

A Postcolonial Turn: Social And Political Change In The New Indigenous Order Of Bolivia

Andrew Canessa
Department of Sociology
University of Essex

Bolivia, overshadowed by its much larger and wealthier neighbors such as Chile, Brazil, Argentina and Peru, is one of those small countries that rarely make the world news. This changed in December 2005, however, when a relative newcomer to Bolivian electoral politics, Evo Morales, was elected to the presidency with a majority of the popular vote. He immediately embarked on a world tour and was warmly received, not only by Fidel Castro (his first port of call) but in many Latin American and European capitals, as well as Asia and Africa, where he was greeted as the world's first "indigenous president."

This world tour had a remarkable effect on Bolivia's global image: pictures of poverty and unrest were replaced by the charismatic face of a man confident enough to ignore sartorial protocol by wearing an Andean sweater and proletarian shoes to meet presidents and kings. Millions of dollars of

investment followed, adding to the invaluable propaganda coup. Around the world people who could not name a single Bolivian president can now pronounce the name of Evo, no small feat for a man who had been shunned by the Bolivian political establishment and labeled by the U.S. Ambassador as a "narcoterrorist."

Evo Morales' election represents profound and dramatic changes in the social and political landscape of Bolivia. Some have heralded his election as a major social revolution. It is certainly the case that for the first time since the Conquest indigenous people have a significant measure of official political power in a country of the Americas. Morales' election is much more than the election of a new leader; it is a major change in how state power is wielded in a country where whites, be they Spanish colonists or their creole descendants, have ruled over a majority indigenous population for five centuries. This has consequences for how power is exercised at the political level but also at the micro level; it has consequences for people's sense of who they are as Bolivians and as indigenous people; and it has consequences in the more intimate spaces of people's lives. These are some of the themes explored in the essays of this volume.

In this introductory essay I sketch the background that led up to Morales' election and the multifarious social and political forces behind it. Some of these go back to the time of Conquest, and others are rooted in the pragmatics of 21st century politics.

Revolt and Revolution

Although Bolivia includes large tracts of lowland rainforest and drier plain, for most of its history the majority of the population has been settled in the high Andean region. Not only did the mountains offer rich agricultural land that sustained

civilizations such as Tiwanaku and the Inka Empire, but the Andes are also rich in such minerals as silver and gold as well as copper, tin and many other minerals. For centuries the area that is now Bolivia was dominated by mining interests (whether they be Inkaic, colonial or republican), interests that depended on the labor of a large indigenous peasantry. Then and now these peasants principally speak Quechua (the language of the Inkas) and Aymara, as well as a number of other languages such as Chipaya and Guaraní.

There are obvious discontinuities between the Inkaic and colonial periods, but there are also important elements that traverse the timeline: whereas the elites changed from indigenous Americans to Europeans, the mass of the population continued to live as peasants and miners. Agricultural and mining techniques in many areas changed relatively little through the centuries.

By the middle of the 20th century the majority of the population continued to be rural-dwelling indigenous peasants. Some lived in *haciendas* where they were, in effect, serfs; others lived in free communities which provided much of the labor for the mines that fueled the country's export economy. A small white elite continued to dominate economic and political institutions.

This changed dramatically with the 1952 Revolution that overthrew the landowning oligarchy and ushered in a period of major social transformation. Agrarian reform returned land to indigenous peasants, education reform initiated the construction of schools all over the countryside, suffrage became universal, and the political class came to be dominated by urban *mestizos* (people of notionally mixed descent) and whites not aligned with the traditional oligarchy. Indigenous people, although they supported the revolution and were instrumental in its success, were not given formal recognition as a group, nor were they represented in positions of power. Instead they were co-opted into the state system through a hierarchical

system of peasants' unions. As the Revolution moved to ban the word "Indian" and replace it with "peasant" (*campesino*), the ethnic or racial aspect of the peasant class (not to mention their urban kin) was erased by fiat.

