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**Brooke Larson
Stony Brook University**

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**Democratic Progress or Peril?
Indigenous and Popular Mobilization in Bolivia.**

The mouse that roared: Bolivia’s outsized significance to Europe and the US.

Historically, Bolivia has occupied a critical place in the shifting geopolitical politics of Latin America. The manifold reasons for its strategic importance are familiar to most of us: Bolivia’s licit and illicit export commodities (from silver through to industrial tin and, most recently, to hydrocarbons and coca) have periodically swept this landlocked nation into the swift currents of transnational trade. Further, Bolivia’s geopolitical location in the interior of the continent, together with its volatile political history, have long captured the political and military attention of the US, as well as Cuba in their expansionary phases (recall the sudden US interest in Bolivian tin during WWII and its strategic “soft” intervention in Bolivia after 1952; or Che Guevara’s 1967 mission to create two, three, many Vietnams, starting in Bolivia’s jungles). More recently, Bolivia has emerged as a fascinating, and troubling, case for scholars, policymakers, and hands-

on practitioners interested in the structural challenges of democracy and development: its endemic poverty, radical inequalities of class and race, deep regional divisions, and cyclical dependence on mono-exports.

The overarching question that vexes us is this: how can an internally fractured, desperately poor nation like Bolivia build a sustainable democratic order capable of addressing those endemic social problems? The question is complicated by the fact that Bolivia is Latin America's most indigenous nation (64% of Bolivians self-identified as being members of an ethnic group in the most recent census). Since the 1980s, many popular movements have traded on that fact. Indeed, as I will argue, Bolivia's return to democratic rule in the 1980s unleashed an array of popular and indigenous movements, which have since reconfigured around the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). Today, it is the most powerful indigenous movement in Latin America, and since 2006 the MAS has become the new driver of democratic politics and social policy in Bolivia. Thus, Evo Morales' recent rise to power on the wings of grassroots movements represents a fundamental turning point in the broadening of participatory democracy in that difficult social and institutional environment.

In this short "think piece," I want to cast historical light on the democratizing process that brought indigenous and labor movements into power. In so doing, I will highlight what I believe to be some of the most compelling challenges confronting this fragile democracy today. As a historian, I am uncomfortable with predictive and prescriptive forms of analysis, but I do think Bolivia's recent experiences with neoliberalism and democratic reform provide a rich context for understanding the daunting challenges facing Evo Morales and his ethnopopulist party today.

Bolivia in the 1980s and 1990s: Latin America's poster child of neoliberalism.

If we are to understand the radical rupture that neoliberalism represented for Bolivia after the return to democracy in 1982, we need to recall how it redefined the mission of the Bolivia state vis-à-vis the economy and civil society. Bolivia's 1952 nationalist-populist revolution had transformed the government from being an instrument of the tiny mining and agricultural elite to a populist-corporatist state beholden to a broader citizenry. Although the '52 state eventually reneged on many of its social goals, it did create the institutional basis for coalitional politics, broader political representation (universal rights to suffrage and literacy were legalized), and delivery of "social rights" to militant constituencies of mineworkers and peasants (through the nationalization of mines, land redistribution, the extension of public schooling, and cultural reforms celebrating Bolivia's mixed "mestizo" heritage, etc.) That historic moment of populist-corporatist rule came to an abrupt halt in 1964, when the military overthrew the MNR government and ruled for the next 18 years. As with her Southern Cone neighbors, Bolivia's struggle for re-democratization was a contestatory and uneven process.

The restoration of civilian rule in 1982 reinstated parties and allowed civil society to flourish, but it quashed the social goals of the 1952 state and redefined the Bolivian

