



Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 2010, 506-517
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

S. Sándor John, *Bolivia's Radical Tradition: Permanent Revolution in the Andes*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009.

Permanent Revolution and the Impermanence of History

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Twenty years after the collapse of Soviet communism, seventy years after Leon Trotsky's death, and eighty-two years after he was purged from the Soviet government, a book from a Trotskyist perspective on Trotskyism in Bolivia may seem anachronistic or even irrelevant. However, the rise of Evo Morales calls to mind the crucial role that miners and their Trotskyist guides played in creating a unique and powerful radical tradition in this land-locked, impoverished country. One of those guides, Guillermo Lora—the most familiar public face of Bolivian Trotskyism—once called Bolivia “*un país trotskizado*.” Be that as it may, S. Sándor John states that “until

now there has been no full-length study explaining how and why Bolivia became the Western country where Trotskyism has had the deepest and longest-lasting impact.” John’s purpose in *Bolivia’s Radical Tradition: Permanent Revolution in the Andes* is to provide that explanation and to discover what it tells us “about the 1952 Revolution and the explosive developments of more recent years and decades” (4-5). John believes that Trotsky’s legacy is crucial and that his ideas continue to play an important if critical role in Morales’ Bolivia.

Trotsky’s ideas came to Bolivia amidst the traumas of the Chaco War and John maintains that they gained appeal because they were truly revolutionary. A small group of opponents of the war, including José Aguirre Gainsborg, became active Trotskyists while in exile in Chile during the war and from there helped to organize the *Partido Obrero Revolucionario* (POR) in 1935. Aguirre and the POR turned for leadership to Bolivia’s best-known leftist and war critic, Tristan Marof (the pen name of exiled writer Gustavo Navarro), a choice John notes which “would be fateful indeed” (34). John spends considerable time on Marof and his relationship with the POR because not only is he the source of key concepts and slogans (“lands to the Indians, mines to the state” etc.), but Marof also “manifested contradictions that shaped Bolivian Trotskyism during its gestation” (43). The contradictions are essentially those between the pragmatics of power and ideological adherence to permanent revolution, a tension also present in the Stalin-Trotsky split as John explains in a useful appendix to his book.

Stalin focused on “socialism in one country” thus giving attention to Russia’s national interests and to the exercise of power. Because he was in power, Stalin moved toward an increasingly bureaucratized and repressive state while Trotsky, now an outsider, criticized these tendencies and kept his unswerving (“permanent”) attention on advancing the revolution. And for reasons of national security, Stalin was more inclined than Trotsky to enter into temporary tactical international alignments with non-Marxists and to accept the two-phase interpretation of Marx’s theories. This allowed tactical alliances between communists and “national bourgeoisie” parties in places like Latin America that needed first to pass through a capitalist

phase before proletarian revolution was possible according to Stalinist theory.

The concept of “permanent revolution” comes from Marx’s admonition to German workers after the failed 1848 uprising to remain vigilant, independent of bourgeois alliances, and militantly focused on proletarian revolution. Trotsky championed this view and warned that “*never and under no circumstances may the party of the proletariat enter into a party of another class or merge with it organizationally*” (244, emphasis in the original). He also maintained that there were not two-phases to revolution but only one because the international capitalist system and the mechanisms of imperialism made peripheral economies like Bolivia’s as pertinent to the triumph of socialism as the most advanced capitalist ones. Shortly before his death, Trotsky wrote: “The perspective of the permanent revolution in no case signifies that the backward countries must await the signal from the advanced ones, or that the colonial peoples should patiently wait for the proletariat of the metropolitan centers to free them” (247). The revolution had begun in Russia, a country of “combined development” and, as in Latin America, traditional modes of production existed alongside advanced ones introduced by foreign capital. This brought contradictions to focus and made revolution possible. Trotsky’s ideas were therefore more radical, more sensitive to imperialism, more pertinent to Bolivian conditions, and thus of greater appeal to Bolivian leftists.

