

From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia

Review of Jeffrey Webber's book

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The election of Bolivia's first indigenous president, on the back of a mass rebellion that overthrew successive governments has stirred great interest in this small Andean nation. Given that the Evo Morales government recently celebrated its 2000th day in power – a feat in its own right for a country that has had around 180 coups since 1825 – any serious attempt to explain the underlying dynamics of this decade long political process should be welcomed.

Combining his academic research and extensive fieldwork in Bolivia, Jeffrey Webber sets out to do exactly that in *From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia*. Unfortunately, the end result leaves a lot to be desired.

The purpose of Webber's book is to convince readers that the election of the Morales government actually represented a leap backwards that "steered the political conjuncture away from the radicalism of the streets towards the tamer terrain of electoral politics." Furthermore, Webber attempts to argue that in place of moderate change, the Morales government has presided over a period of "reconstituted neoliberalism" that has brought about "almost no change" in the conditions of ordinary Bolivians.

Such an argument definitely goes against the grain of the overwhelming bulk of literature dedicated to the Morales government. But Webber defends his view as superior to those that "replace careful examination of empirical reality with the casual celebration of press releases issued from the presidential palace." Only those that oppose the MAS government, says Webber, hold "a responsible perspective, authentically in solidarity with the popular struggles for socialism and indigenous liberation."

Given the hostile tone of his sweeping attacks on the government and its supporters, one would expect a thorough and detailed analysis that patiently explains where it all went wrong. Instead we get a litany of errors and misleading statements. A classic example is Webber's attempt to prove "the regional successes enjoyed by the [right-wing] autonomist movement in the early years under Morales" by pointing to two rallies "of great importance" that occurred in June 2004 and January 2005.... a year before Morales was even in power! But the biggest problem is not his inability to use facts that back up, rather than contradict his arguments. Rather, it is his failure to deal concretely with opposing viewpoints, the relationship between the government and social movements, and the achievements of the Morales government.

Straw Man Arguments

A constant attempt to confuse, rather than clarify, the key issues in debate runs right

through Webber's book. Anyone who expresses any sympathy with the Morales government is brandished as a "loyalist" and an advocate of reformist change through parliament rather than independent mobilisation from below. Yet everyone agrees that Morales' election was only possible due to the preceding five years of social struggle. Similarly, a consensus exists regarding the importance of the constant mobilisation of social movements in defense of their government or defeating successive attempts to overthrow Morales. Given the absence of any evidence to suggest otherwise, one can only conclude Webber prefers to debate figments of his imagination rather than the real position of others.

In Chapter 2, Webber tries to open a potentially interesting discussion on the revolutionary character of the mass mobilisations between 2000 and 2005. But all we get is a theoretical debate abstracted from any discussion based on concrete reality. Absent, for example, is any discussion about the lack of emergence of alternate organs of popular power or an analysis of the military. Yet Latin American history demonstrates in every revolutionary situation, the question of the military has been crucial to its success or bloody defeat. Given Bolivia's status as the world record holder for military coups, surely such an issue cannot be ignored. Unfortunately, in his quest to convince us that the only thing holding back socialist revolution in Bolivia is the Morales government, such issues are simply ignored.

Perhaps the clearest example of Webber's inability to engage in constructive debate is his treatment of the positions expressed by Bolivia's vice-president Alvaro Garcia Linera. Webber refers to an article by Linera on "Andean-Amazonian Capitalism" as evidence of Linera's support for the Stalinist theory of "revolution by stages" and the creation of a new capitalist class to lead Bolivia down the path of "industrial capitalism." Webber is free to disagree with Garcia Linera, but he should at least attempt to debate the real positions offered by the Bolivian vice-president.

In fact nowhere in Linera's article does he advocate building an "industrial capitalist base" as part of a "revolution by stages". Firstly, Linera clearly differentiates his position from the nationalism of old which foresaw a situation where "everyone would become industrious, modern, capitalist and wage earners." In its place, Linera advocates "the construction of a strong state, that regulates the expansion of the industrial economy, extracts its surplus and transfers it to the communitarian sphere in order to promote forms of self-organisation and traditional Andean and Amazonian commercial development." The latter requires stimulating the communitarian economy, until now "brutally subsumed by the industrial economy."