state. The return to civilian rule marked a dramatic turning point in state-society relations: the 1952 corporatist, developmental model of statism now, in 1982, morphed into a neoliberal regulatory model of statehood. The state's primary goals were to control Bolivia's hyperinflation, encourage the creation of efficient enterprises, reduce corruption, induce foreign investment, and increase economic growth. The results of Bolivia's first round of privatization were decidedly mixed. Monetary stabilization brought hyperinflation under control after 1985, and many urban middle class Bolivians quickly jumped on neoliberal-globalization bandwagon. But the closure of large state mines proved catastrophic to the most militant sector of Bolivia's working class, as 23,000 out of 30,000 miners were sacked. Thousands of ex-miners ended up as coca farmers in the eastern semi-tropical regions of El Chapare and Santa Cruz. Meanwhile, massive unemployment followed in the public sector, with 10,000 government employees and nearly 25,000 rural teachers losing their jobs. In short, neoliberalism's first cycle of structural adjustment plunged the lower income sectors into deeper poverty. The scenario was alarming in the late 1980s: real wages throughout the country fell sharply; unemployment soared; severe drought spread across the arid western highlands, dislocating tens of thousands of indigenous peasants; rural migration was transforming the center of Bolivian cities, as destitute Indian day laborers and beggars converged on downtown La Paz and other cities. Such profound social dislocations (what many Bolivian intellectuals called "savage neoliberalism") forced the Bolivian government to renege on many of its market-driven goals and reach out to the multitude of political parties now beginning to appear on the scene. Problems of governability forced the Paz Zamora government (1989-1993) to deploy traditional political tools (multiparty alliances, patronage, and pact making) to secure middle-class support and shore up the state. Weak social institutions and political imperatives therefore undercut a basic neoliberal goal to shrink the government bureaucracy, eliminate corruption, and end patronage. Systemic corruption continued to undermine government legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Bolivians.

In the 1990s, Bolivia's version of neoliberal restructuring took an innovative turn under President Sánchez de Losada (aka "Goni"). Under his 1994 Law of Capitalization, the government sold off the largest state-owned firms (Bolivian oil company, YPFB; national railroad and airlines; telephone and electric companies, etc.), while retaining minority public ownership of those firms. The idea behind capitalization was to channel the proceeds into pensions and social security for the nation's most vulnerable sectors of the population. Backed by the IMF and World Bank, the capitalization plan was part of Goni's larger political program to turn savage capitalism into "neoliberalism with a human face," as he sought to secure the hegemony of market capitalism in this polarizing political climate. Concretely, Goni's government auctioned off half of the five largest state-owned firms to multinational corporations, keeping 50% of the shares for the "shareholding citizens" of Bolivia (ie., pensioners and social security recipients). The so-called *Plan de Todos* put forth utopian projects: a flood of foreign and domestic capital investment, a spurt in GDP growth rates up to 11% by 1997, the rapid growth of jobs.

Again, as scholars look back on Bolivia's second cycle of neoliberalism, they argue about its mixed and ultimately disappointing results. There is no time to delve into

details here, but suffice it to say that the policy of Capitalization did effect a massive infusion of foreign investment in Bolivia's petrochemical export industry—namely, oil and gas exploration and pipeline construction. Dramatically, the full scope of Bolivia's vast hydrocarbon ("gas") reserves was discovered. But the new export boom in oil and gas (a capital-intensive enclave economy) provided little stimulus to the broader economy. Predicted growth rates fell far short of the mark: between 1989 and 1996, average annual growth was about 4%, but fell to 2% in the late 1990s. Moreover, partial privatization triggered massive firings on a scale not seen since the 1980s. Finally, but not least, the government revenues were not sufficient to sustain the new welfare system. Indeed, government revenues declined precipitously in the late 1990s, leaving the Banzer government (1997-2001) with huge budget deficits. By the late 1990s, Bolivia was in for another devastating round of privatization, tax hikes, budget cuts, and overall belt-tightening. Neoliberalism's "human face" had turned ugly, once again.

Taking stock of neoliberalism's boom-bust cycle in the 1990s, Bolivian critics and policy makers repudiated what they saw as "pervasive market failures, new forms of social polarization, and a dramatic intensification of uneven development at all spatial scales." (Brenner and Theodore, "Cities and Geographies..." in K and F 2002: 122). Certainly, popular perceptions held that neoliberalism's "trickle down" agenda had gone into reverse by the end of the decade, redistributing income upwards towards the top of Bolivia's rigid class hierarchy and within the international entrepreneurial elite. What was also starkly apparent by 1999, however, was that the correlation of political forces had drastically changed over the 1980s and 1990s, with the resurgence of grassroots participatory politics and revitalized civil society. In short, state-society relations had shifted rather silently but dramatically during the whole neoliberal experiment of the late 1980s and 1990s. It is to this political reconfiguration of civil society under neoliberalism that I now turn.

