

Review/Reseña

Forrest Hylton and Sinclair Thomson, *Revolutionary Horizons. Past and Present in Bolivian Politics*. (New York: Verso, 2007).

How Revolutionary Were Bolivian Revolutions?

Sian Lazar

University of Cambridge

Hylton and Thomson have produced a very timely and effective book, which places the contemporary 'revolutionary cycle' in Bolivia (of 2000-2005) in the context of a much longer history of revolutionary moments. The study works in three principal ways: first, as an argument for the existence of three revolutions in Bolivian history—1781, 1952 and 2000-5—and for the continuities running through those events; second, as the tracing of two revolutionary currents—indigenous and national-popular—through those historical moments and through Bolivian history more generally; and third, as a comprehensive and very accessible history of indigenous and popular mobilisation in the highlands of Bolivia from the 18th Century until now.

Commentators might take issue with Hylton and Thomson's characterisation of the three Bolivian revolutions. Indeed, they have already—James Dunkerley (2007) for example contends that Independence in 1825 was more of a revolution than the revolt of 1780–1. Certainly, one could debate whether the protests of 1780–81 ultimately amounted to revolution. Hylton and Thomson undoubtedly demonstrate their importance, and describe them in highly evocative detail. However, where revolt becomes revolution is more of an open question; and there is something curious about the attempt to claim revolutionary status for 1781 but not for Independence, since ultimately neither event changed who was really in charge of the country. That said, the same thing might also be claimed about the other two revolutions under discussion here.

But the book does not stand or fall on the question of whether particular events qualify as a revolution or not, and in fact the theoretical discussions of what constitutes revolution or 'revolutionary horizons' are less captivating than where Hylton and Thomson simply tell the story of Indian mobilisation in highland Bolivia. I suspect that this is in part because the book was intended for a wide and non-specialised audience, and it is all the better for that. What I appreciated was the sweep of the book's historical narrative. Without becoming unwieldy it takes the reader through different cycles of protest and revolt in the cities and countryside, making the events real, coherent and comprehensible; all of which is no small feat given the complexity of the different factions, interests and individuals at play. The result is that the book is a superb complement to the existing tours through Bolivian history by Klein (1992) and Dunkerley (1984), providing a wholly different perspective on the same events.

That perspective is not purely an indigenous one, as one might assume. The other strength of the book is the weight it gives to what the Bolivian political philosopher Rene Zavaleta called the 'national-popular' tradition, namely the nationalist and often (although not always) leftist activism of urban and industrialised workers that was so important to the 1952 revolution. It is clear that successful popular mobilisation in Bolivia requires the joining together of the cities and the

countryside—i.e., the indigenous and national-popular political traditions. Hylton and Thomson even attribute the success of 1952 to such a coming together, quite an unusual position to take given that the general orthodoxy is that 1952 was very much an urban revolt. Nonetheless, their argument on this point is well made and very convincing. They further show that the other times at which such a crucial confluence occurred are during the mobilisations against the dictatorships of the late 1970s-early 1980s, and of course October 2003, when protests in rural and urban areas in El Alto-La Paz and then across Bolivia forced the resignation of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. In their conclusion, Hylton and Thomson claim that we are witnessing today a ‘new national-popular formation with Indian centrality’ (149). Actually, it may be a bit soon to comment on current events in such a way, but Hylton and Thomson do end the book reminding us that ‘if history has shown that revolutionary moments leave an indelible mark on the future, it has shown that internal colonial and class hierarchies are durable structures as well.’ (154). Certainly, the opposition that Evo Morales is currently facing from right wing movements in the Eastern part of the country show that any revolutionary achievements of his government will be hard fought.

