

“The Other Gods Were Crying”

Stories of Rebellion in the Bolivian Highlands

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Between 2000–2005, from Chapare to Cochabamba to El Alto, the Bolivian highlands were the site of major uprisings by indigenous people and poor people against the military, government, and neoliberal development projects. In 2000, the people of Cochabamba defeated Bechtel corporation’s attempts to privatize their water. In 2003, the *Alteños* laid siege to the capital and prevented the privatization of the country’s natural gas. On other occasions, indigenous communities kicked out or killed government officials, coca growers defeated the illegalization of their traditional crop, and people from various backgrounds blockaded highways and paralyzed the country to kick out one government after another. These uprisings were continuations of powerful struggles that took place throughout the ’90s.

But in 2006, MAS, a socialist political party formed by a convergence of social movements, came into power, headed by Evo Morales, the first indigenous president in the history of the continent, and the first Bolivian leader to receive an absolute majority of the vote in an open election. Because of the history of discrimination against the country’s indigenous majority, a comparison could be made to the election of Obama, but the MAS victory is not comparable to just another political party coming into power. A closer analogy would be if the US Social Forum, Greenpeace, Critical Resistance, and Food Not Bombs came together to form a political party, took 60% of the vote, and launched Angela Davis into the White House.

Since 2006, little has been the same. A large amount of land redistribution has taken place, and students, pregnant women, retired people and the elderly receive an unprecedented amount of government welfare, funded by natural gas revenues. But the most notable change has been the total pacification and institutionalization

of the social movements, such that now, capitalist development projects worse than any imagined under the military dictatorships are being proposed with hardly any opposition.

To get to the bottom of this occurrence, we talked to unionists, hiphop artists, street theater groups, Aymara storytellers, student anarchists, Quechua rebels, anarchy-feminists, NGO-workers, and others. The synthesis that developed between all these different and sometimes opposed perspectives radically informed my understanding of movement democracy, recuperation, and struggle.

Casa COMPA

Our first stop in Bolivia was at Casa COMPA in El Alto. (El Alto is a slum city built and organized by the residents themselves, who squatted land on the high plateau above the capital, La Paz). COMPA is a cultural center and home to a theater group heavily involved in popular education throughout the city. The building itself is impressive: seven stories tall, built by the residents themselves on top of the original house, with an interactive theater, offices, workshop rooms, a radio, a café, a hostel, and residences. They represent an important slice of the social movements in Bolivia. On the one hand, they use theater of the oppressed and popular education to communicate with a large part of Bolivian society, spreading indigenous histories and histories of resistance, fortifying a street culture by doing performances, illegally at times, in the streets, hosting theater groups for neighborhood youth, and frequently going out into the world with travelling roadshows, visits to schools, and so forth. On the other hand they have adopted a more conciliatory posture to the government, especially now that Evo is in charge, and relied on money from progressive European governments and NGOs, and well meaning volunteers from Europe.

A great example of this contradiction was one theater performance we were invited to. A group of El Alto school children about ten years old were brought to the in-house theater, where they were treated to a participatory performance about the history of Bolivia, starting with the cultures of the Aymara and Quechua, going through colonization and genocide, and ending with mining and the miners' resistance. The performance was impressive, and the children thoroughly engaged. The theater itself was a damn fine piece of work; it included an underground section where a replica of the mine tunnels had been constructed. At that point in the play the children were given hard hats and picks and sent into the tunnels as the plot progressed. However, the play's desired conclusions were deliberately moderated. At the point in the story where the miners rise up, the slogans suggested to the children were "higher wages" and "better tools," even though just ten minutes earlier they had seen how the indigenous inhabitants were basically coerced into the mines. The usual pragmatic justifications we were given afterwards, when we made a general criticism, were based on the age of the kids

and what they're presumably able to understand, and these justifications were blatantly false. One kid, without prompting, had yelled out that they should attack the mine boss, whereas another, at the end of the play, when the boss has been run out, asked why they weren't doing anything about the mine owner, a character who had disappeared earlier in the play. Both of these kids were ignored. When we pointed this out, we were told that many schools would not bring their students here if they were too radical. The parents might complain.

The fact that those who made the play chose to limit the desires expressed within the play to improvements within the existing system rather than encouraging an unbounded process of imagination and self-guided definition of freedom and happiness, nor even acknowledging freedom and happiness as ideal goals in any rebellious action, is really tragic. This tragedy is a typical one, and the age-old mistake of moderating one's own politics in order to reach a larger audience (*through the standard and easier means*—this is the part of the formulation that is always left unsaid) reflects a weak analysis that was widely evident in Bolivian social movements. It seemed to us that this weakness might be related to the easy and total co-optation of these movements, and people we would meet later suggested the same thing. Nonetheless, one would have to be an insensitive purist to ignore that this project of popular education does much to create a context more favorable to rebellion. Those who know the truth of their history and the heritage of their government need only overcome the patently uninspired thinking of union bureaucrats. The call of “everything for everyone!” or “libertad y tierra” overcomes that of “higher wages” if one understands that not so long ago everything did belong to everyone, and this only changed through a violent process of genocide that led directly to the current system.

Tomas' Story

The COMPA people were gracious enough to arrange some meetings for us, and one day we were able to talk to an elderly man from El Alto, who had years of experience with the neighborhood councils that have played a major role in the city's self-organization and in its various rebellions. We all sat down in a spare room at the theater house, and he began to narrate:

In 2003 I fought, like a good *Alteño*, in the Gas War. From 2003 to 2004 I was the president of the *junta vecinal*, the neighborhood council, in the *barrio* of Santiago Segundo. I've lived there for years. Many of us in that neighborhood are miners.

