

Review/Reseña

Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing, with Félix Muruchi. *From the Mines to the Streets: A Bolivian Activist's Life*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

A Bolivia Life between Class and Ethnicity

Robert Smale

University of Missouri

From the Mines to the Streets: A Bolivian Activist's Life is a first-person narrative of Félix Muruchi Poma's experiences from his birth to an indigenous Aymara family in the Bolivian department of Oruro in 1946 to his participation in Evo Morales Ayma's symbolic ascension to the presidency in 2006. The book covers Muruchi's rural childhood; his early move to the mining town of Siglo XX in the department of Potosí; his experiences as a labor leader under military dictatorship, which led to arrest, torture, and exile; and his work as an urban activist in El Alto in the department of La Paz after the restoration of democracy in the 1980s. This last section covers his participation in the anti-neoliberal movements that brought Evo Morales to power. The academics Benjamin Kohl and Linda C. Farthing, co-authors of the book *Impasse in Bolivia: Neoliberal Hegemony and Popular Resistance* (London: Zed, 2006), edited and translated

Muruchi's story. They first met Muruchi in 1987, but the idea for a collaborative book did not take shape until 2006. Muruchi dictated his contribution on an audio recorder, which when transcribed ran to some 165,000 words. Using that corpus of material, Kohl and Farthing edited and translated the story of Muruchi's life in close collaboration with the protagonist until the current, compact book emerged. In the "Preface and Acknowledgements" Kohl and Farthing worry over the potential pitfalls of the testimonial genre and admit that with their heavy editing and loose translation, the book might more correctly be labeled a biography narrated in the first-person. Despite these worries, Kohl, Farthing, and of course Muruchi have produced a book that is one of the most readable and accessible of life-stories from Latin America.

For the sake of simplicity, I am going to call the book an autobiography. Throughout the work, Kohl and Farthing include sections written by them explaining critical elements of Bolivian history, society, and politics. These inserts are brief and shaded gray to distinguish them from Muruchi's autobiographical words and do an excellent job of providing context for Muruchi's life experiences. Evo Morales's assumption of power as president in 2006 bookends the autobiography; it is presented as the culmination of Muruchi's life-long activism and the book's culmination as well. The introduction describes Muruchi's participation in Evo Morales's symbolic indigenous possession of office carried out at the archeological site of Tiwanaku just south of Lake Titicaca on January 21, 2006. Muruchi describes himself and those around him as ecstatic participants in and witnesses to the ceremony. The autobiography circles around to Evo Morales again in the book's final section, but there Muruchi cautiously acknowledge the deep social, economic, and political problems Bolivia still confronts in the wake of Morales's historic election.

Muruchi's life story begins with his early childhood in the Aymara village of Wila Apacheta in the department of Oruro. While his father was a sometimes laborer in the nearby mining settlement of Siglo XX, the family also belonged to a traditional Andean agricultural and pastoral community known as an *ayllu*. The autobiography includes a number of ethnographic observations in this section, reminiscent of Rigoberta Menchú's famous

testimonial from Guatemala, which also begins with an ethnographic section before moving on to more political topics. Subsistence strategies, the importance of the coca leaf in Andean culture, practices surrounding birth and death, community holidays, and children's games all appear in this section. Muruchi's discussion of the structures of community leadership and his own parents' year as traditional authorities are illuminating, as he conveys the heavy responsibilities and financial burdens that accompany office holding in the *ayllu*.

The next portion of Muruchi's autobiography covers his family's move to the mining town of Siglo XX when he was nine years old. This was a more-or-less permanent relocation, even though the family would never completely sever their ties to Wila Apacheta. More than anyplace else the mines would shape Muruchi's identity. The move came about because of Muruchi's parents' (mainly his mother's) desire for greater education opportunities for their sons; the daughters' educations were not as emphasized. In the urban schools Muruchi confronted significant discrimination against his rural origin and his use of the Quechua and Aymara languages (the family spoke both). At the age of sixteen Muruchi began work as a *juk'u* or a laborer who sneaks into the mines at night to grab ore before being driven out by security. He was too young to get more permanent employment with the state-run mining company.

