

## REVIEW ESSAYS / ENSAYOS DE RESEÑA

### NEW PERSPECTIVES ON PROTEST AND POSSIBILITY IN BOLIVIA

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□ *John Crabtree, Patterns of Protest: Politics and Social Movements in Bolivia.* London: Latin America Bureau, 2005.

□ *Daniel Goldstein, The Spectacular City: Violence and Performance in Urban Bolivia.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.

□ *Oscar Olivera, ¡Cochabamba! Water War in Bolivia.* Cambridge: South End Press, 2004.

□ *Andrew Orta, Catechizing Culture: Missionaries, Aymara and the “New Evangelization.”* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

□ *Charlotta Widmark, To Make Do in the City: Social Identities and Cultural Transformations among Aymara Speakers in La Paz.* Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2003.

It is hoped that the national elections of December 2005 will end what has been a long period of tension and violence in Bolivia. The country is in desperate need of democratic renewal after five years of protest in which two national presidents have been ousted because of their failure to listen to public will. These protests have raised the profile of Bolivia in regional and international political debates and in media coverage. Indeed, the U.S. and other American nations not only look on, but hope through financing and other interventions to influence the course of future events. In this climate of political interest, new importance has also been given to research on Bolivia that aims to characterise and explain the causes and background of recent crisis and wider social transformation in the country. In this review essay I seek to focus on five publications that from different foci and perspectives form part of this new research on Bolivia. In the course of the review it is my intention to highlight the value of each of these publications in terms of their intentions of research and documentation, but also as studies that either explicitly or implicitly

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contributes vital elements to an understanding of the recent political crisis in Bolivia. Rather than being characterised as opposing positions and interpretations, it is my intention to demonstrate that, albeit to different degrees, between the publications there are overlapping themes and angles that demonstrate their strength both as a collection and as individual works. As with any body of knowledge it is the whole rather than the parts that provides the most comprehensive and convincing understanding of a particular topic or event.

Out of the five books, two are explicitly written to explain and describe the origins of political crisis and three are written as ethnographies on important aspects of recent Bolivian cultural change, i.e., migration, religious expression and the growth of urban violence. I start with *Patterns of Protest*, a book that through its clarity and scope far out measures its rather handy pocket size. John Crabtree's book sets out to give a clear and comprehensive account of the protests in Bolivia from 2000 to 2005 and outlines some of the key underlining factors in Bolivian culture, society and politics that led the country down the road to crisis. The book quickly and concisely outlines the origins and practice of U.S. and external intervention in the Bolivian economy and political life. It charts the introduction and social impacts of economic adjustment, privatisation and the formation of service concessions for distribution of natural resources. Crabtree also brings our attention to the fact that these economic changes were introduced at the same time as successive Bolivian governments attempted to introduce radical social reforms – goals that were revealed to be contradictory and that generated mistrust amongst the Bolivian population. The book highlights the unequal and very different patterns of land distribution in the highlands and lowlands after the agrarian reform of 1953. It further details the rise of conflicting ethnic and national identities. It also explains the rise of key social movements and demands in the country, and the particular importance of the *sindicatos* (unions), *cocaleros* (coca-growers association) and *rentistas* (pensioners' movement) in national debates. The author argues that whilst the downfall of the government can be linked to a wide range of social injustices in the country, it was recent and apparent government inability, and at times unwillingness, to respond to these diverse demands that lead to their eventual downfall. As well as developing a discussion of each of these issues there are also a series of inserts within the book's text that give a short explanation of many of the special features and terminology of Bolivian society, history and recent protest. The revolution of 1952, the meaning and significance of the *ayllu* (an Andean organisational form), the *coordinadoras* (the coordinating councils of recent protests), and the

*bloqueos* (road blockades) are all dealt with in this straightforward and concise manner. In short, the book successfully characterises the main features and causes of the recent political unrest whilst also giving a quick introductory course on central features of Bolivian life and history.

Whilst *Patterns of Protest* is a good place to start in a search for explanations for the recent crisis in Bolivia on its own it is, however, an incomplete picture of events and origins. Where the book perhaps falls down, and the other books in this review are perhaps stronger, is in its failure to capture the individual desperation and innovation of Bolivians in their encounter with a changing nation-state, competing cultural identities and the complexities of recent political and economic reforms. It is from these changes and engagement that the form of current social movements and public demands are generated. Although Crabtree sketches the background for current debates, their exact details and significance are left largely in the abstract.