The neighborhood councils elect their leaders, six members who serve two years. They're not paid, and it operates on an honor system. Some presidents, however, are eternal. Every two years they stand for election again. The purpose of the councils is to serve all the *compañeros*, but some people get confused and think its purpose is to serve them by giving them connections to find jobs for their family members. I would say in 30% of the councils, the elected leaders are eternal politi-

cians, and in the other 70% they follow the true spirit of the thing and leave office after two years.

In the good councils, every ninety days there is an assembly to inform everyone about upcoming works and the state of the neighborhood. There is good participation, debate. Council presidents have been kicked out before by the neighbors, for not carrying out their obligations.

So basically, every Bolivian receives 102 bolivianos [about \$15] a year as a sort of tax rebate. The neighborhood council decides where this money goes and the state allocates the money, but they can also reject proposed works. So the mayor of a particular district can sabotage a neighborhood council for political reasons. In this way political parties have influence in the neighborhood councils. The councils are independent but they have to curry the favor of the political party the local mayor belongs to. So political parties will often sabotage the work of a neighborhood council that leans toward a different political persuasion. They can do this by denying their funding requests.

All of the work on infrastructure projects is done by the neighbors themselves. Everyone helps out. Those who don't work feed those who do. But the money to buy the materials now comes in the form of these tax rebates, administered by the government. For a long time now they've been getting this money. But in the beginning the neighborhood councils were started by the neighbors themselves, going all the way back to the very beginning of El Alto, in the 1970s. The councils soon organized into the FEJUVE, La Federación de Juntas Vecinales. The FEJUVE has always been political, since the Banzer dictatorship.

Me, I'm a Communist. The Communists prepared me for the struggle back when I worked in the mines. Then there was the coup that installed General Banzer in 1971. I was arrested and exiled. They had us in the airport, a group of us locked in this sort of a box, like they use for cargo or mail. But there was a little crack I could see through, and there in the airport I saw Klaus Barbie [the Nazi war criminal who escaped to Bolivia with the help of the Catholic Church and worked for the CIA] along with some military officers. So I told the others, "there's Klaus Barbie out there with the military," and we all started singing workers' songs, patriotic songs, very loudly. They beat us severely. Then they put us on the plane and flew us out to the desert. I was in their concentration camps for nine months. South of Oruro. I escaped in 1972.

In the camps we only got one plate of food a week, and we had to eat grass. Once I was ratted out for talking about escaping and they put me in the hole for 3 days. Finally I escaped by walking for three days across the mountains. I had to drink my own urine to survive. It was simple, you just pee in your hat and then drink it up. Then you keep walking. I wasn't captured because they were sure I died in those mountains. But I escaped and went back to work in the mines.

Oh, I was talking about FEJUVE, wasn't it? So, FEJUVE has to approve the new presidents elected into the councils, and the Federation itself is governed by an eight-member board elected at their congress from among the council presidents. They serve for two years also. The FEJUVE is super vigilant. They take complaints, make sure everything is working properly. Well, sometimes they also side with a particular mayor and ignore a complaint...

The FEJUVE meet every six months. They also have debates, about social themes (they talk about all of society) or economic themes (like what to do with the money) or political themes (like, is the government doing a good job?). They also debate things like the World Bank.

When Goni [Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, President of Bolivia from 2002–2003, whose tenure saw major popular clashes; he was finally pushed out of power by major disturbances] was investing in all the mines and taking them over, the FEJUVE started a blockade. They would meet to decide whether to organize a protest march, a blockade, or something else, and this time they voted on an indefinite blockade and informed the base. The majority of the councils ratified the proposal, so it was decided. All the councils had to support it. Yes, participation was obligatory. This is called democracy.

The Gas War started in 2003 when the government sent the military against some campesinos who were being framed for an attack on gringo tourists. [At this time, the government wanted to sell the gas on the US market] Some campesinos were killed. So they called a general strike. I stayed here to fight, because the enemy is down below [in La Paz, the capital]. We fought with arrows, rocks, clubs, and slingshots. Some of the miners had dynamite. And we used fireworks to communicate, as a code or a warning, to call for help when a military column was advancing. One day I got shot in the stomach. And many of the young miners, they didn't have experience with dynamite, so they injured themselves by lighting it wrong or not throwing it fast enough. The press said we had grenades but it was all just dynamite.

After we ran out of fireworks we had to use rocks. If we saw the military coming we'd take a rock and start banging it against a metal pole, like this, and everyone would come running to help repel them. And we made the military retreat. We won the Gas War. Now the gas is ours.

My neighborhood, Santiago Segundo, was the site of the first clashes, and the first deaths. In all they killed 61 [67] of us, but we didn't back down.

I looked down and saw that my finger was blown off. This was the 14th of October. Around six in the evening. The conflict began in the countryside on September 20, on October 8 FEJUVE had their meeting and decided on a blockade. They met in the morning, the individual councils ratified it later in the day, and by nightfall the barricades went up. Fighting began the next day.

On October 12 they got me in the legs with a shotgun. See? You see the scars? The other time [on the 14th] we were fighting off these troops trying to come up the hill. It was six in the evening, that's when I noticed my finger had been blown off. So I ran off and hid in a corner, and I felt that my leg was wet. I thought I'd pissed myself. Then I saw it was blood, and I found a hole in my stomach. The bullet went in one side, out the other, and took my finger off on the way out. See?

And in the end, we won. Before the Gas War, the natural gas was completely confiscated by transnationals. Now the gas is in reserves so we'll still control it in the future. There's more money in social security now, money for students, money for pregnant women.

Evo is a good man. He knows what he's doing. He knows how to spend the money. I support MAS. You know the miners are organizing a march soon. Not to oppose the government, no. It's a march for dignity, and for social security.

[...]