Muruchi's service in the army at the age of eighteen in 1964 is a section deserving special praise. His experiences and anecdotes capture the contradictions and complexities of Bolivia's system of mandatory military service. Muruchi's enlistment and time in the military is punctuated by blatant examples of corruption, but most especially it highlights the tensions that develop when conscript soldiers are drawn from social classes at odds with an elitist officer corps. Muruchi's experience was especially fraught, as he served in the barracks when the military, led by General René Barrientos Ortuño, overthrew the civilian National Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario, or MNR) presidency of Victor Paz Estenssoro. This coup initiated a period of more-or-less unbroken military rule until 1982. Muruchi explains the deep-seated enmity that existed between the officer corps and the country's miners. He

witnessed the violent pacification of resisters to the coup in Cochabamba where he was stationed. He observed a fractured officer corps that had to discipline its own members before it could consolidate the coup. He saw the origin of the political alliance between the military and indigenous, rural leaders known at the military-*campesino* pact; the generals purchased the loyalty of important agricultural union leaders. But most especially, Muruchi explains why young men from the countryside and the mines continued to serve in an institution so seemingly hostile to their communities and class. Military service was an ingrained masculine right of passage, and the tenacity of that belief was hard to shake.

With Muruchi's completion of his military service, he returned to the Siglo XX mining camp and eventually secured a position working for the state mining company: COMIBOL. The months that Muruchi had to wait and the contacts he had to make to secure the job illustrate the desperate desire that existed among many Bolivians to secure these dangerous but relatively well-paying jobs (well-paying is relative to Bolivia's crippling poverty). The mining job led Muruchi to become a labor activist within the national labor union, the Bolivian Workers Central (Central Obrera Boliviana, or COB), and eventually to joining the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (Partido Comunista Marxist-Leninista, or PCML) founded by the Siglo XX mine leader Federico Escobar. The PCML was a loosely Maoist party, and Muruchi's party activism would lead to the development of the strongly anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist worldview that enlivens his autobiography. His membership in the PCML also allowed Muruchi to explain the contentious and highly fractured leftist political scene in Bolivia.

As a communist activist and a rising labor leader Muruchi witnessed the military assault on Siglo XX in June 1967 known as the "San Juan Massacre" that killed over a hundred people. In launching this attack the military government sought to prevent any linkages between the miners and Ernesto "Che" Guevara's ill-fated guerrilla campaign in the Bolivian lowlands. After President Barrientos' death in 1969 in a helicopter accident, Muruchi worked with his birth community of Wila Apacheta to break the alliance between corrupt rural leaders and the military. Like

many rural people who had relocated to the mines, he maintained ties with the countryside—an example of the kind of fluidity that might exist among various identities like miner, peasant, and Indian. This activism led to his first arrest, from which he eventually escaped, but not without receiving a savage beating. Muruchi's various arrests, detentions, and escapes are an especially compelling part of his autobiography. I in no way intend to belittle the real mortal danger that Muruchi faced at the hands of the military and police or to downplay the beatings and tortures he was subject to, but one could easily describe his various arrests and escapes as almost picaresque in their telling. This is one of the real strengths of the autobiography. Events that are deadly serious are enlivened by Muruchi's easy-going wit, good-humor, and intelligence—things that none of his captors ever seemed able to extinguish.

For a time in 1970 and 1971 Muruchi left the mines to study law at the Technical University of Oruro. Another military coup in August 1971, headed by Colonel Hugo Banzer Suárez, cut those studies short and led to another brief arrest for Muruchi. Banzer would hold power until 1978. This section of the autobiography conveys the every-day impact of military coups and their ensuing dictatorships: plans scuttled, university studies postponed or lost, and sudden unemployment. For a time Muruchi tried his hand as a farmer on the eastern slope of the Andes outside of La Paz in a region known as the Yungas, but he quickly abandoned the endeavor to return to the mines and his activism. Banzer's military dictatorship would again arrest Muruchi in June 1975 and May 1976. These arrests led to lengthier detentions, interrogations, torture, and eventually to Muruchi's exile to General Augusto Pinochet's Chile and his internment on the southern island of Chiloé in Puerto Quellón.

At the end of 1976 Muruchi and two other Bolivians confined to Chiloé succeeded in evading police surveillance and escaping the island to seek the protection of the Dutch ambassador in Santiago. The ambassador eventually secured Muruchi and the other Bolivian dissidents asylum in Europe. However, Muruchi and his compatriots did have to endure one final, day-long "debriefing" at the hands of Pinochet's thugs before their release.

