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Bolivia

Thoughts on Bolivia

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“The battle, the struggle, is permanent. And I want you to know, sisters and brothers, that as long as imperialism exists, as long as capitalism exists, the struggle will continue, not just in Bolivia, not just in Latin America, but across the planet, wherever there are human beings. [...B]ecause, sisters and brothers, uprisings don’t just happen in Bolivia nor in Latin America, but around the world, we can talk about the French Revolution, we can revisit the grand uprisings of many countries, of Africa. That is to say, where there is inequality, where there is injustice, the people rebel, the peoples rise up...” [1]

So spoke Bolivian President Evo Morales on the 7th of November, 2017. It happened to be the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, so his message was fitting. Yet it was also a moment of state ritual during which money generated from natural gas development was transformed into material objects “in this case checks” delivered to the people.

Since 2006, Bolivia’s government has reaped the benefits of natural gas exports. After the neoliberal regime collapsed in 2003, Evo’s election in 2005 led to what Evo’s government called the “nationalization” of gas. More accurately, the government renegotiated contracts with foreign gas companies, yielding a much higher percentage of royalty payments, or rents, to the government.

Over the past 13 years of Evo’s presidency (he has been re-elected three times), these rents have been redistributed in many ways, chief among them these direct deliveries from the president to the people.

Opponents refer to much of this expenditure as waste. In some cases, new airports in small towns and outside stadiums in the high Andean plateau have gone unused. Other money has been spent on grandiose projects, including the aerial cable car system that now criss-crosses the skies of Bolivia’s capital city, La Paz.

One of the most significant buildings is the monumental new “Big House of the People” La Casa Grande del Pueblo which evokes China’s Great Hall of the People. The new skyscraper in La Paz will serve as the presidential palace and residence, complete with karaoke bar, a jacuzzi that holds eight, and a helipad on the roof.

One anarcho-feminist critic, María Galindo, called it a “phallic monument...a fascist vision...[like] a Las Vegas casino... a high-class brothel...or the big house of the master.” As the country geared up for elections in October, 2019, the right-wing opposition held up these projects as evidence of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) mismanagement of the bonanza of gas.

Even so, much of this state largesse is well-received. Usually these transfers involve some public works project: a new soccer stadium with artificial turf field for a small rural community, a local hospital, new computers for a school, an electrical transformer station, a new gas-line installation, or a new gasoline filling station.

On the day he spoke of global revolutionary struggle, Evo was in Potosí, the famous city whose silver mines enriched the Spanish empire. Of late, Potosí had been politically problematic. Civic leaders in the poor department demanded more attention from the government.

Potosí was still a mining department, and mining had not yielded the rents that gas had. Meanwhile the gas-rich departments of Santa Cruz and Tarija were reaping so much from the boom that they had trouble spending, or even

stealing all of it.

Attempting to show that the state distributed to all equally, Evo's strategy in Potosí- was to bypass the opposition leaders and go directly to the local communities.

After his speech, he handed out checks to one hundred or so municipal representatives, monies theoretically destined to fund local projects like bridges and irrigation systems. Evo said once again that day in Potosí- that he was fulfilling the obligation of the state to the people and delivered about two million dollars' worth of checks.

Recalling Revolution

In his speech, Evo repeated what he says often. The conquest of gas "and the goods and resources being delivered to the people" were the result of a longer history of revolutionary struggle against the military dictatorships, U.S. military intervention, and neoliberalism.

As Evo frequently says, he said again, "we have to refresh our memory," to recognize how we fought oppression in the past, a history that has made us much better off today.

This invocation of memory is important, since the uprising in 2003 that led to neoliberalism's collapse is now receding into the past, as are the struggles against U.S. militarism dating to the 1960s, and Evo's own resistance to the U.S.-backed military interventions tied to the so-called "Drug War" in the 1980s and 1990s.

