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“Fear of Heights: Bolivia’s Constituent Process”

La Paz is the world’s highest capital city, at 3,636 meters above sea level. So it is all the more surprising that to get there, you have to descend: it is located in what the locals call a *hueco*, a hole or a hollow. When I visited in December, I arrived from across the Altiplano, a broad almost perfectly flat plain that stretches out towards Lake Titicaca in the Northwest. Snow-capped mountains loom up on the horizon. The plain itself is dotted with small subsistence farms and apparently run-down huts and houses that gradually coalesce as you approach the city, to form the sprawling shantytown of El Alto. With almost a million inhabitants, almost all of whom are migrants from the countryside, El Alto is now a city in its own right and comprises the largest concentration of indigenous people in the Americas. It is here, where the ground is still level, that the international airport is located. And then suddenly, the ground drops away and you find yourself looking down into the *hueco* itself, a cliff-lined bowl packed with buildings of every type. Five hundred meters beneath you are the sky-scrapers of La Paz city center.

Hunkered down in its hollow, the Bolivian capital shelters from the cold, the wind, and the oxygen-starved air of the high Altiplano. But this relative comfort is won at a price. The motorway that winds down the side of the cliff from El Alto is a precarious affair. And yet almost everything that goes in and out of the city has to pass along it. During the disturbances of October 2004 that ultimately gave rise to the current government of Evo Morales, indigenous protestors took a leaf out of the Argentine *piqueteros’* book: they blocked the road, turning their marginal location, perched on the edge of the precipice, into a significant geopolitical advantage. In the narrow and winding city streets far below, it is relatively rare that you get a glimpse of the heights that surround you. But in the tumult leading up to the 2005 presidential elections, the periphery decisively made its presence felt.

Since 2005, and especially in recent months, another periphery has been flexing its muscles. For heading East other routes, among them one labeled the most

dangerous road in the world because of the perils of its descent, drop down towards the lowland plains. At well under 3,000 meters, temperate Sucre has long been a counterweight to the constituted power otherwise concentrated in La Paz; a historic colonial center and nineteenth-century capital, it is still the location of the Supreme Court among other government institutions. Further and lower down still, in the sweltering heat where the Andes finally give out and between Amazon basin and Paraguayan desert, Santa Cruz is now the country's largest city, a boomtown product of the oil and gas exploration that is the latest key to Bolivia's dreams of wealth and development, and so also the focus of foreign capital, political machination, and social struggle. If the protests of 2004 and earlier, such as the so-called water war in Cochabamba of 2000 and 2001, almost all took place in the highlands, now it is Sucre and Santa Cruz that are the site of disturbances. At stake is the constitution of the country itself.

The political changes sweeping Latin America over the past decade have usually been described in terms of the standard opposition between Left and Right. Since Hugo Chávez's Venezuelan election victory in 1996, we have been witnessing, it is claimed, a turn to the Left. From Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva in Brazil to Néstor (and now Cristina) Kirchner in Argentina, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and even the return of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, the Left has taken power throughout the hemisphere and come remarkably close to victory in several of those countries (such as Mexico and Peru) where it has not won outright. All that remains, then, is an evaluation of what kind or kinds of Left this movement incarnates, and its prospects to effect long-term change in a region renowned for having been the crucible of neoliberal experimentation and, partly as a result, suffering historic levels of inequality and structural violence. Indeed, the broad panorama of the Latin American Left allows the luxury of choosing more or less congenial bedfellows. For Tariq Ali, among others most notably now Slavoj Žižek, Chávez above all is leading the way in the construction of an "axis of hope" for an egalitarian post-neoliberal future. For someone like the Mexican analyst Jorge Castañeda, by contrast, along with probably the mainstream of Northern Hemisphere liberalism, the more cautious social democracy favored by Lula or the Kirchners is preferable to the brash populism of the Venezuelan leader. Yet Bolivia's Morales does not fit easily into either camp: he lacks

Chávez's personal charisma and combativeness and he has been forced, especially recently, into extended negotiations both with his political opponents and with his sometime fractious allies among Left-leaning social movements; on the other hand, his "Movement Towards Socialism" ("Movimiento al Socialismo" or MAS) stakes out some of the most radical demands of any so far articulated in the continent, at least on paper.