Hylton and Thomson sensibly stop just short of including Morales’ government in the latest revolutionary cycle, but do provide preliminary analyses of some of the initial reforms of his presidency: nationalisation of the gas resources, the proposed agrarian reform and the constitutional assembly. It appears now that the nationalisation has been the most successful of those enterprises, possibly because of something that Hylton and Thomson implicitly criticise, namely the fact that it was not quite as radical as earlier nationalisations of hydrocarbons in 1937 and 1969. Nonetheless, their analysis is admirably balanced and thorough, what might be called their ‘sympathetic scepticism’ being a counterweight to journalistic accounts from both sides of the political spectrum. The brief examination of the proposed agrarian reform shows just why the elites from the ‘Half Moon’ departments (Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando and Tarija) are so opposed to Morales. As they point out, the reform is an enactment of a principle

from General German Busch's constitution of 1938, namely that property not fulfilling a 'social function' may be confiscated by the state with compensation. Nonetheless, despite the fact that it is another reform that is not actually very radical, it is clear that the threat to large landholdings in the lowlands is enough to mobilise the local elites. Their discussion of the constitutional assembly is similarly subtle, illustrating the way that the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo, Evo Morales' party) subdued indigenous demands by arguing that the MAS was the only representation necessary for indigenous peoples. This is the process by which the links between the national-popular and indigenous traditions are beginning to break down, as leftist activists deny the specificity of indigenous demands and the ability of indigenous peoples to represent those demands. In that sense, the nature of Evo Morales as representative of a genuinely Indian form of the national-popular then becomes questionable. Conflicts over the educational reform (not discussed in the book) and even over the recent recall referendum have raised some accusations of authoritarianism against some of Evo's ministers, and against Evo himself, which do not only come from the right. The complexity of the current backlash against that social movement agenda so perceptively analysed in 'Revolutionary Horizons' is something for future discussions of the Bolivian political scene.

For of course not all indigenous people always supported indigenous activism; indeed, I would argue that the national-popular often holds more sway, at least in the indigenous city of El Alto and the surrounding countryside, and probably also in the valleys of Cochabamba and the lowlands. Evo was certainly perceived by many indigenous people as 'one of us', but the fact that he stood for an anti-imperialist political position was probably more important for most of his voters, at least in 2002 when the US ambassador significantly increased the percentage of his vote by threatening to withdraw US aid if Evo won. Once Evo came second in the 2002 elections, and after the complete de-legitimation of the established political classes in 2003-5, political debate in Bolivia appears gradually to have become about national identity symbolised by the gas. Evo was the least likely to betray that identity in the eyes of many voters. Even in October 2003,

many people said to me that they were defending 'our dear Bolivia'. Radical indigenist or indianist alternatives are not as successful as politicians who can locate themselves as the 'true' (that is, not corrupt) guardians of the Bolivian state.

So I would differ from Hylton and Thomson in that I am not sure that a radical re-founding of the state with the aim of decolonisation is precisely what most Bolivians wanted from Evo and from the constitutional assembly. Indeed, from one perspective, the constitutional assembly could be seen as simply another talking shop, following on from the two National Dialogues of 1997 and 2000, which are not discussed in this book. I would not for one minute argue that Bolivia does not need decolonising, but it is also the case that the Bolivian constitution of 1994 is not actually a particularly bad document. The problem is that it was not implemented in an impartial or effective way, and it (or any successor) is not likely to be implemented in such a way until the deep divisions within Bolivian society stop impacting so greatly upon the state's ability to function. I think that something like this argument can be extended to the Bolivian state more generally. What this book shows is that throughout the history discussed here, the Indians do not necessarily want an entirely new state or government—say, Kollasuyu. What they want is for their rights to their land to be respected and for the current government not to abuse them: as this book demonstrates, many of the complaints of the revolts of the 18th and 19th Centuries were against abusive local officials, often named individually, while today, people complain about corruption and the theft of public money and national resources by particular individuals or groups, but not about the deep structural inequality encoded in the state and economy. This is curious. I wonder if it is just because those are the only or the most legitimate and concrete claims that can be made, because it is possible for the subaltern to criticise perceived abuse of power by the elites but not the structural conditions that create certain groups as elite and others as subaltern (or even the existence of an elite/subaltern distinction). Or does it say something more about people's underlying commitment to the established way of doing things despite what appears to be

revolutionary fervour at times? Returning to the discussions at the beginning of the book, how revolutionary are revolutions?

References

- Dunkerly, James, *Bolivia: Revolution and the Power of History in the Present*. London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2007.
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