At this point, Tomas starts talking about his escape from the concentration camp again, and his political education with the Communists. When we ask him a question about anarchists in Bolivia, he says "Anarchy has always existed in humanity. Do you know what syndical anarchy is? Syndical anarchy is when a leader boasts and builds monuments without having the money to do it..." We try to disagree with this caricature but Tomas doesn't seem to notice. He only repeats himself and reiterates some of the earlier points in his story until our interview is concluded.

Yawar's Story

A few days after arriving in El Alto we meet Yawar, an Aymara storyteller, grandfather, and puruma. He invites us to stay with him, so we move out of Casa COMPA and pitch a tent on his little plot of land, where he is preparing a garden and a not-school.

The Aymara people have been living in what they now call Bolivia for thousands of years, at least 4 or 5 centuries since before the start of the current counting, the Gregorian calendar. We're older than the Inca. We've always been agriculturalists, growing potatoes, quinoa, herding llamas. Starting many centuries ago, the Aymara started to build a great city, called Tiwanaku. We had developed our own literature, our own science, our own astronomy, a great civilization. Now the Aymara are not one single people. We've never been centralized. Traditionally we organize in ayllu, who live together in a community and are all related. Then a constellation of hundreds of ayllu organize together in a marca. The Aymara nation consists of many marca, and those who live in one region speak differently from those who live in another. We also have many gods. Each ayllu has its wak'a, which is a sacred place where the energy of the earth flows especially strong. We make offerings, asking them to provide for us. Here in my garden I have an illa, which is like an amulet. See, when I come in, I give it a little bit of alcohol. And here is the chakana, oriented to the four directions, the different winds. This started

with agriculture. Before, the hunter-gatherers didn't have to pay as much attention to these natural cycles, but the agriculturalists were dependent on the rain, on the soil, on a whole process of months of cultivation to feed themselves for the year. So they began to take care of the gods, in a spirit of reciprocity.

When they started to build their great civilization, this required centralization. Different *marca* were brought together, the lands of different communities were absorbed. This was done largely by the shamans. The shamans of more powerful gods became more powerful. Eventually, they developed a theocracy, and centralized the religion under one God, the Sun God. The Aymara have always worshipped Pachamama, Mother Earth. Pacha is earth, but also space, and time. But as they were building the city of Tiwanaku, between the 4th and 7th centuries on the Gregorian calendar, they centralized religion and political power, under the Sun God.

Many Aymara are inflexible, rigid, when it comes to religion. They turn rites into ceremonies, and then you have specialized priests. This is something I fight against.

The Aymara engaged in this experiment with centralization, they tried worshipping only one God, and all the other gods were crying. But then we decided we didn't want centralization, we didn't want a state. So the people simply abandoned it. Tiwanaku is incomplete. They left it unfinished and went back to worshipping all their gods and living in decentralized *ayllu*. So as an anarchist I don't need stories from Europe, about Bakunin, the workers. I'm not a worker, I don't work. I can find plenty of stories of rebellion in my own history.

After the Aymara abandoned Tiwanaku, there were hundreds of years of anarchy, a wonderful time in our history. There was no state, no market. The old paths, going all across the continent, remained in existence, and people traded things, but it wasn't for war, it wasn't for profit. They called it the *capacñan*. *Capac* means wisdom, the kind that comes from the elders, and *ñan* is a path. So people would travel all around what they're calling "South America" simply to learn. To trade stories. To meet with other cultures. To grow wiser. It was a beautiful time.

The Inca came later. They were a group of *Quechua*. They resurrected this myth of the Sun God, and thought of themselves as descendents of the Sun. They created an empire that went all the way from Venezuela to Chile. They weren't so obsessed with war though. They had an army, but first they would send people, like diplomats, to the communities on their border, to the *wak'a*, the sacred places, and make offerings, and invite them to incorporate into the Inca empire. But many people didn't want to be integrated. Some of the Aymara, also the *Guaraní*, different hunter-gatherer peoples living in the jungles, very anti-authoritarian.

During the centuries after Tiwanaku, there were also the *Chukila*. They were hunter-gatherers. For me they were the first libertarians. They saw agriculture all

around them, they could have started farming if they had wanted to, but they decided to remain hunter-gatherers, living up in the mountains, hunting guanaco. Nomads. Never sleeping in the same place two nights in a row. I hope some day I can be that free!

Sometimes they would trade with the Aymara. We make our cloths from the wool of the llama, it's very thick, warm. But the vicuña has such a fine wool, the looms they would use needed a much smaller shed. You could put a length of the cloth on your hand and it would slip between your fingers. It was highly prized. But the vicuña were wild, so how would they get the fur? With the help of the Chukila. They would take their flutes and play music, and the vicuña would fall in love with them, and then the Chukila along with Aymara people from the villages would make a circle, a corral, around the vicuña. They would kill one as a sacrifice, and then shear the others, and let them out of the circle.

Look at this cloth here. Two colors, the light and the dark. Masculine and feminine. Everything in the universe is feminine or masculine. The earth is feminine, the sun is masculine. For me, that mountain there is feminine, I call her grandmother. For others, the hills are masculine. Notice that with these two colors, the light part has a dark border, and the dark part has a light border. With us, the other is always included, it's never excluded.

Living in a community can be very oppressive. You have to get married, have children, act a certain way. If you're not married, you're not considered a person. But traditionally there would be roles for people who didn't fit in. There were always people on the margins. There were the kéwa, what now we might call homosexuals. They were respected, important. When there were fights or disputes, especially fights between a husband and wife, they would call the kéwa to mediate the dispute. It was thought that they had both the feminine side and masculine side, in equilibrium, inside themselves, so they could understand both sides.