The individual engagement in protest and the content and meaning of these demands to the Bolivian population are more clearly revealed in Oscar Olivera's *¡Cochabamba! Water War in Bolivia*. Although more a personal account as a leader of the protest than an academic study and focused on only one period, opposition to the Aguas de Tunari concession in 2000, Olivera more strongly conveys the individual and diverse sectorial sentiments that fed into protest. Indeed, he not only characterises the way in which engagement was formed, but also the way in which it changed over time in the encounter with the forces of the state and the realities and possibilities for action and change. We are told by Olivera of the emotion of the time, that "behind the gigantic collective struggle for our water rights, spaces had arisen – in the blockades and occupied plazas – where the people deliberated the issues that most impacted on their lives. It was in these spaces that people began to know each other and to share their problems – problems which, after all, were common among all of them. They soon realised that the act of coming out of their homes and neighbourhoods to occupy the streets was, at its core, a fight to improve their conditions of life" (2004:48). We discover more clearly from Olivera's book that whilst people's engagement in protest is personal there are common interests in local and national sovereignty and with this the improvement of economic conditions. Olivera's book is also important because it outlines more closely than Crabtree the innovative and democratic significance of the *Coordinadora*, a loose organisational form for coordination between different sectorial interests that has spread and continued to play a key role in the formation of protests that have occurred in Bolivia since 2000. In carrying the discussion of natural resource

ownership on from 2000 the book furthermore details more closely the meaning and content of current political debates over the reform of the Hydro-carbons Law and the formation of a Constituent Assembly. Olivera explains the Bolivian public's opposition to existing regulations and government plans for the sale of oil and gas, as an expansion of the Water War's earlier goals of recovering sovereignty and *collective patrimony*. Privatisation has meant the total loss of sovereignty and control over natural resources. He also tells us that a similar process has occurred in national and local government, "which have been turned into *private* spaces under the almost exclusive control of the political parties. Political participation and decision-making are limited to spaces designed by the parties and although lacking in content – these spaces are passed off as *deliberation* and *dialogue*" (2004: 129). The Constituent Assembly is envisaged by Olivera and its growing number of supporters amongst both conservative and radical sectors of the Bolivian population as a means to recover democracy, through the formation of a new official decision-making entity in which all sectors of the country are fairly represented.

Olivera's book makes an important contribution to the literature on recent protest in Bolivia by bringing out these details. However, this said, primarily written as a personal political text (i.e., of Oscar Olivera and his academic collaborator, Tom Lewis) and not as a piece of research, it is possible to raise some questions about the book's accuracy. Indeed, read alongside the three other ethnographies in this review, or more generally in comparison with the recent anthropology of the Andes, the main anti-neoliberal and anti-globalisation message of the book comes over as somewhat exaggerated. There is no doubt that these sentiments as well as anti-imperialism are driving forces for recent protest. However, it is also clear from recent ethnography, if not recent opinion polls, that the motivations and interests of the *multitude* of Bolivians are not so clear cut in terms of their relations to international trade or globalisation. The traditional cultural morality and interests of the country's Aymara and Quechua-speaking populations are in fact despite the important counter-balance of *ayllu* communitarianism heavily predisposed to profit making and participation in national and international markets. Indeed, recent ethnography makes it clear that Bolivians have had a long experience with globalisation and international markets and that in recent years this has resulted in closer and closer relationships between people in the rural and urban regions as well as with the communities and places far beyond their country's borders. Recent ethnography also highlights that these relationships change the sources of Bolivians self and political identification, they have become increasingly impermanent and ambivalent,

a condition which increasingly undermines traditional understandings of the fixed class and ethnic categories and boundaries in Bolivian society.