Muruchi's arrival in Amsterdam was a complete cultural shock, but he seemingly adapted to his asylum better than many other political refugees from Latin America. He pursued his political activism while in exile and continued to affiliate with the communist PCML. In May 1977 he visited socialist East Germany for two weeks—he had a younger brother already living and studying there. The visit was a shock to his communist sensibilities, as the imposed system of the Soviet bloc did not live up to his expectations. Muruchi's first exile to the Netherlands came to an end when he returned to Bolivia on May 1, 1978 after the fall of Banzer's dictatorial regime.

During this short-lived return to Bolivia, Muruchi married Emilse Escobar, the daughter of the PCML's founder Federico Escobar, who had been murdered in November 1966 soon after Muruchi joined the party. Emilse Escobar would play a huge role in Muruchi's life from this point forward. Together they had two daughters, and Escobar is a committed social activist but occupies only limited space in this autobiography. Kohl, Farthing, and Muruchi explain in their "Preface and Acknowledgements" that Emilse Escobar wanted to protect her privacy and that of her family by minimizing their presence in the book. The marriage does provide a somewhat humorous illustration of the tenacity of convention in Bolivian mining towns. The couple hoped to have a short and simple marriage ceremony, but family and friends simply would not allow that to happen. The celebration ballooned into a two-day affair with over one hundred guests—still a bit short and small by Bolivian standards.

The political infighting among the fractured Bolivian left during this period frustrated Muruchi. He would eventually leave the PCML in the 1980s, but his reasons for doing so are somewhat (and probably understandably) confused. He claims to leave the PCML because it was no longer following a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist line, but at the same time he expressed a growing disillusionment with Leninist ideology. This ephemeral period of fractious civilian rule ended in July 1980 when Luis García Meza staged Bolivia's most violent military coup.

García Meza's thirteen-month dictatorship saw the murder of about 1,000 people. Muruchi escaped arrest and death by fleeing overland to

Peru. In 1980 a second and longer exile to the Netherlands began, where his wife and daughter eventually joined him. The family soon saw a second daughter born in Europe. Muruchi makes some observations about the exile and refugee community in the Netherlands that are revealing: class, culture, nationality, religion, and politics all created divisions and tensions among the exiles. Muruchi also detected a change among the Dutch populace during his second exile: a turn toward greater hostility directed at foreign refugees. During this period Muruchi suffered greatly because his father died and he could not return to Bolivia for the funeral. Despite that, he stayed in the Netherland longer than was necessary. Civilian rule returned to Bolivia in 1982, but Muruchi did not return until 1985. He stayed in Europe to finish schooling as a skilled machinist and to earn money for his family.

Muruchi's absence from Bolivia during the tense and chaotic years between 1982 and 1985 is regrettable. While he does make some pertinent observations about the period's economic and political crisis, he cannot provide a detailed on-the-scene analysis. There are also indications in the autobiography that he took a step-back from politics during this period. While he was not completely disengaged—he refused a job at a Dutch armaments factory because it was producing weapons for the Iran-Iraq War—he moved away from more vigorous activism. This shift is also seen in his visit to Cuba in 1985 during his return trip to Bolivia. The Caribbean country's inefficient bureaucracy disappointed and frustrated him.

The pace of the autobiography accelerates in the 1980s. While this is understandable, as the last two decades of the twentieth century lack the revolutionary ferment of earlier periods and Muruchi's life is not imperiled by military dictatorship, readers probably would appreciate a more detailed, first-person account of Bolivia's neoliberal years. Muruchi, Kohl, and Farthing do an excellent job of explaining the implementation of the government's New Economic Policy beginning in 1985. This restructuring of the economy occurred during President Víctor Paz Estenssoro's and the MNR's return to power. Kohl and Farthing deserve special praise in this section for hammering home the fact that the MNR explicitly sought to destroy the COB and organized labor in general during this period. This

links up well with their repeated observations throughout the book that the COB was the one consistent and driving entity behind the eventual restoration of democracy and civilian rule in 1982.