Yet Evo also seeks to produce and enact a kind of revolutionary affect "an emotional invocation of heroic struggle against capitalism and radical change. Evidenced in his own body and history, his words invoke a sense of liberation, and a euphoric embrace of the possibilities of collective struggle. Of course the euphoria is also represented materially in the goods and money that Evo brings to the people, thanks to the conquest of gas.

Furthermore, Evo continues to represent, for many Bolivians, the upheaval of centuries of racial inequality. As the first Indigenous person to occupy the highest seat of power, as many Bolivians will say, "someone like us" now has control of the redistributive levers of the state. This power, by and large, comes from the export of natural gas.

Of course, fossil fuels are a big problem for global warming and other forms of violence that fossil fuel regimes produce, from pollution to war to militarism. And fossil fuels are also, in a global sense, the fuel of contemporary capitalism.

As Andreas Malm has argued, fossil fuels, which can be taken out of their place of origin and moved according to the demands of capital, are central to the process of accumulation (and to the production of CO2).

For Malm, fossil fuels are the bedrock for the "biospheric universalization of capitalist rule." Furthermore, because of the interdependence between the capitalist system and fossil fuels, all capital is fossil capital and all fossil capital is inherently capitalistic.

Yet Evo continually speaks of revolution. From the outside, Evo's MAS government appears to be a radical left alternative to the rightward shift in the region, recently hailed by a writer in *The Nation* as a "socialist success story." Yet in this deep dependence on fossil fuels "and fossil capital" lies the dilemma of revolutionary Bolivia.

Partnering with Global Capital

The renegotiation of the gas contracts that took place in 2006, Evo likes to say, made Bolivia a “partner” (socio) of the foreign firms. As such, this was an improvement on the contractual order envisioned by the neoliberal regime and the World Bank. Yet as partners of multinational capital, Bolivia necessarily aligns a significant portion of its political and economic policy with the demands of multinational (fossil) capital.

Fossil fuel capital, especially as it faces a rising challenge from those of us concerned about the violence it wreaks on people and the earth, is in a hurry of sorts. Fossil capitalism increasingly seeks contractual or financial acceleration, that is, the removal of barriers to rapid monetization of gas.

For example, Evo’s government has moved to weaken indigenous rights to a process called “prior consultation.” Prior consultation is supposed to allow Indigenous organizations some voice in the process of gas exploration and extraction. Yet often a timely affair that takes some months, it’s seen by the industry as a time-consuming obstacle to exploration or drilling operations.

On the other hand, fossil capital needs a political instrument to justify continued exploration and extraction, like Evo and his checkbook. The gas companies also need a government that will tell a convincing story that responds to a collective demand for change in a country known for powerful social uprisings.

In short, fossil fuel companies want to access the gas and monetize as much as possible as fast as possible. Evo, in many ways, does them a service by suggesting that the current moment is the endpoint of revolutionary struggle, rather than a beginning, and that the extraction and sale of gas is itself, a revolutionary, if not socialist act.

In the United States the fossil fuel companies have distorted the public sense of time and change through other various (and nefarious) forms of climate science denialism or stories. Of late, the story is that we need natural gas as a “bridge” to a renewable future. Of course building gas infrastructures will lock us in to destructive levels of CO2 emissions.

Other mechanisms, such as the Trump regime’s regulatory capture of the EPA and other institutions are also prolonging this temporal delay, pushing change further into the future. Rapid monetization and returns for fossil capital and the infrastructures it has built and that it wants to build will lock us further in to dependence while delaying the transition.

Evo Petrolero Emerges

In Bolivia this works through what Evo calls “partnership” with the gas firms, and through Evo’s revolutionary affect, or perhaps more accurately, his revolutionary affectation. From the perspective of fossil capital (fossil time, mobility and freedom in space must take priority), or in political terms something akin to sovereignty, over all other concerns, through any means possible.

In his work delivering public goods to the people, Evo Morales engages in a certain kind of labor for private multinational capital. We might call this figure “Evo Petrolero,” or Evo the Gas Man. Evo Petrolero often wears a national oil company helmet when he goes to inspect a gas field or turns on the gas supply in somebody’s kitchen.