This tension between the quest for power in a specific place—Bolivia—and permanent international revolution, is a central theme of John’s book. John, who makes his own Trotskyist sympathies clear in the introduction, criticizes Marof’s populist nationalism, his “big-tent” socialist strategy, and his willingness to work with the so-called “military socialists” after the Chaco War. Marof’s deviations and the tragically bizarre death of Aguirre, who fell from an amusement park ride in October 1938, might have led to the early demise of the POR and of Bolivian Trotskyism were it not for the emergence of a young leftist named Guillermo Lora. Described by a fellow radical as “a very emphatic fellow,” Lora began to organize

Bolivian tin miners, a crucial reason why Trotskyism attached itself so firmly to the Bolivian left.

According to John, Lora was first recruited in the late 1930s by Ricardo Anaya, his university professor and founder of the Stalinist *Partido de la Izquierda Revolucionario* (PIR). But Lora rejected Stalinism in favor of Trotsky's more consistent anti-imperialism even though at the time PIR was the party in ascent and POR was struggling to survive. POR was essentially still an association of exiles and intellectuals with little connection to the Bolivian proletariat, but Lora (from Oruro) began organizing workers at Siglo XX despite never having worked a day in the mines. The radical ideas of Trotsky, conveyed through Lora, fell on fertile ground among miners. They were exploited and unhappy but shared a solidarity enhanced by their work underground and occupied a crucial position as producers of nearly all of Bolivia's foreign exchange. In short they filled the specific place in Bolivian society that Trotsky envisioned; a proletariat sufficiently concentrated and strategic that it had "a specific weight" far exceeding its numbers and possessed "the social power to lead the oppressed against the old order" (243).

World War II solidified the miners' strategic position in Bolivia and increased their connection to the POR. Trotsky's Fourth International, formed in 1938, did not support the anti-fascist alliance that included Stalin after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. Thus Trotskyists could join miners in resisting allied demands to increase tin production at below-market prices for the war. To Trotsky, to the POR, and to miners, the struggle against fascism could not be separated from larger struggles against imperialism and capitalism and true to Trotsky's injunction, the POR avoided alliances with wartime bourgeois and military governments that the Stalinists dutifully supported. When nationalist army officer Gualberto Villarroel seized power in 1943 the PIR backed U.S. claims that Villarroel had fascist sympathies. The POR remained aloof but took advantage of Villarroel's recognition of the miners union to intensify their work among miners. The PIR, meanwhile, supported the popular uprising in 1946 that led to Villarroel's overthrow; then, over the next six years, fell into oblivion, tarnished by connections to the new government's anti-labor

policies. According to John, the POR's faithful adherence to permanent revolution during this crucial period is another important factor explaining Trotsky's continuing hold in Bolivia.

But this observation is complicated by what followed and John's analysis turns critical as he looks at the story of Bolivian Trotskyists in the years surrounding the 1952 national revolution. During the war and the six years of conservative rule that followed the overthrow of Villarroel, Lora and the POR strengthened their ties to the miners while, at the same time, developing a tactical alliance with the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR). In the late 1940s Lora worked closely with Juan Lechín, the charismatic MNRista head of the mine-workers' union, writing speeches for him while guiding him ideologically and programmatically. The two even lived together for six months. This tactical alliance was cemented by the Thesis of Pulacayo, a statement written by Lora but endorsed by Lechin's miners in late 1946. The Thesis underscored the commitment of the miners to revolution, emphasized the central role miners would play, and rejected "any government that is not our own." As such it was a victory for Lora (its chief author), for the POR, and for the ideas of Leon Trotsky.

John quotes Bismarck that "every alliance consists of a horse and a rider" and notes that after Pulacayo the PORistas thought they were in the saddle (88-89). However, he observes, it was the MNR and Lechín who best advanced their own agendas while using the POR to consolidate support among miners. Trotskyists might have had a clearer vision of revolution, but the MNR had a near-term strategy to seize power and improve miners' conditions and access to power. When the MNR finally seized power in April 1952, miners were key allies, and following the revolution and despite opposition from the Fourth International, Lora and the POR worked within the newly formed *Central Obrera Boliviana* (Bolivian Workers Central or COB) and with the MNR labor wing under Lechin to constantly push both to the left.