For Linera, the immediate imposition of socialism is not possible "at least in the short term", due to two reasons: the lack of both a strong, politically-orientated proletariat and the fractured nature of existing communitarian bonds within indigenous communities, the two pillars on which to construct socialism. In this context, Linera advocates "Andean-Amazonian capitalism" as a purely "temporary and transitory mechanism" aimed at strengthening "worker and communitarian forces for emancipation."

A further factor, mentioned elsewhere by Linera, is the basic proposition that "no revolution can triumph if it is not supported by other revolutions in the world." Webber seems to forget this in his attempts to slander Linera as a kind of modern-day Stalinist. This is ironic given Stalin's position of building "socialism in one country". Instead, the Bolivian government has systematically set out building anti-imperialist alliances with governments and social movements in order to help strengthen the global forces for change. This at least Webber is forced to begrudgingly accept, noting Bolivia's alliance with Venezuela and Cuba as well as

its initiative to stage a world peoples' summit on climate change in April 2010.

Webber may claim this proves Garcia Linera is against implementing socialism overnight. And he is correct, but this is due to a very simple reason: in order to build socialism, the Bolivian masses must first have state power, something Webber seems to forget. Unable to destroy the capitalist state through insurrection, the Bolivian masses instead opted for the electoral route with the aim of wielding governmental power as an instrument for advancing their cause. The immediate challenge for this "government of the social movements" was to convert a fragile electoral alliance comprised of competing proletarian, plebian, campesino and middle class interest, into a united movement powerful enough to defeat the capitalist opposition. At the same time, Linera proposes working towards the "decolonisation of the state", that is, the dismantlement of the existing capitalist state and its replacement with a new state resting on "worker and communitarian forces for emancipation."

One may disagree with this path, but it is just dishonest to represent it as a strategy that "acted to steer incredibly powerful mass demonstrations into constitutional exits, in which elite negotiations between established neoliberal politicians took precedence." The opposite is in fact the case. With the government now in the hands of the social movements, all out struggle for power was unleashed, culminating in the civic-military defeat of the pro-capitalist insurrection of September 2008.

Class Struggle under Morales

Webber's conviction that Morales' election victory represented a shift from mobilisation to negotiation leads him to make ludicrous statements. For instance, Webber describes a period marked by a polarisation that threatened to plunge the country into civil war as characteristic of the "demobilization of independent political actions from below and an increasing reliance on elite negotiations." Far from entering "tamer terrain", the first Morales government was filled with constant street battles between pro and anti-government forces. Ultimately, victory was obtained, not via negotiations, but the crushing defeat of a coup attempt

Webber's confusion on the question of independence from the government also leads him to tie himself in knots, in some cases to painting conservative forces as "radical". Webber is convinced that the MAS loyalists oppose independent mobilisation; once again, this claim is false. The fact that no government in the last three decades has had to contend with as many conflicts and protests as the Morales government surely demonstrates that Bolivia's social movements are far from subordinated to government dictates. This is true not only in the quantitative sense (regarding the number of protests and the largest one in Bolivian history, when one million marched in La Paz), but also in the qualitative sense (the profound nature of the combined military-social movement mobilisation to defeat the coup attempt). The key issue in debate is not that of independence from the government, but rather independence for what aims. That is, do these independent mobilisations serve to further fundamental change or are they simply expressions of corporative movements that prioritise self-interest?

On several key occasions, the Morales government has demonstrated its ability to maintain the maximum unity possible among the competing interests of corporative movements while pushing the process to the left. Chapter 4 of Webber's book purports to demonstrate the opposite, where radical independent social movements are constantly struggling against

a right-wing Morales government. Instead, it only serves to demonstrate Webber's inability to understand such complex interactions and his selective use of facts.

Take for example his description of the events surrounding the 2006 conflict in Huanuni, where clashes between cooperative and wage-earning miners left 18 dead. Selectively choosing what information to provide and conceal from the reader, Webber claims that the situation can be characterised as a reformist government aligning itself with "the privileged layer of cooperative miners" to drown the revolutionary Huanuni miners in blood. Thankfully, according to Webber, the heroic resistance of the Huanuni miners forced the government to back down, but only temporarily, as Morales then proceeded as he always does, to water down his promises of further nationalisations.