Return of Bolivia's civil society, grassroots style.

One of deeper ironies of Bolivian neoliberalism is that it opened up political spaces for new social groups to press their claims on the government and search for progressive and radical alternatives to the neoliberal order. The rising tide of popular mobilization was, of course, built into the very process of redemocratization taking place across the Southern Cone region in the 1980s and 1990s. But in Bolivia, there was a paradoxical shift away from militant trade unionism in the mining sector (due to the massive sacking of mineworkers under the privatization policies of the 1980s) towards a broad indigenous movement based on the Aymara *altiplano*, where peasants, laborers, and a few indigenous intellectuals forged the militant *katarista* movement with links to trade unions, political parties, and the university. The recomposition of the *katarista* Indian movement had a crucial impact in the cultural sphere, by bringing issues and identities of *indigeneity* back into the public sphere after a long hiatus in which nationalist-populist narratives and class ideologies had dominated political discourse. After the 1952 revolution, Bolivia was refashioned as a unifying "mestizo" nation, while the ethnic question was relegated to the margins of national consciousness. All that

changed in the 1980s with “*el retorno del indio*.” Aymara-led movements in and around the capital of La Paz had a crucial impact on shaping popular consciousness and identity policies through Aymara-language radio programs, street-theater, bilingual books, oral history workshops, and the spread of literacy and adult education. The roots of Bolivia’s resurgent indigenous movement, today the most powerful one in South America, grew in the subsoil of the Aymara movement during the transition to liberal democracy and market-driven reforms.

But if we are to understand the reinsertion of indigenous and popular sectors into the political process, we need to take another look at neoliberalism’s “structural adjustments”—this time in the sphere of political reform and social institutions. During the 1990s, Bolivia’s increasingly bankrupt party system gave way to new forms of popular representation, new political subjects, and new conflicts. Bolivia and other democratizing regions in Latin America witnessed the explosive growth of grassroots organization and strategies of mediation that articulated new political constituencies. Indigenous groups, peasant producer associations, *barrio* organizations, subsets of workers and women, environmental and human rights activists, evangelical groups, and the plethora of NGOs that began to inhabit much of rural Bolivia in the 1990s all populated the interstices between civil society and the state, as they fashioned new forms of sociability, identity, and political agenda. Here, I borrow the idea of “associative network” from Doug Chalmers et al. (1997) to argue that those forms and forums of popular representation originated in the base, percolating upwards towards the institutional spheres of power and political influence. This resurgence of popular politics and networks did not, however, mark the return to Bolivia’s old-style populist-corporatist model under a centralized interventionist state (although political patronage still served as a vital instrument of cooptation and control). Rather, the emergence of new forms of popular representation grew out of the need to solve social problems and to press their specific, issue-oriented agendas into the political sphere. They rushed in to fill the vacuum left by the bankruptcy of the traditional party system and by the destruction of militant trade unionism and class-based politics.

But the mushrooming of grassroots politics and networks in Bolivia during the 1990s also reflected the growing pressure on the central government to shift revenues (and slough off the intractable problems of development and governance) to Bolivia’s regional and municipal governments. Goni’s 1994 Law of Popular Participation (LPP) had a measurable impact on political decentralization: for example, the LPP committed 20% of national tax revenues to municipal governments to cover the cost of roads, schools, health clinics, irrigation systems, etc. The LPP recognized grassroots organizations, and by 1997 some 15,000 rural peasant communities, unions, and *ayllus* were pursuing territorial agendas to recover their rights to land. The LPP also created a host of new municipalities in remote rural areas that now could compete for federal funds to jump-start local development projects. Finally, the LPP introduced electoral reform at the municipal level, opening up Bolivia’s 311 municipalities to indigenous and *campesino* representatives for the first time. Another key player to benefit from administrative decentralization was the ubiquitous NGO, which often served to leverage (or control) the agenda of rural grassroots associations. Indeed, many scholars have

argued that the overall impact of NGOs in Bolivia during the 1990s was to steer grassroots organizations away from mobilizing activities in order to promote specific market-friendly projects in harmony with the IMF's globalization agenda, and that Goni's highly-touted agenda of multiculturalism (including his promotion of bilingual educational) was but part of his effort to put a human face on neoliberalism's painful economic policies.

