decades to see how these two frameworks have intersected and diverged and what we can understand about liberalism as a result. Finally I will consider how contemporary moves towards decolonization in Bolivia offer alternative notions of rights and humanity.