Such a view of events however is only possible when omitting or falsifying facts. This occurs with even the simplest of details. Webber claims that the national miners' federation (FSTMB) is made up of miners "employed by the state mining company COMIBOL". But FSTMB also incorporates a much larger bloc of traditionally more conservative mineworkers from the private sector. Webber also tells us that the Posokoni hills were home to the state-employed Huanuni miners, and cooperative miners who existed in "far fewer in numbers." At the time, the state-owned Huanuni Mining Company (EMH) employed 800 workers while some 4000 were affiliated to cooperatives working there. More broadly, miners in Bolivia are separated into state-employed miners, numbering 800; those employed in private sector, which total several thousands; and between 60,000 to 65,000 miners working in the cooperative sector. None of these sectors are organically part of the MAS, each have competing interests and needs, and all form part of the government's social base. This may seem like fiddling over detail, but as we will see these elements are crucial to understanding the conflict.

Webber refers to a road blockade organised by Huanuni miners and local campesinos in September 2006 to demand more public investment in COMIBOL and the creation of 1,500 jobs, although at no time did this include the demand to incorporate the existing cooperative miners working in the surrounding mines. Ignored are the other 28 conflicts that were engulfing the mining sector at the time, each pitting different sectors and interests against each other and local communities. Despite the blockade in Huanuni shutting down one of the most important highways in Bolivia for three days, not once was violence used to deal with these conflicts, the preferred response of neoliberal governments. Instead, the government attempted to simultaneously resolve each individual conflict while negotiating a decree with all sectors that would cover the entire mining industry. The complexity of the situation where each sector was fighting to defend their own interests militated against coming up with a common agreement.

Nevertheless, the government agreed to the demands of the protestors at Huanuni, an elementary fact omitted by Webber. The problem was that this triggered a response from the much larger bloc of cooperative miners, who rejected the deal. Within days violence broke out in Huanuni as cooperative miners moved to take over the mine operated by EMH, a scenario that has occurred many times before. The clashes left 18 dead, with each side blaming each other for the confrontation and the country convulsed by the images of miners clashing with miners.

In response, Morales sacked his mining minister who was publicly criticised for his role in the ordeal. In his place was appointed a new minister closely aligned with the FSTMB. The new minister moved immediately to reach an agreement between representatives from both

sides at Huanuni. The final result was the conversion of all 4000 cooperative miners into employees of EMH. The deal was supported by the local cooperative miners but rejected by the national cooperative miners federation, FENCOMIN, which declared it would demonstrate its “independence” through a series of mobilisations against the government. Contrary to Webber’s portrayal of the government backing down to FENCOMIN demands, the deal not only remained but was also followed by further attempts to nationalise mines.

While continued tensions between the different sectors prevented the government from carrying out its original plan immediately, it nevertheless continued pushing forward with its policy of reasserting state control. In February 2007 it moved to nationalise the Vinto tin smelter and announced the possibility of further nationalisations. At the time however it was the FSTMB-affiliated unions in the private sector, including those in the Colquiri mine, which threatened “independent” mobilisations against any further nationalisations. For some reason, Webber forgets to mention this fact. This is all the more startling given his attempts to portray the Colquiri mineworkers as part of the independent revolutionary left that need to be supported in their struggle against the Morales government. Or does Webber suggest we should have also come to their defense when the government, with the support of the Huanuni miners, announced its intention last April to nationalise the Colquiri mine (along with at least three others), and the “radical” local miners’ unions demonstrated their independence by protesting any such move?

Perhaps the most startling omission, and one that can only lead to the conclusion that there is a deliberate attempt by Webber to falsify history and attack the Morales government is that on May 1, 2007, the government decreed the state takeover of all mineral deposits! Going against Webber’s claim that Morales swung back to supporting FENCOMIN, the decree reaffirmed the strong alliance forged between the government and the FSTMB. While the decree was supported by FSTMB and the Huanuni miners, it was opposed by FENCOMIN.