Perhaps, but it is equally clear that neoliberalism's *political reforms* opened the way for a deeper, more participatory form of civil society and democracy. Bolivia's popular and indigenous sector exploded on the national stage in the 1999-2000, in the famous Water War of Cochabamba. In the view of many social analysts, this massive grassroots movement protesting the sale of Cochabamba's municipal water system to an international consortium (including the US company, Bechtel) marked the end of Bolivia as the IMF's poster child of neoliberalism. For, it triggered a series of popular mobilizations that peaked in October 2003, with nation-wide *bloqueos*, marches, hunger strikes, and military counterattacks. It sent Goni into exile and later forced his successor, Carlos Mesa, to resign. These events presaged the transformation of the MAS from social movement into a broad, inclusionary "ethnopolitist" party, which catapulted Evo Morales into power in the landslide election of December 2005.

Thus, paradoxically, the social and institutional transformations that neoliberalism engendered, or inspired, in the *political sphere* opened the way for the direct political participation by people who now challenge the basic precepts of neoliberal capitalism. The election of Bolivia's first Indian to the presidency is not purely symbolic, although indigeneity has proven to be a powerful mobilizing and legitimizing tool that the MAS has skillfully deployed. The electoral victory of MAS represents, I would argue, a fundamental shift state-society relations, the composition of the state, and its political orientation. Consequently, it has raised sharp dilemmas in the sphere of public policy—such fundamental issues as: how to promote economic development with equity; dismantle the century-old structures of racial discrimination; carry out an agrarian reform program; rewrite the political "rules of the game" in the shape of a new, more inclusive political constitution; and not least, strengthen and reform the state apparatus in the face of growing political and regional polarization. The MAS agenda is, by any measure, an ambitious (perhaps utopian) one, and the jury is still out. But already there have been significant successes (notably, Morales renegotiation of the terms under which Bolivia is exporting gas to Brazil, Argentina, and Spain), as well as some serious setbacks (dramatically, the implosion of the Constitutional Assembly). In light of Bolivia's ongoing social tensions and the constitutional meltdown, the cohesion and viability of the nation now seem to be more at risk.

Rather than focus on unfolding political events and prospects for policy reform, however, I want to briefly highlight the unresolved ethnic and regional tensions that have historically burdened the Bolivian nation and that now threaten to create acute problems of governability.

Confronting ethnic and regional tensions.

The persistence of ethnicity in Bolivian society and politics has permeated the development of the nation state and class politics for most of the 20th century. That ethnic politics are not disappearing (in spite of state policies and rhetoric designed to marginalize ethnicity in favor of “mestizo nationalism”) was dramatically demonstrated by the 2001 census, in which 62% of the population self-identified as belonging to an ethnic group (the largest groups being the Quechua (31%) and Aymara (25%), or one of 31 other named indigenous groups distributed mainly through the eastern lowlands). Historically, ethnicity (namely “Indianness”) was created and utilized by Spanish colonial society, and caste divisions were reproduced under republican laws, policies, and practices until the mid-20th century. The 1952 state went a long way towards incorporating illiterate Indians who still constituted the great majority of the population. Universal suffrage, rural schools, agrarian reform, and new forms of *campesino* unionization brought Indians into the nation, as it extended the reach of the state into the countryside. But, as historians have pointed out, the state-directed process of incorporation came at the price of obliterating the cultural identities and communal rights of Bolivia’s massive indigenous population. The legitimate pretext to suppress Indian identities in favor of *campesinización* was part of the effort of the corporatist state to bring the rural masses into government-controlled unions, while also dismantling the discursive apparatus of racial discrimination. But the imposition of a unifying national “mestizo” identity in the 1950s did not obliterate local indigenous identities, as became all too clear when, in the 1980s under Bolivia’s restored democracy, militant indigenous parties merged with labor unions to create the powerful *katarista* movement in the Aymara region in and around La Paz.