Bolivia's 1952 Revolution was one of the most far-reaching in Latin American history and, with the exception of the Cuban Revolution, the one with the most profound social consequences, especially in the area of land reform. Despite its import, succeeding decades saw a whittling down of the progressive thrust of the Revolution and by the 1970s Bolivia was under a military dictatorship where any kind of political opposition or protest was liable to severe repression. The political oppression also served to obscure the subterranean shifts that were building up pressure that would break in the future.

For a generation of Bolivians, 1952 was the anti-colonial moment; from the point of view of Indians, Bolivian independence in 1825 had merely transferred rule from one white elite group to another. In fact, some aspects of the new republic exacerbated colonial exploitation: whereas the Crown offered some protection to free Indian communities in order to ensure that they continued to pay taxes to the colonial state (*hacienda* Indians being exempt), the new liberal republic assailed the notion and the practice of communal land ownership and the succeeding decades saw the greatest dispossession of Indian lands since the Conquest. It was the Revolution in 1952 and the Agrarian Reform the following year that returned land to Indians, an event that for many people marks the end of "Spanish" domination, the true anticolonial moment.

There can be no doubt of the political and social significance of the revolutionary years and the profound transformations it ushered in: by the end of the century *mestizos* (the term denotes a cultural orientation as much as it does putative mixed ancestry) had become prominent in many walks of life of a much more urban nation.

The progressive social and political reforms of the Revolution diminished in force and scope as military dictatorships took control from 1970 until 1982. The following decade saw hyperinflation that reputedly broke world records, succeeded by a Jeffrey Sachs-designed structural adjustment that shook the nation via the wholesale privatization of state industries (including, most importantly, the mines), and severe fiscal tightening. As is usually the case with “shock therapy,” the poorest sectors suffered most, and in this case their difficulties were exacerbated by a severe drought that pushed many highland people, such as future president Evo Morales, to large cities or to eastern valleys where there were better prospects cultivating coca, an industry that had expanded rapidly under the military regime.

As the century drew to a close amid celebrations and protests of the quatercentenary of European “discovery” of America, people increasingly thought and talked about the 1952 Revolution as incomplete. Yes, the peasantry was free, Indians no longer had a different legal status than whites and *mestizos*, and there was universal adult suffrage; yet, it was equally clear that most indigenous people were not enjoying positions of power or influence after 400 years of colonial rule.

The belief that Indians would disappear in the face of modernization began to erode in the 1990s, and significant symbolic gestures were made towards the idea of a multicultural Bolivia. As the century drew to a close, however, traditional political classes still clung to state power, apparently unaware of the depths of the discontent that was developing.

Revolution Redux

Social and political pressures started to build in the last decades of the previous century around areas of tension such as migration and urban expansion. Since the 1952 Revolution,

indigenous people have been migrating to cities in massive numbers. The city of El Alto, adjacent to the capital, La Paz, was nothing more than a few farming homesteads in the early 1970s. According to the 2001 census the population stands at 650,000, not much smaller than La Paz itself, at 800,000.

Rapid urbanization, of course, is not unique to Bolivia. What is significant about the Bolivian experience is the increasing propensity for urban residents to identify as indigenous. Twenty years ago it could safely be assumed that urban migrants were following the pattern of previous generations and becoming *mestizos*. Even into the 1990s few people in towns and cities identified themselves as indigenous or even as Aymaras and Quechuas; Aymara and Quechua were principally used to refer to languages people might speak, not ethnic or national designations.

Yet today, the majority of the residents of El Alto overwhelmingly identify as indigenous (as does half of La Paz's population). El Alto became famous for its well-organized protests that helped bring Morales to power. These recent migrants or children of migrants live between the Aymara-speaking agricultural world of their parents or grandparents dominated by community life and ritual, and the Spanish-speaking world of schooled but underemployed people struggling to make a living. Their experiences and frustrations are shared by many other urban and semi-urban people in Bolivia.

Another important sector is that composed of coca growers. Coca growers share much with the new urban populations of Bolivia: they are displaced people living in between the rooted agricultural world of their parents and places where communities have to be created in a much more monetized world with high consumption values. If one add the fact that coca growers suffer sustained and often violent repression, it is not surprising that they became politically organized and motivated. Their interests are not, however, obviously aligned with city migrants or the traditional peasantry and, in fact,

there has been profound animosity between urban and rural Aymara people in the area of La Paz and the predominantly Quechua-speaking coca growers led by Evo Morales. They were, nevertheless, opposed to many state policies and a political system that excluded indigenous people.