It's pretty clear that there needs to be a pachakuti, a revolution, when the order of the whole world changes. But it will be the women who do it. It needs to be a feminine revolution. The masculine revolutions failed. The USSR, Cuba, all masculine revolutions. That's not how it's going to be this time. The women know better, they understand how it needs to happen. Me, I try to listen to my feminine side more.

Evo is just another macho revolutionary. That's what's wrong with him. Since he's been president, he's opened how many football stadiums, but not one school! Did you know, he's single. Not married! How could he possibly be a good leader? The leader is not one, it is a pair, male and female, balanced. At the end of the day they go home and argue about all the different decisions, and he gets her perspective and can form more balanced ideas. That's how it traditionally works. But Evo, he's just a macho. Just like everyone else, he's swallowed the lie of development,

of progress. What a joke. They talk about poverty. They'll look at someone living high on the altiplano, far from everything, in a little brick house, and say, "how poor that person is!" But those people make their own clothes, grow their own food. People in the cities don't know how to do that. Who's poor? Progress. Ha!

Do you see those hills there? The cliff? It's beautiful, yes, but that's all from erosion. It used to be covered in trees, but with colonization, they cut them all down. The Aymara knew how to mine gold and silver, they conducted some mining, but with the colonizers it was much more, and they cut down the trees to fuel the furnaces and melt the metals. The trees were almost wiped out, and then they started to come back. Just in time for the railroad. The best fuel for the trains was the charcoal from the kewiña, the native tree here. I've planted a couple in my garden. This one is a year old. In five years, it will only be up to here, up to my waist. But just wait: I can show you pictures of old kewiña, high in the mountains, they're immense, unbelievably tall and broad, five hundred years old.

The colonizers planted pine and eucalyptus, exotic species that take up all the water, and they call it a forest. It's terrible. That's why the whole mountainside is eroded.

Up on that mountain pass is where they caught Tupac Kutari in 1781. He was fighting the Spanish, and going to the Yungas, and he was betrayed and captured there, and then executed. I ask the young Aymara in the neighborhood if they know where Tupac was captured, and none of them do. I try to teach the children, and tell them stories. Too much education, that's the problem. They get sent to school, and it destroys their brains. The children like me, and because I get along well with the children, I'm okay with the parents, even though I don't work.

Did you know the llamas taught us about astronomy? The people near the salt flats of Uyuni would make caravans, bringing salt to the Yungas. They would load up a great big line of a hundred llamas with a block of salt on each side. The journey would take a month or two, they would go once a year, it was a big occasion. A certain llama, sort of like the chief, would lead the caravan. People had noticed that the llamas would never get lost, when going over the salt flats, over the mountains and the altiplano. At night the head driver would go to the chief llama and see how he was always looking up at the sky, watching the stars. What are you looking at, llama? They found the stars in the eyes of the llamas. After that, we began to look at the stars, and learn how to navigate by them. We were vegetarian, then. We drank the milk of the llamas but we would never kill them.

Nowadays, we've forgotten lots of our history. The ground gets covered in cement, and people lose their connection with Pachamama. It's because the Aymara just want to be gringos. They want a car, status. With Evo, the roads of this neighborhood got paved. Before it was just dirt. Now the people here are proud of their paved road. That's why I'm starting this garden. I'll bring the children here, teach

them about the earth, tell them stories. The old people still remember our history, so we have to share that.

There's still a strong tradition of rebellion among the Aymara. Like the Gas War in 2003, they rose up. Dispersed power, just like before. They also kicked out Goni. He had to flee in a helicopter. He's living in the US now. We've kicked out other presidents as well. Dispersing power. But then after these incredible uprisings, people calm down again and everything goes back to how it was before. People aren't so daring, in the meantime.

We don't have anarchist prisoners here. There's not really an anarchist offensive. In my mind anarchism is an urban phenomenon. Here in Bolivia we have anarcho-syndicalists who are just academics, talking about theory. How can you be an anarcho-syndicalist if you're not working? Then there's the anarcho-punks, all very young, in it for just a few years and then they move on. The older ones, the anarcho-syndicalists, say, "Come here, we'll teach you everything you need to know. We have the best theories." And the anarcho-punks tell them to fuck off. They're very influenced by John Zerzan, Hakim Bey, they believe in total liberty, but after a few years they give up.

Right now, we're in a moment of learning, telling stories, recovering our history. We're looking for libertarian roots in our own culture. It's a long process, but soon we'll find it. Soon we'll be ready.

There's a word in Aymara, "puruma." When I found this word, I was very excited. It means "those who live without king or law." Yes! That's me! "Those who live without electricity or police." Electricity or police. You see, it was a Spaniard who translated Aymara into Spanish, and he brought his own cultural views with him, his eurocentrism. King, police, we didn't have those things. But still you can see, puruma is a very good word to describe us. I often call myself an anarchist, but really I'm puruma. We have our own libertarian traditions, we don't need to identify with a European workers' movement. Anyways, I'm against work. In Aymara, in Quechua, in Mapudungun, none of these languages had a word for work. There was effort, creation. But work creates capital. If we all stop working, Capital will collapse.

It's very prestigious to identify as an anarchist right now. After Seattle, the G8. The social movements that have nearly brought down neoliberalism are not Marxist-Leninist groups like in the past, they're largely anarchist groups. It's not so prestigious to be puruma. We don't belong to a global family like the anarchists do. But I'm trying, little by little, to spread the term.

I think it makes more sense for us. Anarchism, it's against the state, against the market, and that's all very good, but there needs to be more than destruction. Permanent creation, that's what I believe in. And we're creating our struggle, recreating our people and our history, little by little.