To John, this tactical alliance smacked of Stalinism, weakened the POR, and subjected it to Lechín's opportunistic "double game." Meanwhile, MNR leader Víctor Paz Estenssoro and the MNR center countered POR's

push to the left by convincing US officials that only they—with US support—could thwart a Trotskyist-labor alliance. By 1954, at the behest of Washington, the MNR was moving against “communists” and as repression increased many of Lora’s fellow party members left the POR to join the MNR. Now the POR was no longer even at the fringes of power and in the late 1950s and early 1960s it split and split again over tactics and alliances. When the military seized power in November 1964, Bolivia’s revolution—the closest Latin America has ever come to a proletarian revolution—remained frustratingly incomplete and impermanent by any standard. John accuses Bolivian Trotskyists, particularly Lora, of failing to finish a revolution they had helped start (161).

With General René Barrientos in power (1964-1969) repression increased and Trotskyists moved back into the opposition. POR factions divided over the revolutionary wisdom of Che Guevara’s guerilla campaign at Ñancahuazú in 1967, and following its failure Lora issued a scathing critique of *foco* theory. He later called attempts by the Guevarist *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) to create a new *foco* north of La Paz, a case of urban, romantic adventurism. When Barrientos died in a helicopter accident in 1969, Trotskyists again divided over how to respond. Lora’s POR-Masas faction was inclined to work with the progressive army officers who were now in power while other POR factions and the Trotskyist International believed militaries to be invariably antithetical to revolution. On May Day of 1971, General Juan José Torres called a Popular Assembly and Lora threw himself and POR-Masas into organizing. But the assembly was again dominated by Lechínistas and did nothing to prepare for the reaction that its revolutionary pronouncements inevitably aroused. The response came on August 19-20, 1971 when Hugo Banzer seized power with the support of a right-wing faction in the military, the energetic backing of Santa Cruz elites, and at least indirect support from the Brazilian and Argentine military juntas and the United States. During the coup, Trotskyists joined students and union activists in a heroic assault of military positions atop Laikakota hill in central La Paz, but in the end that assault was as fruitless and romantically adventurist as Che’s *foco* at Ñancahuazú or the ELN’s at Teoponte.

John covers the period from “Banzer to Morales” in a final chapter that is far less detailed, and that focuses less on the evolution of Bolivia’s radical tradition than on the reactions of the Trotskyist left to that evolution. His strongest case for the continued importance of Trotsky is his suggestion that when miners were forcibly dispersed from the mines by the neoliberal 21060 Law in 1985 they carried his ideas to the Yungas, Chapare, El Alto, Cochabamba, or wherever they relocated. There, John suggests, Trotskyist influence shaped both the ideology and tactics of the emerging coca federations, neighborhood councils, and the other social organizations that were so instrumental in the 2000 “water war,” the 2003 “gas war,” and the 2005 upheavals that led to the rise of Evo Morales. Though John adds anecdotal information from interviews with participants, his coverage of this lengthy and significant period is too brief to add much evidence for what remains a suggestive and provocative hypothesis. He ends his book with a reminder of the continuing power of the ideas expressed in the Thesis of Pulacayo, though “whether and how they will be attained remains very much an open question” (240).

As noted above, John makes his own sympathies clear:

I admire the courage, determination, and self-sacrifice shown by the activists of the Bolivian Trotskyist movement. Moreover, I am sympathetic not only to their ideals but specifically to the concepts and program formulated by Leon Trotsky. This very sympathy heightens my duty as a historian to approach Bolivian Trotskyism with a critical eye...If solidarity is not to be an empty phrase, it demands critical thinking and learning from experience. The results are for the reader to judge. (17)

John’s candor and the challenge he presents in his final sentence leads me to respond to his book with equal candor. It is unfair to criticize a book for not being a different book, but John’s title and introduction seemed to this reader to promise a different and perhaps more valuable book. I’d have liked to have seen more emphasis on Bolivia’s radical tradition and less on Trotsky. I will grant John’s point that “there has been no full-length study” of Bolivian Trotskyism, but, in fact, a great deal has already been written about the miners, the labor movement, and the influence of Marx and Trotsky as his substantial bibliography makes clear. In English alone Robert Alexander, Herbert Klein, James Malloy,

Christopher Mitchell, James Dunkerley, Lawrence Whitehead, and Lora himself (translated and edited by Whitehead) have covered—if less completely or cohesively—much of the material that John covers in his best documented chapters. What no one has yet addressed in any depth, however, is John’s final purpose: to connect the story of Bolivian Trotskyism to “the explosive developments of more recent years and decades.”

