

Indians, Leftists, and Rebellion in Bolivia

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IN THE YOUNG 21st century, few places offer as much inspiration for the worldwide left as Bolivia. From 2000 to 2005 the country witnessed a surge of popular mobilizations against resource privatization, heightening inequality, authoritarianism, and other hallmarks of neoliberalism. Protesters successfully prevented water privatization in the city of Cochabamba, toppled two neoliberal presidents, and paved the way for the election of a left-of-center indigenous president in December 2005.

Jeffery Webber's Red October explains how this earth-shaking cycle of revolt was possible. As with any social movement or revolution, the answer lies in a complex combination of "objective" and "subjective" conditions.

While the economic changes wrought by neoliberalism in some ways increased the likelihood of rebellion, the consciousness and ideological orientation of the Bolivian popular classes were no less important in fueling the upsurge and encouraging cross-sector alliances. Meanwhile, the organizational infrastructure represented by unions, neighborhood councils and informal networks greatly enhanced the mobilization capacity of Bolivian civil society.

Webber's account reaffirms the vital importance of class relations and class consciousness at a time when many scholars have downplayed class and political economy. He argues that even the "new" social movements that emphasize ethnic, gender, or other non-class identities cannot be understood without close attention to class, as most popular movements in Bolivia and throughout Latin America have fully realized.

Yet Webber is also critical of class determinism, and seeks to incorporate non-class forms of oppression and consciousness into a more nuanced Marxist analysis.

Explaining the Upsurge

Bolivia became a poster child for neoliberal "shock therapy" in 1985 when it implemented an International Monetary Fund-backed austerity and restructuring program. For the next 15 years the country remained an exemplary adherent of neoliberalism, culminating in a wave of privatizations in the 1990s.

The effects of neoliberalism in Bolivia and other underdeveloped countries are well-documented: a short list would include growing inequality, mass dislocation, historic transfers of public wealth into corporate hands, dismal economic growth, and increased vulnerability for workers (and especially certain sub-sections of the working and poor population, like women and children).

Yet material deprivation alone rarely produces revolts, let alone successful ones. And the informal economy characteristic of neoliberalism poses its own obstacles to popular mobilization, for instance by removing workers from large common workplaces where they can exchange ideas and organize.

Webber points to five additional factors that enabled Bolivian workers to overcome these obstacles,

and which lent the Bolivian upsurge its awesome power: 1) the organizational “infrastructure of class struggle” in cities and rural communities; 2) the ideological orientation of formal-sector unions toward working-class solidarity or “social-movement unionism;” 3) the “popular cultures of resistance” drawing upon memories of Bolivia’s revolutionary past; 4) the “combined-oppositional consciousness” of Bolivia’s mostly-indigenous working classes, who simultaneously confronted racial and class oppression; and 5) the violence of a repressive state that was nonetheless too weak to completely snuff out the insurgency, thus accelerating popular outrage and mobilization.

Webber demonstrates the role of these factors through a detailed recounting of the pivotal years of struggle in 2000-2005. His thorough reconstruction of events based on newspaper accounts, interviews and personal observations is a great strength of the book. He focuses special attention on several key moments: the famous 2000 “Water War” in the central Bolivian city of Cochabamba, the popular mobilization of Aymara Indians in the western states of La Paz and Oruro in 2000-01, and the “Gas Wars” centered in the cities of La Paz and El Alto in September-October 2003 and May-June 2005.

The Water War erupted in response to the privatization of Cochabamba’s public water service, which resulted in drastic rate hikes for residents. Factory workers, irrigation farmers, coca growers, and diverse other groups formed a coalition called the Coordinadora that organized activist assemblies, a massive public consultation, and the all-important road blockades and street protests that finally forced the government to cancel the privatization contract.

Particularly important in the Water War victory were two factors, says Webber: the existing “infrastructure of class struggle” provided by the factory-worker and peasant unions, and those unions’ ideological commitment to forging links with other marginalized sectors (“social-movement unionism”).

Most of the other major mobilizations of 2000-2005 were concentrated in the western altiplano region of Bolivia, especially in and around the capital of La Paz and the neighboring city of El Alto. The first round started at roughly the same time as Cochabamba’s Water War and was similarly focused on retaining community control over local resources, especially land and water, in the face of government attempts at privatization.

These protests were surpassed in the Gas Wars of 2003 and 2005, when La Paz, El Alto and surrounding communities organized strikes and road blockades that brought down two neoliberal presidents, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003 and Carlos Mesa in June 2005.

In both moments the central issue uniting the popular coalition was the future of Bolivia’s major export, natural gas — whether the government would continue “selling off our hydrocarbons at the price of a dead chicken” (as one El Alto union leader put it) or whether the gas reserves would be used to benefit ordinary Bolivians via “a socially just development-model.” (215)

Accompanying the popular demand for the re-nationalization of gas and oil (which had been privatized in 1996) was the broader call for a revolutionary Constituent Assembly to overhaul the Constitution and institutions of government.

The rebellions in La Paz and El Alto most vividly demonstrate the five factors mentioned above. As in Cochabamba, there was a pre-existing infrastructure of formal-sector unions committed to fighting for the working class as a whole, including the miners’ federation, the El Alto workers’ central, and the peasant unions outside the cities.