The fusion of ethnic and class politics is the mantle that Evo Morales and MAS inherited and redefined, as they moved into power. However, unlike the militant separatist movement of *katarismo*, MAS has harnessed the idea of “indigenous rights” (that is, customary law, or “*usos y costumbres*”) to a broad coalitional agenda that has tried to make common cause with diverse urban popular sectors and the middle class. So while Morales rode into power calling for the “recuperation of national patrimony” and “economic self-determination,” he has located those issues in the resurgent indigenous movement. “The MAS is born and draws its strength from the struggles of the indigenous peoples, for the defense of our identity, which is the coca leaf, for the defense of our land, who is our mother, for the defense of our natural resources, which are our hope and our patrimony.” (Morales, 2004, quoted in Albró 2005: 447) The indigenous struggle has become the basis for broader concepts of *social rights* (to economic livelihood, education, health care, cultural inclusion, etc.) and *national sovereignty* (the repatriation of the nation’s natural resources). MAS’ strategic brilliance in the political campaign was to use indigenous rights as a rallying point to build a broad cross-class coalition of workers, peasants, and progressive sectors of the middle class against the moral bankruptcy of neoliberalism. No surprise, then, that Morales’ presidential inauguration was suffused by rich ethnic symbolism that capitalized on the idea that Bolivia’s first Indian president marked the culmination of 500 years of resistance to colonialism and oppression.

Looking back over 2006, MAS' crucial first year, we can trace the outlines of a public policy agenda driven, in large part, by an effort to redress historical injustices and social marginalization of the rural indigenous population. In brief: 1) Bolivia's increased hydrocarbon revenues will help finance social programs (social security, education, health care) for the 65% of Bolivia's population that lives below the poverty line; 2) the government's new hybrid coca/cocaine strategy celebrates the coca leaf as an indigenous cultural symbol and as a licit commodity with great industrial potential, while maintaining a firm line on drug trafficking (utilizing cooperative, instead of forced, policies of eradication); 3) the government has promoted an Agrarian Reform process, promised more than a decade ago, that would redistribute privately-owned, but uncultivated lands, thus threatening the huge *latifundia* in the eastern frontier regions of Bolivia; and 4) as 2007 opened, the government announced plans to promote job creation, micro-enterprise development, and improved services in health, education, and welfare—all skewed towards the rural poor. Undergirding these domestic reforms is Bolivia's international realignments in trade and diplomacy: its crucial trade relations with Brazil and Argentina, the economic and technical aid and trade packages Bolivia has negotiated with Venezuela (and, to a much lesser extent, Cuba), its growing trade relationship with China and India, and the cancellation of debt to the international credit cartel. These realignments, along with the US's relative disengagement from Latin America, have made the US much less salient to Bolivian domestic politics and policy making.

In spite of these policy outcomes (or potential benefits), MAS increasingly confronts a restive base that expects the rapid delivery of lands, jobs, and social services. Bolivia's highly mobilized popular sector both inside and outside the MAS are positioned, as perhaps never before, to stir up opposition in the case that MAS reneges on its promises to attack poverty, social exclusion, and inequality. Militant labor leaders, like Oscar Olivera who led the 2000 Water War, are deeply critical of the compromises the Morales regime has made to the imperatives of functioning within the parameters of global capitalism, for example. And Morales confronted an acute crisis in October, 2006, when the confrontation between Huanuni's unionized mineworkers and self-employed *cooperativistas* left many people dead. Such violence and disillusionment inevitably feed militant class politics and ethnic fundamentalism, which threaten to boomerang. Indeed, it can be argued that MAS itself has fanned the flames of ethnic fundamentalism with its own fiery rhetoric and symbolism. Nativism rallied the masses and helped define MAS' political identity, but ethnic separatism fundamentally perverts MAS' broad ethnopolitist agenda of coalitional policies and multiethnic inclusion.