In a paper on political ferment prior to the 1952 revolution that I delivered at the March 2000 Latin American Studies Association, I began by asking whether Bolivia’s radical tradition still existed. I had been in Bolivia the previous spring and while the Trotskyist head of the teachers’ union in La Paz, Vilma Plata, had managed to disrupt the beginning of the 1999 school year, I saw little of the popular mobilization that had always struck me as an essential ingredient of Bolivian political discourse. Law 21060 had largely destroyed Bolivia’s proletarian radical core by closing the mines. What was left of that tradition seemed to reside in the coca regions and while it was easy to sympathize with small coca producers who were then taking the brunt of an increasingly repressive drug war, their efforts seemed nonetheless tarnished by links to a trade that was more about immense profits than permanent revolution. But the answer to my question was coming, exploding into international awareness only days after I delivered that paper when the people of Cochabamba launched the water war that thwarted Bechtel and the World Bank and that destroyed Bolivia’s seeming neo-liberal consensus with remarkable rapidity.

Bolivia indeed has a strong radical tradition, though with all due respect to Lora and his considerable influence it has never been “a Trotskyized country.” Rather, there are various strands in that tradition as Theo Ballvé points out in a recent article that cites the work of Forrest Hylton and Sinclair Thomson:

Bolivia’s rich histories of tightly knit campesino communities (called ayllus), workers unions, campesino unions, neighborhood associations and many other forms of collective organization have long made it one of Latin America’s most organized societies. “Hence when Bolivians began the latest cycle of resistance and insurgency in 2000 . . . their radical traditions of organizing provided unexpected reserves of strength. Revolutionary forces and aspirations only recently

thought to have been buried, suddenly resurfaced with surprising energy and creativity, albeit in new forms and under new circumstances.” These conditions made Bolivia uniquely poised to resist, and overturn reigning global economic, political and military arrangements, and it has begun to do so with stunning success.¹

More analysis and evidence of the exact degree and nature of Trotsky’s influence on this recent resurgence would have strengthened John’s book. Unfortunately his coverage grows skimpy just when the story gets most interesting—the 1980s when the military finally withdrew from politics, the unions tried ineffectively to again reassert their influence, and the MNR returned to power to launch structural reforms that essentially gutted the labor movement and dispersed the miners, all of this happening against the backdrop of the collapse of Soviet communism. Through the 1990s, labor activists and Trotskyists seemed impotent against the onslaught of neoliberal policies, which continued unabated until the water war. John was in Bolivia, directly observing some of these events, and his informants provide valuable insights into the role of Trotskyists in the resurgence of radical activism after the turn of the millennium. I would have enjoyed the depth of coverage and analysis of this period that John brings to earlier parts of his story.

Bolivia’s radical tradition has an Indian face. Trotsky recognized this. He wrote while in Mexico that Latin America’s proletariat should “attract to its side the tens of millions of Indo-American peasants” (cited on p. 245) and John comments that from the beginning Trotskyists in Bolivia realized that the “proletariat was indigenous” (25-27). John describes how the POR not only worked with Indian miners, but also played an important role organizing indigenous peasants in the Cochabamba valley prior to land reform. But POR successes in Cochabamba not only threatened the MNR, which used its patronage powers to redirect much of that peasant activism back into support of the revolutionary regime, it also threatened Lora who feared that too many peasant members diluted POR’s message and its

¹ Theo Ballvé, “¡Bolivia de Pie!,” *Dispatches from Latin America*, Vijay Prashad and Theo Ballvé editors (Cambridge: South End Press, 2008), 152.

proletarian base since “the peasant is really a small proprietor” and not a true revolutionary force (145).