Politics during this period of rapid social change were dominated by three parties that alternated power: the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement which was the party that led the 1952 Revolution; the *Acción Democrática Nacionalista* (Nationalist Democratic Action); and the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario* (Movement of the Revolutionary Left). ADN and MIR twice shared power in coalition.

Despite two of the parties having “revolutionary” in their titles, all three presided over a liberalizing of the Bolivian economy: workers’ rights were eroded; state assets were sold off to foreign investors; trade deals were struck allowing competitive imports to undermine Bolivian producers; and, more than ever, Bolivians were exposed to the vagaries of world markets. Moreover, politics on the national level continued to be controlled by a white social and economic elite. As a consequence, peasants and, increasingly, urban people, began organizing new movements in protest against the state and political parties that marginalized them. For much of the 1980s and 1990s these opposition groups were largely politically irrelevant and particularly prone to infighting. During this time they were increasingly organizing not only as peasants, miners, and coca growers, but as indigenous people.

The emergence of new kinds of indigenous identity was one of a number of factors that combined to expose the weakness of the state and the party political system, leading to increasing outright challenge to the state. In April 2000 there began a “Water War” in the city of Cochabamba around the sale of water resources in the region to a multinational company, Bechtel. The *Coordinadora de Agua* was principally led by middle class

residents of the city who quickly managed to form a robust coalition that included urban residents (middle as well as working class) and small- and large-scale water users from the surrounding area.

During the two years of unrest before Bechtel quit Cochabamba, the language of protest became increasingly refined: it invoked indigenous imagery with greater frequency and also represented itself with the language of a protest against globalization. The Water War won support from other parts of the country, notably from the coca growers under Evo Morales' leadership, and from peasants in the highlands around La Paz where the Aymara leader, Felipe Quispe, successfully blockaded the capital city several times.

The demands expressed by these sectors were no longer specifically about water in Cochabamba but about broader issues to do with political neglect, corruption, marginalization, poverty, and the exploitation of natural resources. These concerns were increasingly expressed in terms of an historical injustice, a direct consequence of European colonization.

Evo Morales' coca growers were, at least initially, concerned with the more specific issues of coca eradication policies, especially those implemented under the presidency of former dictator Hugo Bánzer who was elected in 1997, rather than broader social or political issues. Under shrill pressure from the U.S. embassy, Bánzer's successors in power (Tito Quiroga of his AND party and Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada of the MNR) similarly pursued vigorous and violent policies against the coca growers causing numerous deaths. It is worth recalling that at this time Evo Morales was known domestically as the leader of the coca-growers and not as an indigenous leader as such; internationally, he was becoming aware of the virtues of being recognized as an indigenous leader.

Tensions continued to rise through the presidential elections in 2002, not least because Evo Morales gained the second largest number of votes. His surprising result was in part due to the

unexpected boost given him by the U.S. Ambassador's calling him a "narcoterrorist" and threatening to withhold aid from Bolivia should the population elect Morales. This undiplomatic threat in the context of an election so incensed Bolivian opinion that it gave Morales increasing support, a fact he himself has readily acknowledged.

Sánchez de Lozada won the presidential election with little over a quarter of the popular vote. He nevertheless acted boldly to sell Bolivian gas to a California-based corporation via a Chilean refinery. The subsequent "Gas War" as it came to be known was supported by large sectors of the population, such as miners, urban groups, leftists, coca growers, peasants, and intellectuals for whom it became a proxy issue around which to protest the distance of government from the people, the loss of national sovereignty, and more generalized hostility towards the United States and global capitalism. Increasingly diverse issues came to be represented in terms of a broad indigenous political sensibility, a political umbrella that was far broader and much more ambitious than historically defined indigenous issues such as land rights or identity politics. Indigeneity was developing into a political positioning and a powerful one at that.