This is rife with the symbolism of national^{ist} struggle for resource sovereignty against foreign exploitation. In a marginal neighborhood of Oruro, the president posed for a picture beside a gas meter installed in the exterior wall of a humble abode

Then, inside the kitchen, at the stove (and wearing his helmet), like a local utility employee, he turned on the gas while festooned with a traditional wreath of flowers and the ubiquitous confetti that accompanies public ritual in Bolivia.

He lauded the process of nationalization that allowed the government to “attend to the demands of the people” and reduce their gas costs to around \$2 per month. All of this, he argued, was because “thanks to Mother Earth” Bolivia has “cheap gas.”

So, against the accelerated temporality of fossil capital that seeks to access space and monetize material things by moving them elsewhere as fast as possible, Evo works to produce a revolutionary temporality in which the current moment of redistributive largesse is said to be the culmination of a long century of revolutionary struggle.

With Evo's daily labor, handing out checks or turning on the gas, he aims to activate an affective response, a simultaneous embrace of himself, of gas, and of the story of popular struggle. This is condensed into a story of revolutionary transformation, moving from inchoate affect to revolutionary affectation.

In invoking rebellion he is not suggesting that people keep rebelling, but rather that the present moment is the accomplished result of that universal struggle. So, we might say “at the risk of crude functionalism but for the sake of argument” that Evo's revolutionary affectation seeks to reconcile the contradictions created by the temporal disjunctures that fossil capital must bridge, and to give meaning to the abstractions created by ongoing dependence on fossil capital.

As long as Bolivians remain convinced of this, the gas will continue to flow. To my mind this is not socialism, but rather a gas-dependent redistributive politics tied to other less progressive realities, about which more below.

The Balance Sheet

To be sure, Evo Morales has been rightly celebrated for being the first indigenous president in the Americas, and of Bolivia. He has overseen a relatively ambitious program to redistribute public goods. Bolivia's turn to the left is a welcome alternative to those emerging from the right, across Europe and the Americas.

One must acknowledge the economic stability that has been maintained in Bolivia. Foreign reserves are at record high levels. Poverty has decreased. Economic growth has bested most of the rest of Latin America. The currency is stable. Wages are up from around \$50 per month in 1995 to over \$100 per month.

In macro-economic terms, the government of Evo Morales appears “for the moment” to have finally captured the surplus, and used it to capitalize the country.

One taxi driver summed up his support for Evo in acknowledgement of the government's policy to democratize access to credit: “I never set foot in a bank before Evo was elected. Now I have a new house and a new car.”

On the surface, the regime has managed a gas boom in relatively good fiscal terms. Yet all of this depends on continued extraction of gas.

It is for these reasons that by late 2018, the Vice-President Alvaro Garc a Linera, though questioned by many on the left in Bolivia, could receive such resounding applause for his participation at Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales' first international forum on critical thought held in neighboring Argentina.

Taking credit, on behalf of the left, for lifting millions of people out of poverty; for women's autonomy over their bodies; for the combination of street democracy and parliamentary democracy, Garc a Linera said that in the next wave of the left in Latin America there must be "ecological socialism." [2]

Like Evo, Alvaro was working at managing time, pushing the ecological crisis of the present onto a future socialism to come later. As with Evo's management of revolutionary time "which pushes resistance into the past" Alvaro's management of revolutionary expectations pushes the possibility of real radical change into the future.

In both cases, willingly or not, these modes of speaking dovetail with the temporal concerns of fossil capital, which is to compress time and accelerate extraction in the present. Even so, the Vice-President reaped great applause and adoring praise from would-be revolutionaries in the land of the YouTube comments section.

If revolutionary affectation is effective at home in Bolivia, it seems equally effective in international forums.