Talking with the La Paz Anarchists

People in La Paz tend to view El Alto with fear or suspicion. It has a reputation for being a dangerous place even to set foot. Many alteños themselves internalized this reputation. But that changed in 2003, an anarchist hiphop artist from El Alto tells us. Since fighting and winning the Gas War, she says, there is an increasing amount of alteño pride. All throughout those years, El Alto was the site of major struggles, and generalized defiance of authority. One of the worst things about the Morales regime, she says, is the near total co-optation of this previously rebellious social fabric. Though Evo is not from El Alto, he is indigenous, like most alteños, and he does come from the base of the social movements, so many people feel that one of their own has become president. But beyond this personal identification, MAS has been highly successful at integrating social movements into the functioning of the government, by working with them directly, buying them off, or giving social movement representatives government posts. She invites us to talk about this more at the social center she works with, but unfortunately that day we've already planned to meet with an anarchist group in La Paz.

The La Paz anarchist organization is one of the few groups in the country working against a new mega-development project, a major highway that would cross Bolivia from Brazil to Peru and Chile. This project is a perfect, tragic example of the failure of the anti-globalization movement. That worldwide movement achieved a number of specific victories, and more importantly it animated and spread struggles globally, facilitating the transfer of experiences from countries with active, strong struggles during the '80s to countries that had been pacified by then. But on the whole, the movement adopted a gravely mistaken strategy of populist communication, presenting superficial, comforting analyses that could more easily build majoritarian support. As such, movement groupings tended to opt for an analysis that faulted neoliberalism and imperialism, rather than capitalism as a whole. In other words, foreign investment or economic policies instituted by a new wave of politicians were to blame, and not the entire system to its very core.

Evo's highway springs from an agreement between MAS and the Brazilian government under the Workers Party. The capital is coming from a Brazilian development bank, and the construction companies are Brazilian. In other words it doesn't fit the negative image of development popularized by the anti-globalization movement. It's not an IMF project being carried out by US corporations. South American capital has developed to the point that now, projects such as this can be carried out domestically. And in fact the national chauvinism implicit in the crusade against neoliberalism (we can recall the mourning of the loss of the nation-state in the popular documentary *Fourth World War*) would encourage people to take pride in such a development project because it's not a foreign venture. This is symmetrical to how Leninism reproduced capitalism by glorifying production, pretending that

if production were nominally in the hands of the workers it would serve different ends.

Many socialist chauvinists try to defend their populism by painting Brazil as the new regional imperialist power, the new wealthy foreign enemy. One wonders what excuse they'll come up with in ten years when Bolivian capital has developed sufficiently to carry out projects like this one without any outside investment.

Perhaps the most flagrant element of the highway is that its route takes it through TIPNIS, a large national park that is a vital reserve for Amazonian biodiversity. Furthermore, directly thanks to struggles waged in the '90s, it is not a pristine nature park according to the eurocentric models, forcibly cleansed of all human presence; TIPNIS is the home of three indigenous nations who have traditionally lived there, and continue to do so in a sustainable fashion. The highway will not only cut the forest in half, it will encourage and allow illegal logging and coca plantations that will likely destroy whatever remains after construction.

The rightwing governments of Bolivia's past could not have carried out such an audacious attack against their peoples without sparking unquenchable, bloody resistance. It is the triumph of the Left that they have succeeded where their opponents have failed.

The La Paz anarchists tell us story after story illustrating how MAS has accomplished this pacification. Social movement leaders have been bought off, and social movements have been turned against one another. When a group of workers organized a protest march, MAS got an indigenous group to blockade a road and stop them. Social movements that are disciplined to follow an NGO model, converting them into single issue struggles that any clever politician can turn against each other, exploiting conflicting interests and shortages of funding.

Throughout it all, outside Bolivia as much as inside it, the Morales regime has been protected by the same Stalinist dichotomy that has protected leftwing dictatorships around the world. Anyone who criticizes the government is accused of being in the pay of the rightwing or the CIA. In the early years of Evo's presidency, ordinary people would shout the La Paz anarchists off the streets as "imperialists," any time they tried to protest.

Meanwhile, MAS's modest accomplishments have been exaggerated as revolutionary. A fair amount of land has been redistributed, but even larger land redistributions were carried out by military dictatorships in Bolivia's past. It is common to hear people talk about Bolivia's gas as being "nationalized," but the La Paz anarchists pointed out that just as many multinationals are involved as before in the extraction, processing, and commercialization of Bolivia's gas. The only difference is that the government is taxing these companies a little more, and putting the money in a welfare fund that amounts to a few dozen or up to a few hundred dollars a year for students, pregnant women, and the elderly.

Arguably the most extreme change the new government has accomplished is to clean the image of the police and the military. The same institutions that people fought against year after year, that people knew to be murderous and oppressive, are now celebrated patriotically. The La Paz anarchists warn us of a growing militarism in Bolivia. They say that military service is now the essential rite of passage for boys to be accepted as men.

Evo initially faced strong opposition from the Right, but he has proven himself a great reconciler, and much of the rightwing is now integrated into the government. In several situations early in his presidency when there were clashes between popular movements and the Right, Evo had the police intervene on the side of the rightwingers, or stand back and let the well armed conservatives smash the protestors.

Anarcha-feminists we later spoke with in Cochabamba would tell us that fascist hooligans were also integrated by the State. In the past, when they wanted to take the streets they would have to fight these hooligans, and they still did, but now the fascists were taking part in pro-government rallies and backed by the police.

We hear about a new law that would allow Evo to shut down media organizations, and a broad new hate crime law that could allow the government to prosecute its critics. Our new comrades also tell us of the riots in February 2003. Unlike those of October, the February uprising did not fit within any progressive agenda, and didn't claim any victory. It sparked off when the police in La Paz went on strike against low pay and tax hikes. In the absence of State authority, people began taking the streets and attacking symbols of power. The military were called in to restore order, and there were a number of armed clashes between the military and police, and between the military and the people. In two days of fighting on the 12th and 13th, 16 people were killed, along with 10 cops and 5 soldiers.