Far more dangerous to the democratic order, I would argue, is the longstanding problem of regionalism, newly articulated to a racialist anti-Indian agenda. As historians have shown, the history of regional fragmentation goes back to the 19th century and is exacerbated by the country's three-tiered ecology (western backbone of mountains, intermontane valleys, and vast eastern lowlands) and historically weak infrastructure of roads and rails. In recent times, regional cleavages has acquired a new bipolar dynamic that bifurcates Bolivia into two warring racialized and regionalized identities, the highland indigenous *colla* and the lowland white/mestizo *camba*. This normative

bipolarity of region, race, and national identity has assumed a new, more threatening dimension since the resurgence of indigenous social movements in the highlands. The *cambas* of Santa Cruz (and the whole arc of eastern provinces known colloquially as *la Media Luna*) cast themselves as the nation's forward-looking entrepreneurial elites leading Bolivia into the future, as against the primitive backward-looking *collas* of the western highlands. The discovery of gas in the Tarija region (part of the *Media Luna*), together with Santa Cruz's buoyant agro-export economy, has exacerbated debates over how the nation should be governed and in whose interests. Key disputes include such vital issues, as how the rents from hydrocarbons should be allocated, how much political "autonomy" each department should be granted, and what sort of model of development should be promoted. Reduced to its starkest polarity, this regional conflict is about what sort of nation Bolivia is, or hopes to become. Santa Cruz elites look towards Brazil and capitalist modernity, wishing themselves to be white, modern, and cosmopolitan. Indigenous leaders of the western highlands find inspiration in their own communal past and in popular forms of representation, and they want to impose popular sovereignty over the nation's natural resources.

However much Evo Morales would like to unify the nation under his vision of economic development with equity (with a rural, pro-indigenous twist), the counterforce of regional politics is proving to be one of the most difficult challenges facing the government. The imploding Constitutional Assembly is perhaps the most visible venue in which these polarizing regional, racial, and class tendencies are playing themselves out. For, the elites of the eastern zones have created a political bloc within the Constitutional Assembly to sabotage MAS and promote the cause of "regional autonomy," which would give them greater control over the region's vast territorial and natural resources (everything from lumber and land to hydrocarbons). Most recently, the country's legitimate capital (Sucre, in the south versus La Paz, in the north) has become another flashpoint in the larger theater of regional power struggles. As many scholars have warned, this dynamic of regional/racial dualism has become a powerful new force that could break asunder the viability of Bolivia as unified territorial nation.

Concluding remarks.

I want to end this essay with a few observations about the promises and perils of democracy in Bolivia today. In my view, the rise of MAS, the most powerful indigenous social movement/party in Latin America, has had a largely positive impact on Bolivian democracy because it has leveraged the political influence of traditionally marginalized groups and articulated an economic project of development with equity. Certainly, Bolivia's electoral democracy has been strengthened by the significant increase in voter turnout in indigenous areas over the past five years. It has made mistakes and indulged in excesses, but overall MAS has navigated the transition from social movement to political party with relative success. On the other hand, MAS continues to have a dual character: this mass party grew out of the vigorous social movements and popular citizenship organizations of the 1990s, and it is still articulated to a heterogeneous (and increasingly factious) social movement.

How the MAS manages to sustain good governance in this highly mobilized, extremely polarized society is a challenge of a higher order of magnitude. On balance, the Morales government has accomplished notable domestic reforms, reintegrated itself on favorable terms into South American diplomatic and trading networks, and demonstrated an unusual degree of political transparency. On the other hand, the new regime has not shied away from militant pro-Indian symbolism, which has frightened or alienated much of the urban elite. Politically, the most intense struggle has taken place in the constitutional convention to “refound the nation.” Precious months were lost in the battle over voting procedures, thus squandering the opportunity to bring the country together under the powerful electoral mandate that put Evo into office in the first place. Meanwhile, longstanding tensions between regionalism and centralism have flared up, feeding fuel to the “Regional Autonomy” movement of the *Media Luna* and to right-wing opposition parties like Podemos.

Thus, Bolivia seems to be at a historic impasse over how to rewrite the political rules of the game and, more fundamentally, how to consolidate a centralized state committed to solving Bolivia’s desperate social problems—poverty, inequality, marginality, and discrimination. Symptomatic of this breakdown of unity and dialogue is the resurgence of street politics—marches, *bloqueos*, demonstrations, hunger strikes, and even brawls—being deployed by both MAS and the opposition forces. As a result, racial-ethnic polarization is, once again, on the rise in both the “Indian highlands” and “white lowlands.” Today, it is the convergence of the regional-ethnic schism that constitutes what is, perhaps, the most sinister threat to Bolivia’s fragile democratic order.

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