

Linda C. Farthing and Benjamin H. Kohl. *Evo's Bolivia: Continuity and Change*. xix, 243 pages. Austin, TX.: University of Texas Press.

Evo's Bolivia: Continuity and Change is a remarkable contribution to the contemporary literature on Bolivia. Perhaps, its greatest contribution is how Linda Farthing and Benjamin Kohl make a complicated history, political economy and geography accessible to a broad range of people (without compromising the politics, nuance, and complexity of the contemporary era). This book represents a culmination of more than thirty years of commitment to a place and to a people. Through their extensive personal networks and web of community and scholarly relations, they weave together diverse narratives into a kind of patchwork of responses to Bolivia's *Proceso de Cambio* [Process of Change].

Bolivia's Shades of Gray in a Black and White World

Farthing and Kohl use Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's concept of *chi'ixi*—something that can be simultaneously white and not white, and black and not black—as a conceptual framing for thinking about *el Proceso de Cambio* (history, politics, economy, and redistribution of resource wealth) in Bolivia. This Andean notion envisions a complex form of conjugation of peoples and ideas that is closer to complementarity of differences than hybridity. Despite popular journalistic and academic tendencies to polarize or to characterize the Leftward turn in Latin America as “good/bad,” Farthing and Kohl sought to create more of a patchwork. Their book demonstrates that Bolivia is best understood by examining the multiple layers and

intersections of culture, history, economy.

Farthing and Kohl first sketch the broad contours of the social, political and economic transformation of the country with the rise of Evo Morales. After a brief introduction to the country (Chapter 1) and to Bolivian history, landscape and environmental geography (Chapter 2)—which highlights the cultural, geographical differences between highland Altiplano and lowland Amazon—they hone in on the rise of Morales in the wake of a series of resource-based movements. While Morales' inauguration into office represented a watershed victory for indigenous peoples, there was a very real threat coming from the elite business community in the Eastern lowland city of Santa Cruz. "With a stranglehold over local politics, media, and business [...] Santa Cruz's oligarchy claims to represent the entire media luna (half-moon, because of its crescent shape), as Santa Cruz, Beni, Tarija and Pando, the four lowland departments that curve northwest around the Andes, are known" (Farthing and Kohl 45). Morales's commitment to decolonizing the nation-state and to ending 30+ years of neoliberal reforms through nationalization of natural hydrocarbons and gas threatened both the racial hierarchy of power and undermined the Cruceño *development model*, primarily dependent upon agribusiness expansion and natural gas reserves. Elites launched a powerful regional campaign calling for decentralization and autonomy over their lands and natural resources with deep anti-indigenous, anti-"Colla" (term used to describe someone from the Western highlands) sentiments.

This climate of resistance is important for understanding the various ways in which the Morales government has attempted to reinvent the state (Chapter 4), albeit with great limitation. Some of MAS's progressive reforms included the passing of Law against Racism and Discrimination and designating October 12 as national day of decolonization. While "incorporation and inclusion" have been key to this administration (particularly as they formed a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution), Morales's union history (and top-down leadership style) limited MAS' ability to practice a truly "participatory democracy." The 2011-2012 TIPNIS crisis provides the most glaring examples of this, as Morales failed to consult with lowland indigenous communities before approving a major development plan to build an inter-continental highway through "collectively" owned lands. This "consultation process" had been written into the new constitution. These

are the shades of gray that Farthing and Kohl attempt to document. Instead of rejecting Morales and the MAS, they attempt to locate themselves inside these spaces of contradiction and tension, to ride inside the spaces of uncertainty.

One of those spaces of great uncertainty is Bolivia's continued dependency upon natural resource extraction—primarily natural gas and mining—to fund social programs. As Farthing and Kohl indicate (in Chapter 5) reliance upon resource income has created a “paradox of plenty.” Resource-exporting countries generally suffer from political and economic dysfunction (political instability and corruption; high rates of poverty, low levels of economic growth and failure to diversify their economy). Such traits have long characterized Bolivia—but the shades of gray here have to do with the fact that Morales has taken advantage of the high commodity prices to increase social spending, which has reduced poverty and improved quality of life for many marginalized populations in Bolivia. Something Farthing and Kohl argue we cannot ignore.