Matters came to a head in "Black October" 2003 when the army killed 60 unarmed protestors and the nation erupted in protest against the government. Sánchez de Lozada was branded a murderer and fled to the United States, which gave him sanctuary and refused to extradite him to stand trial. His vice president held onto power until the following year when elections were held and Evo Morales won with a clear and unprecedented majority of the vote. It was the first time in modern history that a single candidate received anything close to a majority of the votes cast for Bolivian president.

A New Revolution

The 2005 election has been seen by many in Bolivia and elsewhere as completing the 1952 Revolution. If the latter was fought by Indians but led by *mestizos* and whites, the former was overwhelmingly directed by indigenous people; moreover, indigenous people were assertive and confident in their indigeneity. The principal pillars of the 1952 Revolution (land reform and education) together turned the monolingual indigenous majority into a predominantly urban and Spanish-speaking people. Yet contrary to expectations, many of these people do not closely identify with or assimilate to the mores and aspirations of the white middle and upper classes.

It is among these sectors that Evo Morales finds his most solid base. His reforms are directed at improving their health and their children's access to schools. He also articulates a sense of national pride, more specifically an indigenous national pride, that helps bolster people against the cruelties of class discrimination within Bolivia and harsh exposure to global processes.

Evo Morales is not simply an indigenous figurehead or a successful politician who just happens to be indigenous: there is an overwhelming indigenous presence in the cabinet and ministries; and for the first time since the 16th century indigenous people in Bolivia formally control the state, albeit a notoriously weak one. This certainly makes for political tensions: not only does the old party elite resent its loss of power, but the large landowners in the eastern part of the country (an area that mostly escaped land reform) are pushing for increasing autonomy from the state. This resource-rich part of the country continues to be governed by an elite which presents itself as white in contrast to the indigenous highlanders. At the time of this writing, constitutional reform is paralyzed largely because of intense maneuvering by departments arguing for increased autonomy, as well as controversies over the Supreme Court. In

many rural and urban areas the “Evo Effect” is being felt, not only in terms of more health and other resources to villages and poor urban areas, but in the presence of an optimism that positive change is possible. Many indigenous people see the president as one who is addressing their concerns.

It would be a mistake to see Morales’ success as a simple case of an indigenous majority taking power, not least because the wealth of the country has by no means changed hands. Morales’ skill lies in his ability to speak to the concerns of a people across a broad spectrum: leftists, peasants, industrial workers, recent migrants, those concerned about globalization and those seeking political change. The changes he is proposing are consequently both broad and profound and are prompting a widespread reevaluation of some of the basic ideas of what it means to be Bolivian.

This Volume

The papers in this volume explore various aspects of the changing social and political landscape of Bolivia. A key feature of the new political order is a change in traditional power relations. The model of the Indian either in a servile position to powerful people or violently opposing them has changed: it is indigenous people who now wield power. The phrase “indigenous people in power” represents a jarring contradiction with respect to the previous five centuries. Being an Indian has meant precisely being on the inferior side of a power relationship; and for hundreds of years those Indians who acquired power were reclassified as *mestizos*. Indians historically have had access to power through patron-client relations where they are expected to act the role of the servile and sycophantic *llunk’u*. At the same time, as Albro notes in this volume, the *llunk’u* is stigmatized for kowtowing to the patron class and for being a shifty and mistrustful client. Calling someone a *llunk’u*

is a powerful insult and one of the worst that could be thrown at an indigenous politician because it implies a selling out of ethnic pride and an adoption of a colonial relationship.

As Albro details, the stigma applied to the *llunk'u* serves as a means to criticize hierarchical relations as well as an assertion of indigenous masculinity and integrity with which it contrasts. Problems arise, however, for the new indigenous political order that seeks to erase hierarchical relationships, especially those with an ethnic or racial tint to them, even as it presents itself as a worthy patron, in the form of the state, to its citizens. This is one of the many contradictions at the heart of Morales' project as he attempts to overturn centuries-old power relations rooted in racial and gendered modes of exercising power. Rockefeller, in his paper, confronts a similar paradox. Morales owes his success to the support of several social movements from different sectors of Bolivia's population, and their support was rewarded with key posts in ministries of the state. However, many of these social movements are antagonistic towards the state and continue to agitate against it. For Rockefeller this is an example of Leninist-Trotskyite "dual power" inherent in many revolutionary situations. The concept of "dual power" is useful in understanding contemporary Bolivia because it underlines the revolutionary nature of the many demands made by the social movements and the delicate maneuvering Evo Morales and his government have to undergo to direct an effective state even as their supporters oppose it. Perhaps more significantly is the fact that by including the social movements within government, current powers can claim to represent the people of Bolivia in electoral terms and simultaneously claim to speak for the "masses" who, as recent history shows, are capable of mobilizing to bring down governments. The sources of the dual power can also therefore be seen as offering a double legitimacy.