One such ethnography that highlights recent shifts in the nature of Bolivian culture and society, and of the population's complex relationships with the global is Andrew Orta's *Catechizing Culture: Missionaries, Aymara and the "New Evangelization"*. Although in my opinion missing a consideration of the wider context of religious transformation in Bolivia and Latin America, and particularly the spread of protestant pentecostalism, Orta's book is a carefully constructed ethnography that reveals the continued encounter between Catholic missionaries and Aymara Indians in the Department of La Paz. The book explores the pastoral shift away from the liberation theology that had dominated Latin American Catholic missionisation up until the mid 1980s and its surprising replacement in Highland Bolivia by the new current of a "theology of inculturation." Nearly five centuries after the first wave of Catholic missionaries arrived in the New World, contemporary religious workers in the Bolivian highlands have begun to encourage local people to return to traditional ritual practices. In their separation from modernity the old ways are now viewed as local expressions of Christian values. To become more Christian, the Aymara must now become more Indian. The book traces the roots and practices of this new theology, but also importantly highlights the changing nature of the relationship between the rural and the urban, the national and the international in Bolivia. Orta emphasises that to understand the practice of catechists in Bolivia it is necessary to stress the "porous" nature of locality (2004: 10). By "porous" he means to evoke a condition of permeability or even saturation by external forces while simultaneously acknowledging a degree of local integrity. Porousness qualifies boundedness but does not efface it. To sustain this approach Orta builds on a series of basic axioms. The first is an understanding of culture as an ensemble of phenomena that takes place someplace, which is always enacted and emergent in a given context that is always given situated relevance by positioned agents. A corollary of this is an understanding of locality as never fully given, but always produced by a range of coimplicated actors. A third fundamental point is that translocal and putatively foreign agents – in this case, missionaries – need to be understood as component subjects of local level ethnography, deeply engaged in the production of locality. The importance of this methodological approach and understanding is that it leads to an emphasis on the inter-relationships that exist between transnational processes and the local production of life-worlds. It also helps to stress something missing until recently in Andean anthropology and social science, i.e., that whilst a

local product, Andean culture and society is neither fixed nor isolated from wider social and political flows and pressures. Indeed, the book helps to underline the fact that the links between the rural and the urban, the national and international have strengthened to a point where cultural and religious influences can and do have simultaneous impact.

In Charlotta Widmark's *To Make Do in the City: Social Identities and Cultural Transformations among Aymara Speakers in La Paz*, this emphasis on interaction is studied further in the context of urban migrant neighbourhoods in Bolivia's capital city. Although somewhat constricted in language and structure by its original design as a PhD thesis, the book aims and succeeds in convincingly studying the relationship between the formation of identities and economic survival amongst second generation rural-urban migrants. One of its main contributions is in describing the difficulties individuals face in moving between countryside and the city. Widmark does not, however, describe this as a clash between two cultures, or as a process of cultural mixing or *mestizaje* as traditionally understood. Rather, in line with Orta, she demonstrates that different pressures and influences co-exist and highlight the private choices and strategies of individuals to make the best of "themselves" and life in the city. Although keen to circumvent the idea of a cultural clash, Widmark demonstrates empirically the cultural and social tensions that individuals face in the course of making life choices. It is the personal interaction with these tensions that explains the vagaries of public cultural identifications over time. Importantly, Widmark also stresses that personal interaction means that when it comes to self identification within the neighbourhood, commonality is expressed through reference to common conditions of poverty, and not ethnic background. However, in underlining the importance of poverty, her depiction of those who call themselves poor is not one of passivity, but rather of action and innovation. She describes the way in which different cultural practices are used and continually transformed by the poor in the urban context to form strategies for personal survival in the city.

Orta and Widmark both then demonstrate the way in which individual Bolivians, like "us," have multiple sources of identity and therefore also multiple sources for political identification. Returning to think about recent political developments in the country, both of these studies may help to explain the range of demands that are now being expressed, and to explain the rise in support for Evo Morales who is now, together with the Movement for Socialism (MAS), the leading contenders for the Presidency. Morales and his party deftly combine Aymara culture, symbols and values with political ideas drawn from both social democracy

and the international left. Despite the interpretations of the anti-globalisation movement or the conservative international press, MAS is therefore neither a real swing to the left or entirely anti-global. Indeed, these studies may also help us to understand how, in connection to these political developments, the whole notion of what it means to be indigenous in Bolivia is changing and becoming more inclusive of different categories of marginalised people. In a recent interview with the Latin American Social Science Council (CLACSO) Morales stated that MAS was the “synthesis of the poor in Bolivia”.