Upon his return to Bolivia, Muruchi and his family relocated to El Alto on the outskirts of La Paz. This relocation from the mines to an urban setting mirrors that of other families displaced when COMIBOL fired 23,000 workers. During this period Muruchi began working for a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) affiliated with the Catholic Church. Kohl, Farthing, and Muruchi make a more critical assessment of NGOs than one usually finds, and this is refreshing. Kohl and Farthing especially acknowledge the criticism that is sometimes leveled at these organizations: that they benefit mainly the middle-class functionaries hired to work in them, and that they are a prop for neoliberalism and its devastating economic restructuring. Despite these potential pitfalls, Muruchi is proud of his NGO work. Various, the NGOs that he was affiliated with provided artificial limbs to the handicapped, food to unemployed miners and their families, and technical job training. Muruchi's NGO work also allowed him to travel to Europe, the United States, and Israel, and enabled his two daughters to earn university degrees from institutions in both Bolivia and Europe.

Because of his residence in El Alto, Muruchi eventually returned to political activism. He became an active participant in his local neighborhood organization—important and powerful institutions in El Alto. He ran for public office on the ticket of La Paz's mayor Juan del Prado, who had once been detained with Muruchi during Banzer's dictatorship, but he left the party when a political alliance was made with the MNR of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada—one of the great architects of neoliberal restructuring. Muruchi played a role in establishing the Public University of El Alto (Universidad Pública de El Alto, or UPEA). He would begin studying law once again in the UPEA and serve in its student government. Because of these various neighborhood and university connections, he would participate in the 2003 uprisings that led to the resignation and flight of President Sánchez de Lozada. Eventually,

Evo Morales would win election in 2005 and begin serving in January 2006.

In the “Preface and Acknowledgements” Kohl and Farthing write that some initial readers felt that the book had the ring of hagiography—that there was little criticism of Muruchi, something typical of the testimonial genre. I did not find the book overly hagiographical. There are several points in the autobiography where Muruchi admits personal weaknesses and failings. One of his most honest admissions is his description of his time as a university student in Oruro, where he acknowledges a feeling of shame and embarrassment at the thought of establishing a relationship with a woman who wore traditional dress. In the parlance of Bolivia, the woman was *de pollera*: she wore the traditional multilayered skirts of the highland people.

Other elements of the autobiography are a bit more disconcerting. The book has a subtle *katarista* undertone: it engages in a bit of Aymara ethnic nationalism. This only occasionally becomes blatant and is more pronounced in Kohl and Farthing’s explanations of politics and history than in Muruchi’s narrative. Linked to this tendency, Kohl and Farthing engage in an odd “othering” of Félix Muruchi Poma. The two editors note that readers of the initial manuscript found the language a bit flat; Muruchi tended to talk more about Bolivian history than his own participation in events. Kohl and Farthing judged this a disconnect between North American sensibilities emphasizing the individual and an indigenous point of view focused on the collective. Later, as they continued to refine the manuscript with Muruchi, they felt that Muruchi quickly learned the forms of Western narrative and began to tailor his contributions accordingly. This placing of Muruchi outside of Western culture is odd considering his university education, his extensive foreign travel, and that he is the coauthor of two books in Spanish: *Ponchos rojos* and *Minero con poder de dinamita*. Might not Muruchi’s original emphasis reflect his personal proclivities or his political point of view rather than an innate cultural tendency?

Kohl and Farthing want to privilege ethnic identity over class, but Muruchi’s own proclivities keep them from doing this to excess. At the end

of the autobiography they even suggest that socialism is a form of European colonialism. There are also hints that they would like to elevate gender over class as well, but the unwillingness of Muruchi's wife and family to appear prominently limited the possibility. Toward the end of the autobiography Kohl and Farthing label Muruchi's experiences as a miner and a student—experiences that led him to develop a militantly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist ideology—as a kind of self-colonization. That seems unnecessarily harsh. During Muruchi's years in Europe, friends and acquaintances insisted on emphasizing his indigenous identity. Muruchi insisted on his identity as a miner—his preferred identity throughout his life. Perhaps the European (and North American) prioritization of an indigenous identity is a kind of modern colonialism?

Félix Muruchi Poma's life-story is engaging and accessible. The fact that it covers so many periods and elements of twentieth-century Latin American history make it a wonderful classroom resource. One could easily pair it with Domitila Barrios de Chungara's testimonial edited by Moema Viezzer and translated by Victoria Ortiz, *Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*. Barrios de Chungara and Muruchi were both members of the PCML in Siglo XX, and she makes two appearances in Muruchi's autobiography. I will soon be using this book in my own courses.