The La Paz anarchists are a small group, but through protests and propaganda they are spreading a libertarian critique of authority, building resistance against the highway, and working in solidarity with indigenous struggles (most of the group are themselves indigenous).

They believe it is a revolutionary necessity to get organized, and they shared an interesting critique of insurrectionary anarchism with us. One member of their group said that insurrectionary anarchism may be necessary in other contexts, but in Bolivia society still retains enough strength and independence that it could shut down the State simply by self-organizing. After the recuperation carried out by MAS, they fully recognize the need for a critique of the Left, the NGOs, and democratic organization, but this critique can be carried within the activity of revolutionary self-organization. Unlike in wealthier, more thoroughly colonized countries, the argument can be made that the very social fabric needs to be destroyed,

but in Bolivia, unlike elsewhere, the government could simply be blockaded out of existence.

After all, the city of El Alto built itself, and numerous indigenous communities in the past years have simply lynched their mayor and declared themselves autonomous. We seemed to share a critique of the Left and of democracy. If there is plenty in their society worth saving, and enough social strength to save it, it makes sense that a revolution here would take a completely different course.

The Water Committees

Our contact in Cochabamba arranged for us to visit a number of Water Committees. It was a tedious day, especially after a sleepless night on the bus crashing down from the Altiplano, but it helped me clarify a number of things.

The Water Committees have often been hailed as a revolutionary example of self-organization, and I was eager to see the extent to which this was true, and to see how this revolutionary potential was faring under the MAS government. Well before the Water War in 2000, neighborhoods in the southern zone of the city, which had no access to water, began self-organizing to build their own pumps, cisterns, piping, and sewage. Dozens of neighborhoods accomplished this feat, and won themselves a much better quality of living than those neighborhoods that did not self-organize and continued to buy the expensive water shipped in daily by tanker trucks. This self-organization, in the spirit of solidarity and mutual aid, undoubtedly also created a strong foundation for the Water War, during which these same neighbors barricaded the streets and fought against the police to protest the selling of SEMAPA, the city water company, to the powerful transnational Bechtel. They won their battle, providing one of the clearest examples of a reversal of the supposedly inevitable tide of neoliberalism.

We visited three different water committees that day. One was a largely technical showing of a new cistern, whereas the other two meetings took place in the decision-making centers of their respective neighborhoods. These two provided an important contrast that delineated the range of possibility within the committees generally.

At the first, which was blatantly the more popular, directly democratic one, we stumbled into a misunderstanding that illuminated a number of weaknesses in the better of the committees. We happened to arrive the day of a general meeting. The meeting was held in an open courtyard and it seemed the entire neighborhood had turned out to participate. Over a hundred people were there, young and old, and they were swearing in the newly elected delegates, holding them at their word to serve the entire community, and opining profusely about various problems, decisions, and questions they faced. When the group of us gringos arrived on the bus with delegates from other water committees who were making rounds, as they do periodically, to meet other water committees and exchange experiences, someone

evidently told one of the local delegates that we were representatives from some French NGO that had sent them money. The announcement was made and we were given seats of honor before we understood what was happening, before we could object and correct the error, and subsequently I panicked and played along rather than create a scene in front of the whole group, though in retrospect it wouldn't have been a big deal to explain who we really were.

I was mortified. The situation was extremely embarrassing and acutely uncomfortable, but it illustrated far better than any casual observation could have how readily the committee itself created an internal hierarchy and catered to the assumed status of foreign NGO reps they thought had sent money. Clearly, in this most democratic of spaces, money (and the right citizenship) brought a power unmatched by participation as a *compañero* in the project itself. Interestingly, one person in our group who didn't look like a *gringa* slipped away from us before being seated in the front row of the circle. She spent the whole meeting talking with some grandmothers in the back, who eagerly told her that the meetings were boring, the same people always spoke, and they were never women. This, mind you, was in the better committee.

At the other water committee, which exemplified bureaucratic democracy, we were brought into a newly constructed hall—similar in shape and layout to an evangelical church. The building served as their office and meeting hall, and they had paid for it with the monthly water dues given by all the members.

Members of all the committees pay an entrance fee which includes installation, often a hundred dollars or more, which is a major investment for Bolivia's poor, but feasible for those families that at least have a house which can be hooked up to the water network. This fee helps pay for the equipment and materials necessary for laying pipe and wells, though aid from foreign NGOs and governments also pays for much of those costs. After joining each family must pay a monthly rate which goes to maintenance of infrastructure and above all to fuel costs for the water pumps. The dues are significantly cheaper than what they would have to pay otherwise, but evidently some of the committees run a surplus.

This particular committee adopted an aesthetic of success that closely mirrored the ruling system. Their new office was very professional, and the three delegates who met us there carried themselves like experts and dressed in the best suits people of their class could afford. Unlike in the other committee, no one else from the neighborhood was there to meet us.

The most chilling thing they told us, and they said it without a hint of shame, was that if a family were a day late in paying their dues, they'd have their water cut off, and subsequently if any neighboring family gave them water, that household would also have its water cut off.

In other words, they were intentionally structuring their water system to kill the very ethic of solidarity that had made it all possible in the first place.

A Conversation with Carlos and Oscar

Later, we got to talk with Carlos, an older anarchist from the university, and Oscar, an influential union organizer who authored the book *Water War!* We talked about the total co-optation that had been accomplished by the Morales regime, the state of the water committees, and the trajectory of struggle in Bolivia. It was an exciting talk because both of them had been very much a part of the social movement that had defeated itself by winning, Oscar had even been a comrade of Evo's, and both of them expressed the same disappointment and transformation of their analysis that we encountered elsewhere.