It is clear that the picture is much more complex than Webber’s simplistic portrayal of a so-called reformist government versus “independent, increasingly radical popular class forces.” Instead, the Morales government has clearly attempted to move forward with an integral policy for the mining sector, while taking into consideration competing self-interests among its base. To do so it has had to deal with a myriad of independent social forces, many of which have opposed progressive measures and sought to defend their own corporative interests. While not free from error, each time the government has attempted to stay in tune with its diverse base, while taking a clear leftist position. It has also worked to strengthen the position of those independent forces on the left, while working to win over other sectors to such a vision. Of course, all advances have not been solely the work of the government; the mobilisations of the Huanuni miners and other progressive sectors have been fundamental. The point is that the trend has been one of combined action from the social movements on the ground and in government. This dynamic relationship will continue to be critical if, for example, the miners in the private and cooperative sectors are to be won over to a radical perspective. What is clear is that far from selling out the movements or holding them back, in the majority of cases the government has played a role of uniting the social movements in order to press forward with the process of change.

“Reconstituted Neoliberalism”

What about the charge labeled against Morales by Webber that he is pursuing a policy of “reconstituted neoliberalism”? Is there any evidence to prove that the first Morales administration saw the “deepening and consolidation” of a new type of neoliberalism in

disguise? That there has been “almost no change in poverty rates”? Even if we ignore the impacts of the global economic crisis, of capital’s constant attacks via economic sabotage, capital flight and coup attempts, and the governments urgent need to attend to an infinite amount of equally important and competing interests among its base, the facts speak for themselves.

Under Morales Bolivia’s GDP has doubled, state control over the economy has increased from 17% of GDP to 34% (a four-fold increase in monetary terms). As a result of the nationalisation of gas reserves, government revenues from this sector have jumped from US\$673 million in the year before Morales came to power, to US\$2235 million in 2010, representing a rise of almost 350%. During the same time, public investment has increased five-fold. Similarly, over the same period, poverty levels have fallen from 60% to 49.6%, while extreme poverty has dropped from 38% to 25%. The gap between the richest 10% and poorest 10% has shrunk from 128 times more wealth to 60 times more wealth. Average incomes have risen from US\$950 in 2004 to US\$1833 in 2010. On top of this access to basic services such as education, health, water and electricity have dramatically increased. What other neoliberal government (reconstituted or otherwise) can point to such figures?

How have these gains been possible? Fernando Ignacio Leiva – whose writings Webber directs our attention to – explains that they are the result of the Bolivian government’s economic policy, which he describes as the “formulation for an alternative to the present order.” Despite spending nine pages outlining Leiva’s position, he never once mentions this or Leiva’s description of Bolivia (and Venezuela) as “newly emerging alternatives actively and methodically seeking to constrain it within certain boundaries so that society and equity may thrive.” Also ignored is Leiva’s contention that Bolivia’s policy far from being neoliberal, is focused on “strengthening the capacity of the state to capture via the tax system part of the nation’s economic surplus and redirecting it toward micro and small producers in rural areas and cities.” Quite a stark contrast to Webber’s argument; no wonder he leaves this out!

Does this mean Bolivia is socialist? No, but then no one has ever argued that. Nevertheless, when we combine all this with the fact that Bolivia’s economy policy has been “nationalised” and is no longer dictated by the IMF or Washington, it is evident that important strides have been taken. Add to the mix the strengthening of “worker and communitarian forces for emancipation” that have politically, ideologically and militarily defeated the right and begun taking steps towards decolonising the state, there is little doubt that the Bolivian masses are in a far superior position to where they were five or ten years ago. Or how else does Webber explain why Morales continues to maintain tremendous support among Bolivia’s poor majority, or that no alternative project to its left has emerged?

There is still a long struggle ahead, no doubt full of tensions and contradictions. Critical to this struggle will be the deepening of similar processes elsewhere in the continent, which is why the Bolivian government has placed so much emphasis, not only on developing ties with other underdeveloped and anti-imperialist government, but with social movements from around the world. Yet one feels that none of this will be enough for Webber who would prefer they abandon their route in favour of an imaginary one in which socialism is installed overnight.

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