The piece of paper that perhaps best articulates the aspirations of Morales's movement, and on which Morales has gambled and arguably lost much of his personal political capital, is the revised Bolivian constitution, approved in December by a constituent assembly composed almost entirely of Morales supporters as his opponents chose to boycott proceedings amid often acrimonious and violent scenes in lowland cities such as Sucre and Santa Cruz. For rather than Left versus Right, the situation in Bolivia, as indeed much of the rest of Latin America, is best understood in terms of the tension between constituent and constituted power, or even between competing versions or understandings of the constituent process. The alternative is less the tired choice between social democracy and populism, and more the question as to whether we are seeing the emergence of a new form of governmentality sealed by a renovated social pact, or whether by contrast this is but the start of a radically open process in which all pacts and contracts are kept permanently in suspense. Is this a renegotiation of the postcolonial settlement designed above all to relegitimize the state and its institutions? Or is it the rebellion of a multitude, a historic inversion in which what Simon Critchley would call "infinitely demanding" social movements ensure that any attempt at hegemonic closure is now perpetually deferred? In short, is for instance the declaration that Bolivia is a pluri-ethnic nation state, which recognizes the rights and, in certain cases, parallel justice systems of indigenous communities, to be understood as biopolitical retrenchment or as a lasting challenge to the unitary principles of state transcendence?

In Venezuela, it seems now clearer than ever that Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution is more retrenchment than opening. There, ironically, the constituent process has been kept open only by the mass abstention of millions of former chavistas from the latest series of proposed constitutional amendments, defeated in December's national referendum. The centripetal force of Chávez's reforms, the way in which they tend to concentrate power in the presidency itself, has become ever more obvious. The irony, however, is that the president himself becomes ever more diffuse: his appeal is

sustained only by a hectic schedule of travel alongside the constant attempt to make himself present in the population's everyday life by means of his marathon stints as talkshow host on his weekly programme "Alo Presidente." Much more literally and much more insistently than any other world leader, Chávez's ambition is to be the president in your living room. Indeed the controversy following his government's refusal to renew a broadcasting license to the RCTV television station had less to do with the fact that this was a channel that steadfastly sided with the political opposition, and more with what is effectively a competition between state and private sector over the serialized affects of the Venezuelan viewing public. RCTV was avidly watched even by people averse to its political line, because its soap operas were perennial favourites. Chávez, meanwhile, has taken political melodrama to new aesthetic and affective extremes, even on the international stage as in his complex orchestration of the Colombian hostage rescue saga at the beginning of this year. It was only appropriate that Oliver Stone, cinematic master of political affect, should have been present at least for the first, botched, incarnation of the mission dubbed "Operation Emmanuel" in honour of the child hostage the world was led to believe that the FARC still held.

In Bolivia, the situation remains more complex and more fluid. In part this is because Morales is a very different leader from Chávez. He has little of the military man's bearing or sense of spectacle, though in his own way he does know how to put on a rather low-key show. Where the Venezuelan leader favours a sartorial style that includes plenty of jumpsuits in the colors of the red, yellow, and blue national flag, a sort of combination of Vegas-era Elvis with a Mondrian obsession, the Bolivian president won headlines when, shortly before his inauguration, he undertook a world tour (which took in Havana, Caracas, Madrid, Paris, Brussels, and Jon Stewart's "Daily Show") clad always in what was apparently the same rather homely alpaca jumper. Though Morales has certainly earned his political stripes over the years, as leader of the largely indigenous coca-growers' movement, the public impression he gives is much more down to earth and conciliatory than Chávez's larger than life and in-your-face hyper-activity. Morales does not possess the charismatic personality that could overcode the many disparate social forces that constitute his political movement. Hence, therefore, the constitution and the constituent process is much more of a delicate balancing act: the piece of paper matters more to Morales's air of legitimacy than it does to Chávez, who was able to shrug off his referendum defeat with what was yet another

masterful piece of televisual showmanship in which a concession speech only thinly veiled a triumphant discourse declaring that the revolution was but temporarily postponed "for the time being."