They describe social movements that have been "neutralized or co-opted." Carlos tells how Evo Morales is planning a "Great Industrial Leap Forward," by building megadams, highways, and mines. In the case of a new lithium mine, he got the area farmers' organization to sign on in exchange for some of the profits. In another case he supported a Japanese mining company exploiting silver and zinc in an arid climate and destroying the region through their massive water consumption, by buying off the farmers' organization that was fighting the project.

Oscar says, "There's no space to speak, act, or mobilize without being shut down, delegitimized, or maligned by the government. [...] What they care about most is money, money to complete their promises of development. So what the government says is, where's the money? And it's in the mines, it's in the oil, it's in building highways. Nothing else interests them, just the money. Water—they don't do anything about that anymore. Health, work, housing... But outwardly they have a very anti-imperialist discourse, and anyone who disagrees with them is accused of being funded by the Right."

The two criticize the discourse, shared by the government and social movements, of sustainable development, an unboundedly optimistic triumphalism based on the assumption that it would be possible to develop and industrialize while conserving resources and protecting people. Oscar points out that the Workers Party in Brazil, under Lula, is a major influence on this kind of discourse, and Brazil itself has become a terrible regional power whose energy demands are the source of much Bolivian economic policy. An important part of their shared discourse is the image that "the State will deliver."

Knowing how involved Oscar has been with the water committees, I gently mention what seemed to us as a compatibility between the committees and authoritarian systems. We had only spent one day visiting the committees, and I didn't want to arrogantly dismiss them when they had also played an important role in past struggles and enabled neighbors to assure their own survival. But Oscar wasn't so gentle. He and Carlos agree that the water committees as much as the syndicates

showed an “absolute lack of internal democracy,” and were “organizations that recreate mini-states.” Oscar adds that “the state structure obliges them to function that way” (as institutions).

We agree that in the infinity of people’s ability to self-organize exists the perfect capacity to organize themselves a new state. Marcela, Oscar’s sister, who arranged this conversation and enters it later on, adds that the water committees arose out of the absence of the State to meet a fundamental need that the State would otherwise have supplied (were it not for its policy of negligence towards the poor southern zone of the city).

We talk about how it is impossible to separate access to water from the decision-making that organizes that access. The neighborhoods are steadily being pushed out of the decision-making processes, and parallel to this the water prices are rising. They have defeated themselves, in part, by opposing neoliberalism without opposing capitalism. “The privatization of the water was defeated,” points out Oscar. The city water company is public, but the water is still commercialized, so people are losing access to it all over again.

At one point I take issue with their use of democracy as a desirable ideal, as when they criticize the water committees or syndicates for lacking internal democracy. I argue that it was exactly their internal democracy—central decision-making authority, unitary and singular outcomes, majority rule, delegation of authority, and compromise among all existing social elements rather than subversion of powerful elements (three of these five characteristics would also exist in the most ideal of direct democratic systems)—that made them recognizable to and co-optable by the State. Because of this centralization and unification of decision-making, the water committees can enact a political discipline that is a precondition for being ruled. In the absence of government, the force that this unified will or the elected delegates must follow is that of the whole of assembled neighbors. But with the arrival of a government interested in co-opting and funding them, the elected delegates will follow that higher power, and a unified political will lacking delegates could also be shunted into the government program unless the neighborhood has specifically cultivated an antagonism towards the State. Otherwise, it would be another social element to compromise with, and as the party with the most resources to bring to the table, the State could make sure any compromise fit well within its program.

I argue that it was a lack of critique of democracy that allowed the Bolivian social movements, which had such a robust practice and analysis in defense of repression, to be defeated so severely. It’s hard to tell if they’re humoring me or genuinely agree with my argument, but they express the need for such an analysis to develop and say that many comrades are moving in that direction. Carlos offers the argument that “when you introduce the discourse of rights, you’re calling on the State” to co-opt you.

They bring up the example of some groups that are trying to help each other get access to water without the State. “It’s a question of strengthening our own capacities.”

Later, we’re able to talk with Fredy, who is helping such a group, la Escuela Andina de Agua, the Andean Water School. The purpose of this group is to preserve indigenous Andean wisdom and technologies of water management, which are communitarian and interrelated with different relations to the land, the mountains, and the forests.

One of the communities participating in this initiative is Comunidad Flores Ranca. The community is 60 years old, has 2000 inhabitants, supports itself through agriculture, and meets its water needs through deep wells. They grow part of their food for the market, and part to feed themselves. They have individual garden plots and communal space too (pastures and the wells). They used to have communal land, even after the agrarian reform, but little by little they gave it away to new families that had emigrated closer to the city. “There’s a contradiction or ambivalence between communalism and individualism.” Those who come back from Argentina or Spain generally want the municipality to manage the water, whereas those who stayed in Bolivia are more likely to value the idea of communal self-management. In any case, water costs five times more when the government administers it, so at the moment it’s a moot argument.

“Community is created via the water,” Fredy tells us. “The land no longer creates community because it’s individually owned.” The Escuela tries to encourage ecological usage of water and also to strengthen the communal vision of water. Previously, the communities in the region got their water from natural springs, the river, and canals. Then everyone had their personal drinking wells, fifteen meters deep, but now it’s all dried up, and only very deep wells can reach the water.

Looking at the history of the water committees, a number of contradictions arise. They defeated themselves by collaborating with the government, yet they arose in order to meet a basic need: access to water. You can’t criticize someone who doesn’t have access to water for talking with the government or receiving money if that’s the surest way to get water.

Taking this to its conclusions, it becomes apparent that one can neither ethically nor realistically criticize what people do in order to satisfy their basic needs. If I were starving to death, I might very well steal food from my own friend in order to stay alive. I would certainly be happier with myself if I refused to turn against those who were in the same condition as I was, but I would also be dead, and I can’t really advocate an ethics that is so unsustainable.