For Lora in this case, and perhaps for John as well, Trotskyist ideology can, at times, get in the way of the story. The peasants’ role in Bolivia’s unfolding revolution was pivotal, and even if they became relatively conservative advocates of the MNR regime and eventually supported Barrientos, their inclusion after the 1952 revolution altered the trajectory of Bolivia’s history. Now they, as recent immigrants to Bolivia’s cities, play a central role in the reemergence and redefinition of Bolivian radicalism, reshaping it in ways that Trotsky could not have imagined. The villains of John’s piece are the opportunists like Stalin and Lechín whose pragmatic quest for power leads them, in his eyes, to betray the revolution. Marof and even Lora veer off course in a quest for immediate influence thus forgetting Trotsky’s permanent focus on the final objective. For John, the jury is still out on Morales (with some justification, perhaps, since, as I write this review, clashes between peasants and government forces in the Yungas have led to one death.) He accuses Morales of being too quick to come to terms with foreign capital and quotes Bolivian Trotskyists approvingly when they describe Morales “not as an engineer on the locomotive of revolution, but a fireman trying to put out the flames of revolt” (6). But while this may be a satisfying ideological position, it ignores the fact that it is the actions of those who struggle to shape conditions in Bolivia through praxis that are the compelling and significant parts of the story (at least to this reader).

Trotskyism, as John notes, has never truly been tried (238). Ironically, this may also be a reason for its continuing appeal. The ideas of Marx, Lenin, Mao, Fidel, Che, and other great Marxists *have* been tried and in all cases the revolutions their theories spawned did not play out to script. History has a funny way of doing that. John continues:

Revolutionary opportunities presented themselves, not once, but repeatedly—yet at each new stage they returned to their old ways of leaning on Lechín and his political heirs. Each new stage ended in new defeats and frustrations, as radical labor found itself unable to break free from the political framework bequeathed by the 1952 nationalist experience. At each new stage, social revolution remained a historic possibility, a potential that Bolivian Trotskyists found themselves unable to bring to fruition. (238)

This is more an assertion by a true believer than a product of careful historical analysis, and seems to greatly overstate the potential of Bolivian Trotskyists to affect the proletarian revolution in Bolivia. It also ignores that it is Morales and his coalition of supporters who are finally breaking free of the 1952 nationalist framework. Permanent revolution (at least to me) is the permanent quest for justice, equity, freedom from want, empowerment of the powerless, liberty to pursue one's personal goals, and so forth. These values advance, not with ideological rigidity and programmatic fundamentalism, but rather through active participation and struggle by people supporting these values within the messy process of history. History allows—in fact requires—compromises, alliances, negotiation, exchange, and engagement and John's book is most interesting when addressing these things, and less so when he covers the theoretical debates among Trotskyist purists.

Despite these criticisms, this is a valuable addition to the literature on Bolivia's history of radicalism. It is admirably researched, well-written, and in many ways strengthened by the author's investment in his topic. He provides the clearest explanation of the split between Stalin and Trotsky I've seen and uses careful research into the substantial primary and secondary literature on the Bolivian labor movement to supplement extensive and highly original archival work and his interviews with key participants. John shares voices and memories that might otherwise soon be lost—voices of Bolivia's own "greatest generation." His attention to collective memory and the voices of those who help shape those memories is a significant contribution to our understanding of recent Bolivian history and Bolivia's radical tradition. In addition, John provides new perspective on Guillermo Lora, Bolivia's most prolific and fascinating Trotskyist. John's ambivalent feeling toward some of Lora's decisions is clear, yet he recognizes Lora's centrality to the story.

The old labor leader, in fact, comes tantalizingly close to providing a one-man answer to John's quest to discover "why Bolivia became the Western country where Trotskyism has had the deepest and longest-lasting impact," and this is precisely because Lora did not always remain ideologically pure. But, of course, no single man is responsible for the

continuing hold of Trotskyism on Bolivia nor is one strain of radical thought sufficient to understand or explain Bolivia's radical tradition. Rather that tradition continues to evolve and is product of multiple historical factors, Trotsky's lingering influence being but one.