Orta and Widmark are then suggestive of explanations for larger processes outside the narrow focus of their ethnography. However, perhaps disappointingly neither of them attempts to make these kinds of larger connections themselves. Indeed, although Widmark mentions the growth of crime and violence in La Paz, she does not explore how they relate to the same practices of culture and identification she set out to study. The mass protests in Cochabamba and La Paz that occurred during her time in the field are not mentioned at all. For the links between cultural practice, violence and protest we must turn to the final publication in this review, i.e., Daniel Goldstein’s *The Spectacular City: Violence and Performance in Urban Bolivia* (2004).

In this ethnography Goldstein considers the significance of and similarities between two kinds of public spectacle in Bolivia – street festivals and the vigilante lynchings of criminals. During the period of Goldstein’s fieldwork in the Cochabamba neighbourhood of Villa Pagador in the mid-1990s, residents attempted to lynch several thieves and attacked the police who tried to intervene. Since that time, there have been hundreds of lynchings in the poor neighbourhoods in all of Bolivia’s main cities. Indeed, if you travel in to La Paz from the airport in El Alto visitors to the country can easily spot the straw dummies hung from lampposts at the start of streets by local residents as a warning of the consequences to criminals in the neighbourhood. Although an ethnographic study of one neighbourhood, Goldstein also considers the clear meaning and reference of his study for the now widespread occurrence of lynchings and other vigilante actions that appear to be taking place with increasing frequency in Bolivia. In line with Widmark, Goldstein also asserts the importance of poverty in forming social practice. Moreover, Goldstein demonstrates how marginalised urban migrants, shut out of the city and neglected by the state, use performance to assert their national belonging and to express their grievances against the inadequacies of the state’s official legal order. In the book a line is drawn from the performance and formation of the local community through festivals and other cultural practices and the expression

of citizenship through out-bursts of violence and protest. Whilst the book fails to highlight that lynchings are not part of traditional Andean customary law, the book is nonetheless a convincing and thought-provoking study that clearly suggests that recent urban violence, and possibly recent protest, can be explained by a thesis of “spectacular performance.” As in the other publications above, Goldstein also illustrates the diversity of positions and opinions (glossed over as encompassing community in earlier studies) and the deep interpretive discord in the neighbourhood where he worked. This is again something that may indirectly explain the fragmented nature of recent protests.

Importantly *The Spectacular City* also explores the consequences and implication of an expression of citizenship through extralegal violence for human rights and the rule of law in the contemporary Andes region. Goldstein places a stronger emphasis than the other authors on the gap between government rhetoric and reality, as well as highlighting the local responses to it. These responses he characterises as claims for inclusion, and the violence as a protest and expression of citizenship aimed at capturing attention and aimed at improving participation in local and national political decision-making. He demonstrates that poor neighbourhood inhabitants have gone through the long bureaucratic procedures necessary to establish themselves as legitimate land and business owners in the city, but have been denied real stability and access to the state because of persisting social prejudices and the impact of recent neoliberal reforms. As a result, he argues, violence is used as a means to stake a claim to rights that should be, but have not yet been conveyed by the State (2004: 223).

Each of the five books mentioned here have then important attributes and make important individual contributions to our understanding of particular features, and more general processes in Bolivian social and political change. Taken together they also implicitly and explicitly provide important insights into the histories and reasons for recent protest and crisis in the country. Indeed, although I consider each book worthwhile reading in their own right, I suggest here that taken as a collection the weaknesses, but also the importance of the main and lesser stressed features and arguments of the individual works are accentuated. Whether just or not, the placing together and comparison of these works highlights lessons that should, but alas are not, given more focus in current debates on and in Bolivia. Those that have been picked out in this review include the importance and formation of dissonance in Bolivian society, the omnipresence and inter-relationship of the rural and urban and of the national and global, the role of poverty as a source of common social and political



identification, the opening up of indigeneity as a social category, the relationship between culture and political behaviour, the weakness of policy promises and importance of concrete acts by government and finally, and perhaps most importantly, the individual and communal expression of desire to not only be citizens, but act as citizens at all levels of political life. Whoever is interested in understanding Bolivia better would be wise to learn from these lessons, and as such, together or apart, the five publications mentioned here would be an advisable and enjoyable route to rapid comprehension.

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