Deep Contradictions, Perverse Outcomes

At least the redistributive state redistributes, something no neoliberal state does well. There are also significant differences from modalities of neoliberal incitements to improve health, to self administer and to aspire to self-improvement. This is the discourse of the right, for example, their feeble alternative to Evo and the MAS: that the country should become a country of "entrepreneurs."

For the right wing, whether technocratic neoliberal or unabashedly fascist, the natural workings of the market and the rational individual condense into a bourgeois theory of inevitable fossil fuel consumption.

But in the gas-encompassed state, the incitements are to "defend" and to "recover" collective public goods, real and imagined, to demand that the state fulfill its obligation (even when it doesn't), and to embrace the right to "consume" as a pueblo, the collective subject of both nation and struggle.

As such, the inevitability of fossil fuel extraction is achieved through a different means. Nonetheless, the labor of transforming an aspirational revolutionary temporality into consumptive practices dependent on a hegemonic fossil fuel regime has deep contradictions and perverse outcomes.

Far from a socialist success story, Evo and the MAS have overseen a rather conservative and pragmatic det ente with Bolivia's own capitalists, entrenched in the eastern agro-industrial sector. The recent fires in the Amazon have drawn attention to the government-backed expansion of a large-scale soy export economy.

Growing opposition to the extractive economy exists in some parts of the country, even from Indigenous organizations. Another contradiction emerges from the androcentric shape of the industry itself, which transforms the

economic boom into the commodification and consumption of everything, deepening existing forms of violence, especially against women.

While femicide “the killing of women” is at alarming levels globally, it is particularly high in Bolivia. Drawing direct linkages between gas and this gendered violence is difficult. However, Evo’s government relies on a male-centric form of politics that bridges social organizations, the military and the party “all in turn reproduced through control of the police and the judiciary.

Activists have suggested that this patriarchal political order “again far from any socialist ideal we might imagine” is to blame for the rise in violence against women. In addition, victims’ families rarely see justice. To draw attention to this point, MarÃ-a Galindo, the activist quoted above, recently joined her comrades to douse the façade of the new “Big House of the People” in red paint, symbolizing the blood of murdered women.

In addition, despite the endless invocation of anti-imperialist struggle, Evo is overseeing the legal and political labor of subordinating sovereignty and reorienting the collective will of the people in favor of fossil fuel infrastructures. This has the perverse outcome of degrading Bolivian nature, and undermining the political foundations of movements by reducing their political horizons to internecine battles over gas rents.

Perhaps the most egregious recent reflection of this is when Evo Petrolero “as Evo the Presidente Indio of Plurinational Bolivia” attended the inauguration of the racist, militarist and fascist Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Concerned that Brazil might reduce its purchases of Bolivian gas, Evo found himself referring to Bolsonaro as a “brother” in a “shared struggle.”

In Bolivia, where Evo makes much of his revolutionary credentials, this is referred to as “eating toads” (tragando sapos). Such is the sovereignty of gas, that the landlord bows to the customer and tenant.

While Bolivia’s management of the gas economy is certainly a success story in some ways, one would be hard-pressed to suggest that gas-based redistribution reflects a serious or ambitious political horizon for socialist thought, given these internal contradictions, let alone what we know about global warming.

Because of Bolivia’s deep history of social movement struggle and rebellion, even right-wing economists observe that without a nationalist frame, no oil or gas would be exported from Bolivia. In order to argue that this signifies revolution, enter Evo the gas worker, who also performs as Evo the revolutionary, to produce, manage and embody revolutionary struggle and revolutionary temporality.

At the end of the day, fossil capital achieved its goal, the monetization of nature in the service of capital accumulation. Evo’s revolutionary affectation in Bolivia achieved what neoliberal orthodoxy could not: the flow of gas. At the time of writing, all evidence suggests that Evo (and the gas industry) will be re-elected this October.

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[1] Evo Morales, speech delivered on November 7, 2017. Ministry of Communication. 2017. Translation by the author

[2] His office tweeted the quote https://twitter.com/VPEP_Bol/status..., from the speech available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUF...>,