Indigenous Anarchism in Bolivia

An Interview with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Andalusia Knoll

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The South American nation of Bolivia has filled the headlines of the global press with its fight against water privatization, struggle for nationalization of gas, non-compliance with free trade policies, and the 2005 election of the continent's first indigenous president, Evo Morales. These struggles are rooted in the long history of indigenous resistance to colonialism and imperialism in Bolivia. In an interview conducted during her recent stay in Pittsburgh, subaltern theorist Aymara sociologist and historian Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui discussed Bolivian anarchism, the health benefits of the coca plant and the cocaleros' (coca growers) fight for sovereignty. Rivera Cusicanqu is a founder of the Taller de Historia Oral Andina (Workshop on Andean Oral History) and author of Oppressed But Not Defeated: Peasant Struggles Among the Aymara and Quechua in Bolivia, 1910–1980 (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 1987). She was born in 1949 in La Paz.

Andalusia Knoll: Could you talk about some of the things that you have uncovered in your research about anarchism in Bolivia as related to the struggles of the Aymara and Quecha people?

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui: We started as an Aymara collective that basically wanted to uncover the Aymara and Quechua struggles and we discovered that there were many links with urban Aymara communities that had organizations linked both to the indigenous communities and to the union movement, which in the 20's was basically anarchist. What happened in Bolivia is that there have been two official histories: the official history written by the [Revolutionary] Nationalist Party–MNR–that basically denies all the agency of both workers and peasants and indigenous peoples; and the official history of the left that forgets about anything that was not Marxist, thus eclipsing or distorting the autonomous history of anarchist unions. It's the links between the anarchists and the indigenous people that gave them another nuance, because their communities are self-sustained entities and they basically are places where anti-authoritarian type of organization can take roots. They don't need this leadership that is like permanent leadership. The communities have leaders, but as a rotational thing that is a service to the community. It's kind of a burden to be a leader for a community, you know? It's something you do once in a lifetime and you do because you ought to do, and that the community says its your turn or the turn of your family. So, that creates a totally different relationship with power structures and, in a way, it decolonizes power and to a certain extent gives it back to the people. That is what fascinated us most about the communities and, on the other hand, it led us to discover that com-

munities were not only rural but also urban and worked with [1920s anarchist] Luis Cusicanqui and other anarchist leaders because they had such an affinity between the way they saw struggle, autonomy, domination, and oppression.

Andalusia Knoll: Anarchism in general, I think, is perceived as a European tradition that has been brought to the United States and places like Argentina and people don't generally associate anarchism with places like Bolivia or places in Africa, et cetera. Could you talk about how anarchism was in line with many of the beliefs of the Aymara and Quechua people and the way their communities were governed.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui: A general point of departure of Bolivian history with the rest of Latin America is that many–especially anarchists–have had to go through the filter of their own traditions of struggle that are basically anti-colonial. So, what happened is that there was like a mutual breeding, a mutual fertilization of thought and an ability to interpret universal doctrine that is basically a European doctrine in Bolivian, Chola and Aymara terms. That's why Bolivian anarchism is so important, because it has roots in the grassroots urban unions. Because most urban workers were also Indian in Bolivia and still are. 62 percent of the population in Bolivia self-identify as indigenous, as Aymara, Quechua, Guarani and as many other indigenous peoples. So we have a majority, even in urban settings, and therefore have a particular brand of anarchism. I would say it is Anarcho-Indianism. And also it is Anarcho-Indianism-Feminism because the chola figure, the women, the female fighter, the female organizer, is part of Bolivian daily life. If you have been there you know what the market looks like, how strong these women are, how in solidarity they are when there is a march coming from the cocaleros, when there are these marches that last ten, twenty days without much to eat. These women prepare these huge pots of soup they give away to the poorest people. They have such a tradition of union associations that self-organize. And they self-organize basically in the administration of space. The market is a space and it's very symbolic that they take over this space and just grab it from the municipality or from the central state. So, you have a very specific chola brand of anarchism that explains why it was so attractive for so, so many people. And it explains why one of the most salient things in Bolivian anarchist history is that their leaders made their speeches in Aymara. And just thinking that another non-Western language, non-European language is filtering the thoughts of anarchists and helping to phrase, to express the rage, the proposals, the ideas–it gives such richness, you know? In Aymara you can say, "us" in four different ways.

Andalusia Knoll: How do these struggles of indigenous people in the '20s and '30s relate to struggles against neoliberalism today?