Arguably even more important, though, were other organizations like the El Alto neighborhood

councils and traditional indigenous governance structures in the countryside, which combined participatory democracy with remarkable mobilization capacity. Webber notes that it was often the “informal networks” of rank-and-file within these organizations, rather than the organizational leadership, that proved to be the most radical. (202)

The political culture and consciousness of the mostly-indigenous working class in the La Paz region lent the upsurge its revolutionary energy. Based in part on his interviews with indigenous activists, Webber introduces the theoretical concept of “combined-oppositional consciousness,” defined as “a collective consciousness in which the politics of class-struggle and indigenous liberation are tightly interwoven.” (260)

This consciousness derived from the inseparability of class and race oppression in the Bolivian context, both also intimately tied to imperialism in the popular mind. The rebel consciousness was nourished in part by collective memories of Bolivia’s revolutionary past, including both indigenous rebellions from the colonial era onward and the self-consciously Marxist and anarchist movements of the 20th century. Many activists in El Alto who had migrated there from mining regions drew upon their personal experience in some of these past struggles.

On the other side of the conflict, the state’s own weakness and contradictions lent greater power to the protests. It remained intransigent toward popular demands and, in the case of Sánchez de Lozada’s regime, brutally murdered scores of civilians in the infamous “Black October” of 2003 (a term adapted by Webber for the book’s title). Yet this repression was “insufficiently powerful to wipe out opposition” and only further radicalized protests. (316)

This dynamic challenges some “political-opportunity” theories of social movements, which assume that protests grow in response to perceived openings and recede in the face of repression.

Indians and Leftists

One of the most remarkable features of the upsurge of the early 2000s was the development of popular alliances across ethnic, regional and sectoral lines. Formal-sector workers joined forces with street vendors and the unemployed, mestizo leftists in the cities joined indigenous activists, and Aymara, Quechua and other indigenous ethnic groups coordinated together. These developments were notable given the resentments and prejudices that had often divided these disparate groups, especially in the latter half of the 20th century.

But as Webber’s historical overview in Chapters 2-3 suggests, and as a growing number of historical studies demonstrates, these alliances had many precursors. Although nationalist and military regimes after Bolivia’s 1952 revolution had great success in maintaining divisions among the popular sectors, the 1920s through 1940s had featured many fascinating examples of fruitful collaboration.

The largely mestizo left in the cities and indigenous peasants in the countryside sometimes supported one another. Urban socialists played a supporting role in the 1927 Chayanta indigenous uprising, Marxists helped organize sit-down strikes on haciendas, and anarchists in La Paz and Oruro developed close relations with indigenous workers and communities outside those cities. Moreover, the urban left — particularly anarchists, I would argue — was often quite sensitive to the ethnic aspect of indigenous oppression as well as its class aspect.

Later, in the 1970s, the new katarista indigenous movement — named for the indigenous anticolonial hero Túpac Katari, executed in 1781—would start to seek out alliances with workers and the left. The movement fought against racism and promoted the revalorization of indigenous people

and culture, but the dominant current within it was also anti-capitalist. Many individuals came to self-identify as both Indians and members of the working class, presaging the widespread “combined-oppositional consciousness” that Webber describes for the early 2000s.

These examples belie the common depiction of Latin America’s urban left as primarily mestizo, paternalistic, and class-reductionist. The history of the 20th (and even the 21st) century is full of examples to support such a characterization, but there are also many contrary examples of respectful inter-ethnic collaboration — not just in Bolivia but in Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico and other countries.

One of Webber’s overarching points is that “historical materialism as a tradition has not always been class-reductionist, and need not always be so in the future.” (303) These historical examples and Webber’s own analysis support this argument.

Gender receives less attention in the book than ethnicity or class, perhaps because most Bolivian popular organizations have not talked about it much. Webber is attentive to women’s role in the protests he describes and does interview a fair number of women activists.

At one point he comments that most of the leaders of the El Alto neighborhood council federation are men (as has historically been the case in most Bolivian unions). But a deeper discussion of gender dynamics and feminist currents within popular organizations would have enriched the book’s analysis of revolutionary politics.

After the Dust Settles

Were Bolivian protesters able to translate their disruptive power into fundamental changes in the country’s political, economic, and social structure? The Evo Morales administration that began in January 2006, the focus of Webber’s previous book *From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia* (Haymarket, 2011), is treated only briefly in *Red October*, but some basic points are worth noting.

Webber is much less sanguine about the Morales administration than many on the international left. He argues that, radical rhetoric notwithstanding, Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party have pursued only a mild reformism while channeling the vibrant grassroots movements of the previous years into the electoral arena.

While making important strides against racism, the Morales administration has implicitly defined indigenous liberation as a cultural goal rather than one requiring fundamental redistributions of power and resources. The MAS’s Constituent Assembly for writing a new Constitution effectively barred radical social movement representatives while compromising with the white elite of eastern Bolivia.

In the economic realm, the administration passed a watered-down gas “nationalization” law in 2006 that merely increased taxes on private corporations rather than bringing the industry under public control. Land redistribution has been far less than many peasants had hoped.

The economy as a whole remains thoroughly dependent on mineral and hydrocarbon exports to the detriment of the environment and many indigenous communities. In sum, though more progressive than its neoliberal predecessors, the Morales government is far from radical.

I have minor differences with Webber — or at least questions — regarding some of his details and emphases. For instance, I would give slightly more weight to the modest but real socioeconomic redistribution since 2006 (partly in light of new data released in the several years since Webber wrote his two books, which show more substantial reductions in poverty and inequality than in

Morales's first years).

I also wonder if he overestimates the freedom of action available to the Morales administration, given Bolivia's underdevelopment and the economic leverage of foreign powers and the domestic right.

But whatever the precise extent of the possible, Webber is certainly correct that far more is possible. Judging by the popular upsurge and demands described in Red October, plus opinion polls and mobilizations of the past few years, most Bolivians favor Morales over his neoliberal opposition but would likely also support a more radical approach to transforming the country.

Webber also seems right about another thing: lasting revolutionary change in Bolivia, if it happens, is less likely to come from the initiative of MAS leaders than from the country's popular classes recapturing the revolutionary energy of the early 2000s and compelling a more radical transformation.

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