

Bolivia: Social Movements On Fire

A review of “The Price of Fire” by Ben Dangl and “Impasse In Bolivia” by Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing

Workers Solidarity Movement

12 December 2007

Over the weekend of November 24–25 (2007), protesters clashed with police in Sucre, Bolivia – they were demanding that the capital of the country be moved to Sucre. Three people died and over some 100 were wounded in the clashes. Yesterday Morales announced plans for a nationwide referendum to resolve a deepening political crisis in the country.

A few years ago the Cochabamba water war coincided perfectly with the 2000 anti-globalisation peak to solidify many of that movement’s arguments about neo-liberal rule in cold hard scenarios of struggle. An exciting new round of images depicting indigenous women confronting militarised police dotted left publications, while documentaries like ‘The Corporation’ used the revolt as a sharp anecdote in hacking off the avaricious tentacles of multinationals.

With the success of the Movimiento al Socialismo¹, western attention moved from the social movements honed in such resource struggles to the left caudillo Morales and, despite previous excited flutters, there’s now little comment on how the grassroots relate to this new moment. Al Giordano complained in a recent book on Oaxacca, that the radical press often shares problems with the mainstream – reeling in a journalism of instant replays, full of heroic and tragic moments from the barricades, instead of cogent analysis.

Thankfully in the past six months two very different books sought to pierce through the frailty of movement reportage on social movements in Bolivia, to explore why they emerged with such force since the 1990’s and how they now relate to the MAS. The first of these is Kohl and Farthing’s ‘Impasse in Bolivia’, a heavily wrought background to the face off between a globally prescribed neo-liberal hegemony and a local population repeatedly drawing on a five hundred year resistance narrative.

Taking the reader through a well-elucidated history from the Spanish Conquest to the early 21st Century, they track how economic restructurings affected the composition of Bolivian resistance movements prior to neo-liberalism. The exploitation of silver deposits at Potosi by the

¹ Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism) is the party of Evo Morales.

Spanish profoundly re-organised Andean society, leading to the emergence of indigenous resistance through nested kinship structures that fuelled rebellions such as the mythic 1781 siege of La Paz from the alti-plano by tens of thousands of Aymara warriors.

The authors describe how the later drive for an independent Bolivia stemmed from liberal criollos keen for the benefits of their own state but bent on uprooting and modernising indigenous communal land-holding systems to fundamentally exclude them as citizens. The eventual replacement of these hacienda based elites with natural resource companies at state level set the ground for embryonic industrial agitation and ripples that reach the present.

In the thirties a rivalry between Standard Oil and Royal Dutch Shell over control of deposits in the Chaco region forced Bolivia into a proxy war with Paraguay for control of the disputed area. Defeat both drastically reduced the country's land mass and welded the social force for the 1952 Revolution among war weary drafted students, workers and campesinos. The resultant Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario deposed the mining oligarchies with a regime subject to land and labour pressure from below in the form of the Confederación Obrera Boliviana. Forced to recognise land seizures and labour demands, it constructed a state in the modernist nationalist tradition with a strong central administration and control over natural resources.

This defiant union movement continued to push for a deepening of citizenship rights only to be marshalled with a military dictatorship in 1964 as Cold War realities hit home. The imposition of neo-liberal economics in the eighties under the NEP against this historic background becomes quite central to the authors' account, seen as a serious attack both on what became known as the "State of '52" and the labour movement.

Engineered for president Estenssoro by Jeffery Sachs of the IMF, it was the first programme of its kind, leading to some economic recovery in the face of hyper-inflation but an ensuing human misery. Over 20,000 miners lost their jobs, manufacturing collapsed and over two thirds of the urban population were dragged into the informal economy, dramatically paralysing the COB as the backbone to popular struggles. With the way paved for an affirmation of neo-liberal policies, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada's Plan de Todos in the nineties unfolded with the familiar theme of privatised state owned enterprises, gutting the country's revenue.

Yet according to the authors, the couching of this new market democracy in electoral and social reforms inadvertently opened a space for indigenous resistance in rural areas. As failed neo-liberal promises bolstered anger, diverse movements around coca eradication in Chapare, land rights and basic urban services quickly transformed the political landscape to "forge a common sense of injured national identity²."

Unfortunately Kohl and Farthing's work is hamstrung with the distance of academia, it sketches the imposition of neo-liberalism brilliantly but fails to illustrate "the shape that popular challenges to it will take³" in any grounded way.