Moreover, Morales precariously presides over a much more fragmented polity. Whereas Chávez has engineered an almost perfectly Schmittian division between political friend and enemy, chavista and anti-chavista, the Bolivian constituent process has encouraged declarations of autonomy on the part of the lowland provinces that increasingly have become the country's economic heartland, for good measure stirring up age-old conflicts over the postcolonial settlement that carved up constituted power between Sucre and La Paz. The constituent assembly was to have met in Sucre, in part as a gesture towards decentralization, but street violence eventually forced a change in venue from public theatre to guarded military academy, and final approval in mid-December took place in highland Oruro. At almost exactly the same time, the governor of Santa Cruz province declared autonomy from the central government, proposing the creation of separate identity cards and the province's own police force, as well as more significantly arguing that two thirds of the region's oil and gas revenues should be retained locally rather than going to La Paz for national redistribution. Three other lowland provinces quickly followed suit, effectively undermining the notion that the constitution signified the refoundation of the Bolivian republic. Rather, it seemed to presage its imminent disintegration. But the perhaps unintended effect of this separatist declaration was that Morales was forced to re-open the constituent process, accepting that the constitution's terms were up for renegotiation ahead of the national referendum required to ensure its passage into law later this year.

Who then incarnates the constituent power that for Antonio Negri is the expression of an insurgent multitude? A strange reversal seems to have taken place, by which a national government with its concerns for unity and legal due process is identified with subaltern movements and the indigenous. And it is the economically powerful, whose interests regularly coincide with those of oil and gas multinationals, that are declaring autonomy and issuing demands that constituted power is unable to satisfy while realistically retaining its territorial monopoly of real and symbolic violence. In short, and in the terms offered by Negri and Michael Hardt's *Empire*, forces aligned with Empire are behaving rather more like their description of the multitude, while the so-called multitude is identified ever more with something closely resembling

the old-fashioned national-popular state. It is no great wonder, if no small irony, that Negri himself has repeatedly thrown what weight he has behind leaders such as Chávez and Morales, and even Kircher and Lula, whom he extols in *GlobAL* (co-written with Giuseppe Cocco) for advancing a "constituent New Deal." What happened to the theorist who, in essays such as "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State," was such a trenchant critic of Keynesianism and the *old* New Deal? It is no doubt a sign of the ambiguities of the concepts of multitude and Empire, and even constituent and constituted power, biopower and biopolitics, as advanced in publications such as *Empire*, *Insurgencies*, and *Multitude*, that on what should perhaps be their favoured terrain (and given the amount of time that Negri has spent in recent years in and writing about Latin America, it would seem that he believes the region to offer the clearest instance of the tendencies those concepts set out to describe), they are still as yet insufficient to their task. However much the framework that Negri suggests is an improvement on the now worn-out platitudes of liberalism, populism, and social democracy, its actualization in Latin America remains problematic.

The situation in Bolivia remains complex and unpredictable. This year could see further violence and further disintegration. Morales's position may well prove fundamentally untenable, and the alternative is likely turn out to be far worse, at least in the short to medium term. But as with Chávez and *chavismo*, it is worth looking to the internal conflicts within the MAS and its allied movements. For the drive to consolidate constituted power is hardly representative, however much as always constitutional renovation is undertaken precisely in the name of enhanced representativity. Equally, the inhabitants of hydrocarbon-rich provinces such as Santa Cruz hardly hold a monopoly on desires for political and social autonomy. Indeed, the tension within Bolivia's social movements and their purported representatives is also that between a subalternist tendency that turns its back on any claims to political unity on the one hand, and a hegemonic logic of refoundation on the other. The fact that an indigenous leader is installed in the National Palace in La Paz does little in itself to resolve the tension between a capital that seeks refuge in the folds of the Altiplano and the sprawling multitude that look down on the city from the surrounding heights. My wager would be that it is in the informal coalescence of El Alto that Bolivia's best prospects are to be found. The current squabble between La Paz and Sucre, La Paz and

Santa Cruz, is symptom as well as alibi for the fact that a new, post-neoliberal logic of social order and/or multitudinous community is still at best on the other side of the horizon.