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui: Liberalism made its big reforms in the late 19th century, which were anti-Indian reforms. They killed the market for indigenous crafts and goods. They took Indian lands. They jailed all the leaders of the communities. They wanted them to become servants of the haciendas and have a quiet and domesticated, low-paid labor force in the mines and in the factories. You have a second liberalism here now that wants basically the same thing, except for the issue of haciendas. Haciendas are out of date in Bolivia because of agrarian reform. Yet there is still a need for agrarian reform because the big land ownership has moved, it has been displaced to the lowlands and still it's doing the same thing. It's usurping indigenous lands. So you have basically the same set of problems and aggressions, but you obviously have cultural differences, a cultural gap. Because in those times, you didn't have much of a literate working class, or literate leadership in the communities. The communities had many problems just trying to understand the language of the documents that decreed their extinction, or decreed the laws against them. So

they created a movement in favor of schools. That was another link with the workers, because the workers, especially the anarchists, had their own self-organized schools. The indigenous communities came in search for support for their schools and found a very fertile terrain in the anarchist unions.

Andalusia Knoll: Could you talk more about the struggles of the cocaleros? Here in the United States there's very little dialogue about their struggle and people don't even realize that there is a difference between coca and cocaine.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui: Well, let me tell you, I have been researching, and every time I come to the US I go to the libraries with one question: Why is coca so underground, so unknown, so mistreated, so stigmatized? Why do people believe all these lies? Why can you get any drug but not coca? It's because if coca was a drug you could get it. And I'm finding a big conspiracy against coca in the late 19th century by the pharmaceutical industry. And it is a conspiracy against people's health in general. But the conspiracy against coca was particularly mean and ill because it was a conspiracy against a people. The Indians had been in touch with coca for millennia and have been able to use it in a variety of ways; as a mild stimulant for work, as a ritual item, as a recreational commodity that you chew at parties, at wakes, at weddings, or even as a symbol of identity and of struggle. So, coca leaves are almost pervasively present in the Bolivian context but there is like this press blindness, blindness of the media. Blindness of the media that in many senses is dictated by the US embassy, you know? It's the US embassy that dictates the policy on coca and blackmails the government so that if we don't do as they say, the funds for development or, I don't know, the funds they give to the Bolivian government will be cut. I always said to the leaders, "Let them cut! We won't die! And we can't live forever on somebody else's alimony." It's hard because really there is a problem of poverty; but poverty in Bolivia is constructed, it's a result of bad policies! And it's a result of being robbed of our resources. And so I think the coca issue is very, very enlightening in terms of what the power of interests of corporations can do to truth… Just veil the truth to such an extent that…common sense has been overcome by this absurd idea that coca is cocaine. I have chewed coca since I was 16 years old. When I came to the states, of course you miss everything you don't have, but I'm not in a [withdrawal] syndrome. I have a [withdrawal] syndrome of coffee! When I quit coffee I had symptoms of being addicted to coffee, but the coca leaves are not addictive. I just chew them and enjoy them everyday and if I don't have them I don't chew them and that's it. And I'm very healthy and I think so many people would be rid of osteoporosis and calcium deficits and gastric disorders and obesity and cardio-vascular problems and diabetes [if coca were available]. And that's why it is an enemy of the pharmaceuticals; because we wouldn't need all their shit! All their pills, all their venoms that make us believe that they are good and then they have side effects and then you go back, and they give you another thing, and you keep on going back and then you end up with having a full pharmacy in your drawer and then you feel miserable and you have lost control of your life. That's what they want and that's what we're against and coca is our big, big shield against companies taking over our bodies.

Andalusia Knoll: Earlier you had mentioned one of the marches of the cocaleros. Could you talk about some of the actions that people have taken to defend their rights to grow coca and their sovereignty?

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui: Yes. Well, I like to talk about things I really know first and there have been many, many marches. One of the most impressive ones was in 1994 and it is really very incredible to be a part of one of these events. And in 1998, when things were getting really

bad because of forced eradication and assassinations of cocaleros, and army raids where they went into the coca fields and destroyed everything. It was a daily occurrence… there was this big march that I joined… And I was able to get into the rank-and-file cocaleros within the march and see how there is this Gandhian ethic of self-sacrifice accompanied with coca. It's also a Gandhian ethic of not eating too much, because…[i]t is the force of the spirit and the force of the belief that goes and carries your body. And so your body has to be light. And that's why you learn a lot about ethics when you do this type of struggle… you're doing a sacrifice for a cause that is for the good of many people and it really feeds your spirit. It is very important to have something beyond your own belly… and also to go for a cause that is for the whole of the Bolivian people, because sovereignty is the missed task. No revolution of whatever kind–liberal revolution, nationalist revolution, leftist–has really been freed from imperialism, freed from colonial domination. So, that task requires all the strength and these marches, vigils and hunger strikes have been, always, a typical characteristic of the Bolivian people. A peaceful type of non-violent actions–but so massive! so massive!–where people are ready to die. And that generosity…is very, very heart-lifting, you know? And so, it gives people a strength to overcome many obstacles, to overthrow governments, and to even take governments. And so, I think that's a result of our strength; our collective strength.

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