Using a very different approach Benjamin Dangl's 'The Price Of Fire' is refreshingly intimate, he too starts with a "revolution in reverse," rolling through the tides of Bolivian revolt during a brief stay in old Potosi.

His writing style is steeped in hauntology and the psychic scars of centuries of exploitation; it's the fruit of bar room conversations, pickets and blockades and a brief encounter with Morales. He

² Kohl, Benjamin and Linda C. Farthing. *Impasse in Bolivia: Neoliberal Hegemony and Popular Resistance* (Zed Books, 2006) p175

³ *Ibid* p23

cushions this in minor analysis and travelogue, allowing voices from social movements to provide a “human face to the looting and struggles of a continent⁴.” During a visit to the Chapare, this “bearded gringo with a notepad” rails against the use of coca eradication as a paltry excuse for US intervention in the post cold-war climate, arguing that the migration of unemployed miners to rural areas accelerated coca’s growth as the only viable cash crop under neo-liberalism.

From this dynamic the MAS emerged, capable of unifying different strands of struggle with its origins in coca growers’ unions formed by former miners. Visually this is seen in the use of the coca leaf as party insignia, once used for energy by silver miners but equally evocative of indigenous and anti-imperialist messages today.

The book continuously traces how modes of militancy spread through migration. Like Farthing and Kohl, he agrees that the water war was a momentous turning point with the practice of mass assemblies in rural areas becoming more engrained in cities through the Coordinadora. Retaining a critical eye, he doesn’t rush to romanticise the end result of the water war. Bechtel may have left but the public water company is still controlled by a local political elite, though one more subject to street based popular power.

The question of how to use Bolivian gas further unified traditionally diverse social movements in the 2003 gas war to reverse the privatisation carried out in the mid-nineties. Protesters used “the wealth underground” as a point of correction for past lost resources and to envision a future of possible development, education and health-care.

Casting his eye to Caracas, Dangl hints at the use of oil revenue in Venezuela to empower the nation’s poor with literacy programmes, health clinics and community centres as a path for the Morales regime.

‘The Price of Fire’ takes a brief jaunt into urban geography in a chapter on the internal world of the El Alto, a city whose residents played a crucial role in the 2003 gas revolt. The same social forces that drove miners to become cocalers in rural Chapare led to the informal settlements outside La Paz skyrocketing to a population of 800,000. Neighbourhood organisations sufficiently ingrained to strangle the capital below in periods of struggle, sprung up based on the experience of miner and rural agitation, as well as the absence of basic state services. One of the few academics Dangl speaks with describes their strength as lying in “the basic self-organisation that fills every pore of the society and has made superfluous many forms of representation⁵.”

Within these El Alto urban movements we are given glimpses of a counter-cultural response to neo-liberal hegemony in Teatro Trono, a theatre group meshing struggles against the IMF with traditional myths in popular education programmes. There’s also a growing hip-hop movement that fuses the Aymara language with sampled stateside beats into a poetics of urban resistance to poverty.

In his conclusion Dangl takes a critical look at the problem fraught Morales’ regime. He claims that images of troops entering gas fields from afar look like the stuff of radical expropriation but nationalisation really meant a series of buy outs of majority stakes sold for a pittance in the 1990s, higher taxes and a re-negotiation of over generous contracts. Stepping aside from the flurry of rhetoric surrounding nationalisation, the YPFB in reality still remains at a capital disadvantage with international companies holding minority shares.

⁴ Dangl, Benjamin. *The Price of Fire: Resource Wars and Social Movements in Boliva* (AK Press, 2007) p11

⁵ *Ibid* p151

Rarely mentioned in discussions of Bolivian social movements is the traditional demand for a constituent assembly convoked by Morales this year. Many of the movement activists we meet through Dangl's travels complain that the electoral nature of the assembly excludes them, forcing them to abandon their autonomy and seek representation through the MAS party. Simultaneously it has reinvigorated right wing parties weakened by the popular rebellions, allowing them the space to develop a dangerous language of autonomy for oligarchical strong holds like Santa Cruz.

If you are looking for long streams of statistics on Bolivia's immiseration, then Farthing and Kohl have compiled a resource for your agitational pot-shots and filler articles — but if you want the human face of Bolivia's social movement push, then Dangl is your only man. Whichever you prefer, Bolivia remains a fertile soil for the rebellious imagination, full of "better worlds- some that have lasted and some no more than euphoric glimpses⁶."

⁶ Ibid p9

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