Because survival relativizes ethics to the point of meaninglessness, it becomes apparent that revolutionary projects cannot be founded on basic needs. As long as the State holds all the guns and all the social wealth, they will be able to guarantee

survival far better than we can. Furthermore, excepting certain historical moments in certain geographic regions, capitalism wants us to survive. What is revolutionary is exactly everything that goes beyond survival, and that at key points actually makes survival more difficult.

We cannot criticize those who rob others for their own survival; what we can do is refuse to glorify them as revolutionary. The water committees are engaged in vital work, and they carry it out while wearing the mask of solidarity, which they discard when it becomes uncomfortable. But they, just like our individualist thief, are robbing their survival from the mouths of others: in this case, from their grandchildren or possibly even their children. As long as we use capitalism as the guarantor of our survival, we are robbing our survival from others—from other species, other peoples, and from the future. If capitalism is not abolished, soon there will be no more water around Cochabamba, as the drying wells readily attest. The water committees are an impressive example of self-organization, and they are doing necessary work, but their project is not a revolutionary one and it deserves the exact same level of admiration as the actions of one who wins his water by stealing it from his neighbors. What they gain in (temporary) solidarity, they lack in bravery, for their act of theft, working all together, getting support from NGOs and then the government, stealing from a defenseless future, is probably the path of least resistance.

The revolutionary project, in this situation, is the more difficult one, that insists on creating different relationships within the community and with the land as a less pragmatic, more utopian means for acquiring water.

Las Imillas

With some help from Yawar, we were able to make contact with Las Imillas, a group of Quechua and Aymara anarcho-feminists in Cochabamba. I was excited about the meeting because I had felt so little affinity with the radical feminists we had met in La Paz, for their essentialism, their emphasis on advancing women as individual property owners, their exclusion of trans women, and disapproval of women who love men.

We met with them a couple times, once at the new social center they are creating, and learned about the effect of the MAS victory on the feminist movement. “The women’s movement here was taken apart [...] all co-opted,” by MAS, incorporated “and turned into just another arm of the government.” They describe an opportunistic “utilization” of women within the new government. Meanwhile, MAS policy has also set them back in a number of ways.

The use of gas money to provide welfare for, among others, pregnant women, has been one of Evo’s most lauded advances. Yet this gift, like most government programs, is a trojan horse. In a country in which most people, especially indigenous women, give birth at home and self-organize the births, the welfare money

has been used as a weapon to institutionalize daily life. Women only receive the money if they get a medical check-up every month of the pregnancy and if they give birth in a hospital. Thus, the Bolivian government can improve its development statistics, tout its progressive character, win more funding and positive propaganda abroad, and destroy women's autonomy and traditional birthing all in one go. "It's a form of State control of women's bodies." Additionally, if you have a second baby within 2 years, they take away all your benefit money (which clearly is only a disincentive for poor women, mostly indigenous).

We also talked about the water committees. "In the water committees, the women didn't participate much [...] But when there's a strike or a mobilization or a struggle it's the women who sustain it [...] cooking, feeding everyone, carrying the banners, confronting the police, fighting."

There are usually more women present at the water committee meetings, but they participate less. If a woman talks in a meeting and she's wrong about something, the men laugh at her, so they don't feel comfortable talking. On the other hand, whatever themes are discussed in the assembly are also debated in the homes, so in many families the women tell their men what to say in the following assembly, because they are in charge of daily affairs and understand them better. Then the men will go to the assemblies and express this opinion as though it were their own.

Another project Las Imillas are involved in is La Rebelion de las Wak'a. "Our project is about recovering historical memory, identity." Small groups of Aymara and Quechua people across Bolivia are participating in this rebellion, including Yawar back in La Paz. The wak'a, the holy sites of the indigenous communities, retained their power long after colonization. The Catholics built their churches and cathedrals on top of the wak'a because in the end it was the only way they could get the native peoples to go to church (and in the process catholicism was transformed dramatically, as locals converted the various saints into their old deities).

The rebellion of the wak'a is a long-term project aimed at recovering these sacred sites. At the moment, people are focusing on reminding everyone what the wak'a are, and where they are, with the use of art, including theater but especially graffiti murals and posters. We saw a number of churches around Cochabamba decorated with beautiful murals depicting scenes from indigenous culture or colonization or struggle. Once they have built up the power to do so, the idea is to physically recover the wak'a, one by one.

Bolivia is clearly at a low point in its social struggles, but the conversations we had with compañeros there made me feel undauntedly optimistic. They had a long-term perspective, and a perseverance that can enable them to overcome recuperation just as they have overcome State repression time and again in recent

years. Many of the democratic models of organization that facilitated their defeat are models that still retain validity for many anti-authoritarians in North America. The water committees and the neighborhood councils played an important role in creating solidarity, sustaining life, and strengthening social struggles, but once they had helped create this force and the State changed its strategy from repression to recuperation, these same organizations began to kill solidarity and to channel a rebellious vitality into unthinking subservience, in part through dynamics that they exhibited from the beginning. North American anarchists who champion these as revolutionary institutions of dual power are padding the resumé of a false analysis.

By critically engaging with these social movements and illuminating the possibility of entirely different relationships, I think the Bolivian comrades will develop a practice better suited to resisting recuperation. Because we came to them in a spirit of reciprocity, bringing what aid we could, and eager to learn all they wanted to share with us, they greeted us with open arms and I think we all came away stronger. By continuing to build relationships of solidarity, we can help deprive their progressive government of its international fame, and learn a great deal from their experiences of struggle, strengthening our own struggle in the process.

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John Severino
“The Other Gods Were Crying”
Stories of Rebellion in the Bolivian Highlands
December 11, 2010

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