The next three chapters highlight some of the advances of the Morales government: the social programs made possible through resource wealth, land reform, and new drug policy (managing coca programs). First, let's take a look at (Chapter 6) “Living Well/Vivir Bien.” The foundation underpinning the new social programs in Bolivia is the concept of Living Well, “a philosophy that gauges well-being differently from the usual economic indicators, and takes into account access to health, housing, running water, and education” (Farthing and Kohl 99). MAS has employed this philosophy of Vivir Bien in the following areas (and evidence shows that, these have had a positive material impact on people's lives). *Bonos* are small cash-transfers to elderly such as *Renta Dignidad* which reaches over 750,000 women and men over the age of sixty. While it might not be enough to live on (only US \$29.00) a month, it does “help pay for staples like rice, pasta, sugar, and oil for almost a whole month,” argues one of their informants. The Bono Juancito Pinto provides \$200 BS for each child enrolled up to fifth grade. All of these kinds of governmental supports reduce inequities and have provided financial support to vulnerable populations. In terms of healthcare reform, MAS has attempted to revamp a privatized health-care system into a more participatory and community-based model where doctors visit communities in order to identify and recognize social

underpinnings of illness.

Farthing and Kohl recognize that these social changes do not go far enough: “the generalized reluctance to strengthen the long-term financial base through fundamental tax reforms exacerbates reliance on natural resource income, putting the sustainability of reforms in question” (112). Beyond long-term sustainability, reliance upon extractive industries continues to place pressure upon an already fragile environment as cities in Bolivia are currently undergoing radical environmental and climatic changes.

At the center of some of these environmental questions are problems of land and land use in Bolivia (Chapter 7). This is not a contemporary problem, but rather land has generated conflict since the conquest. Bolivia has one of the most uneven distributions of land-holding patterns in all of Latin America. This pace of accelerated inequality was exacerbated during the 1980s and 1990s in which neoliberal reforms further commoditized and privatized lands, turned land into speculative capital, and slashed ownership restrictions. This chapter highlights the regional Landless Peasant Movement (Movimiento Sin Tierra - MST), a grassroots movement that seizes latifundio lands in order to place pressure upon the state to redistribute lands to poor peasants. Farthing and Kohl recognize the achievements of some of these grassroots movements for land reform, while at the same time identify the limitations, particularly in the East as agribusinesses encroaches upon state-owned and indigenous lands for the expansion of the soy industry. While MAS has attempted to create a new land reform bill (in part shaped by members of the MST), the agribusiness elites in search of new opportunities for extraction and development in the East undermine opportunities for land/territorial and food sovereignty.

Perhaps equally contentious, the issue of coca-production and US backed War on Drugs also created much backlash in Bolivia. US drug policies criminalized and militarized zones of production in the Andes. Morales (having come out of the coca-grower unions) attempted to (de)criminalize coca-production and point toward the historic and cultural uses of coca. In 2006, Morales announced that a social control program would be introduced in the Chapare. “Grounded in indigenous practices for controlling deviant behavior, the program was conceived as a locally managed means of ensuring respect for the *cato* agreement,

and reducing police-and military-driven violence” (Farthing and Kohl 135). Linda Farthing has written extensively on coca politics in Bolivia and provides a beautifully nuanced analysis here of the constraints of Morales’s social control within a macro-political economic environment of international drug trafficking. “Prices, demand, and availability of cocaine are shaped by forces beyond Bolivia” (142). While Morales attempted to create policies focused on harm reduction, international demand undermines sovereignty over coca-production.

This conundrum comes back full circle to the question of natural resource wealth as critical revenue for social programming (all limited by the environmental, climatic, and even greater macro-political economic ebbs and flows). Potential new projects like extracting Bolivia’s massive salt flats to feed the international appetite for lithium batteries will have great impact upon politics, economy, and the already fragile environment. These constraints then plague every area of reform and have limited the possibility for a new kind of Bolivia. Yet what I have often *loved* about Farthing and Kohl’s work is their fierce engagement to social change. This book instead of retreating to traditional form of academic pessimism ends rather with hope and a vision for the future.

They end their book with this thought, “Clearly a program that focuses on *Vivir Bien* has to be vertically integrated and find some solutions for the now urban majority, those who identify as indigenous but speak Spanish, those who talk of decolonization even as they participate in the global culture. This might entail embracing more fully the concept of *ch’ixi* and recognizing that rather than play according to the rules defined by neoliberal globalization, Bolivia and countries like it need to create a new game” (Farthing and Kohl 161) Perhaps, the gray zone becomes *the* space for creating a new society, not bound by the old rules, or by neoliberal globalization. To embark on this path would require both political and ideological changes and perhaps this will not be done in a steady and linear way, but in the chaotic and contradictory path that is contemporary Bolivia.

This book will live on for generations to come as will Benjamin Kohl who died unexpectedly shortly after this book went to press. It is no coincidence, however, that this book represents the end or culmination of a vibrant academic career—a book which pieces together the complicated history, political economic and geographical tale of Bolivia, a

book with great reach beyond the academy, and a book built off of years of cultivating a vibrant personal and political network. This book was shaped by Farthing and Kohl's deep historic, personal and intellectual commitment to social and political change.

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