One of the sources of Evo Morales' legitimacy is his ability to speak for the indigenous people of Bolivia. This apparently

straightforward statement obscures an immensely complex set of positions and identities which come under "indigenous." Morales has partly capitalized on and partly produced an expansion of indigenous identity in Bolivia.

In the past, "Indian" was a word of abuse and never self-ascribed; and even as recently as 20 years ago, with the exception of a few intellectuals, few people in Bolivia used the term "indigenous" to refer to themselves. In the last census a majority of Bolivia's population self-identified as indigenous, including large sections of the urban population. In his contribution, Canessa explores some of the contexts of this new and politically powerful identity, which in Bolivia has the capacity to unite a majority of the nation. He demonstrates that it can mean very different things to different people: indigenous symbols can be used in different and even contradictory ways; and the language of indigeneity used in urban areas and by indigenous politicians may be radically different to the way "obviously" indigenous people think of themselves.

In his new Bolivian republic Morales is opening up the corridors of power not only to previously excluded indigenous people but to many other sectors of the population that have been excluded. Clearly inspired by the Zapatistas in Mexico, indigenists in Bolivia are drawing on their experiences as marginalized peoples to develop an indigenous positioning, a particular political stance from which to view the world. Due to their historical experiences, it is argued, indigenous people have privileged perspectives on issues relating to the environment, globalization and marginalization. Accordingly, they assert a kinship with oppressed groups everywhere: women, workers, racial and sexual minorities, and so on. To be sure, indigenous movements are by no means immune from sexism, racism and homophobia but the brand of indigeneity espoused by Morales (and Comandante Marcos of the Zapatistas) attempts to reach out to a broad array of oppressed groups.

Susan Paulson's paper demonstrates how the personal is political in Bolivia and the ways in which family, kinship and citizenship are being re-imagined. Historically in Bolivia the (white) heterosexual family has been at the center of the imagined nation and contained profound assumptions about female agency, employment, and sexual desire, among other things. The Indian family, in contrast, was deemed disturbingly problematic. The strength of women and their apparent disregard for modern housekeeping were issues that exercised the minds of politicians in the 20th century. Morales, as Rockefeller points out in this issue, is committed to refounding the Republic and opening up power to the previously disenfranchised. As Paulson shows, the Morales government has given women's groups and sexual minorities unprecedented access to power and their voices are being heard as never before. This is not to say that forms of repression and discrimination have been abandoned but the indigenous revolution has opened the spaces to imagine a new Bolivia not only in terms of political power but also in terms of social relations, domestic arrangements, and a new intimate and political kinship. The publicly emerging forms of kinship and family that Paulson describes are much more than mere effects of a liberal environment. They draw on deep traditions of connection and collaboration that for some time were overshadowed by the hierarchical models of male-headed nuclear family, peasant union and political party. And, as these more modern structures erode, they contribute to discussions and formations of new kinds of social and political bonds.

As Canessa notes in his paper, the new indigenous positioning is as much a claim to justice as it is an assertion of ethnicity; and this claim to justice pulls a wide and laden net. Indeed, it would need to since Morales' success draws on a broad group of quite diverse social groups united in their claims to justice.

As constitutional reform falters and internal opposition builds against the government, it seems likely that the hopes with which the Morales administration was elected will not all

be realized. It is hard to imagine, however, that Bolivia will easily return to a situation in which the indigenous majority of the population was systematically excluded from power and taken for granted by political parties. Economic power continues to lie in the hands of a white elite but it is possible to believe that the country has indeed entered a postcolonial era.