

REVIEW ESSAY

The “Proceso de Cambio” a Decade Later: What is New in the New Bolivia?

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John Crabtree and Ann Chaplin. *Bolivia: Procesos de cambio*. 204 páginas. La Paz: PIEB/CEDLA/Oxfam, 2013.

Fran Espinoza Molina. *Bolivia: la circulación de sus élites (2006-2014)*. 364 páginas. Santa Cruz de la Sierra: El País. Colección Ciencias Sociales / Historia 36. 2015 [doctoral thesis defended in 2014].

Ximena Soruco Sologuren, coord., Daniela Franco Pinto y Mariela Durán Azurduy, asistentes de investigación. *Composición social del Estado Plurinacional. Hacia la descolonización de la burocracia*. 312 páginas. La Paz: CIS, 2014.

María Teresa Zegada y Jorge Komadina. *El espejo de la sociedad: poder y representación en Bolivia*. 277 páginas. La Paz: Plural Ediores, 2014.

A decade has elapsed since Evo Morales' historic first electoral victory brought him into power and began his so-called *Proceso de Cambio* (Process of Change, henceforth PC) which has re-founded the country as the Plurinational State of Bolivia. It enacted a wholly new Constitution with increased economic roles for the State, and among other changes: new channels for democratic participation, a (limited) devolution of legislative and executive powers to departmental governments, deep recognition of indigenous rights and cultures, and novel levels of possibilities for indigenous autonomy. It has also ignited an ongoing and unparalleled cycle of economic growth and social mobility that has been changing the face of the country as anyone who has visited Bolivia after many years could attest.

And this Bolivian PC has deservedly sparked a great deal of scholarly literature on many of its facets, including strong Indigenous emergence, aspects and effects of new public policies or the transformation of the State among many others. At first, many of the studies focused primarily on the “epic” dimensions of the accelerated political changes thus brought about, and most of them have consisted in fragmentary visions over one or some of the main dimensions of the ongoing or proposed changes. However helpful these have been in comprehending current Bolivian politics, they leave us desiring some form of “global assessment” on how much innovation there really has been on the many dimensions that comprise this new Bolivia. But as the dust begins to settle and Minerva’s owl prepares to take off, recent years have already witnessed some publications that are most welcome for they try to deal with some very important dimensions of the PC through a holistic vision about them.

One of the first such assessments was John Crabtree and Ann Chaplin’s *Bolivia: Procesos de cambio*,¹ published in the late 2013 and which sought to analyze how much change there really had been in several important socio-economic issues from the point of view of its citizens and political actors. With this aim, the authors conducted 148 interviews throughout the country during the first half of 2012 with an eye to representing its extreme heterogeneity on the interviewees’

¹ Also available in English, *Bolivia: Processes of Change*. London/New York: Zed Books, 2013.

selection. The book—which was originally directed at foreign readers—starts with two more general and interpretive chapters that attempt to summarize the evolution of the popular organizations that formed the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) governing party and the indigenous political ascension and its internal tensions. It then moves to the seven latter chapters more directly based on the interviews conducted that consider the changes and contradictions as perceived by the actors themselves and which are clustered geographically. These involve: tensions in the *Altiplano* between peasant unions and indigenous *ayllus*; the migrant city of El Alto; mining zones and organizations; coca growers in the Chapare and Yungas regions; the gas industry in Tarija and its tensions with indigenous peoples from the Chaco; impact in the oriental department of Santa Cruz; and transformations in the Amazonian North.

As the authors themselves recognize, the initial years of the Morales presidency were marked by such extraordinary amounts of hope and expectations that it was inevitably bound to provoke relative frustrations over the shortcomings of their actual materialization. But the interviews show, nevertheless, wide and accelerated processes of change which have been acknowledged as such by many of the interviewees, however uneven or contradictory these processes may sometimes have been vis-à-vis the epic images of transformative liberation initially dreamt of. For instance, the authors consider as an objective fact that the new Constitution enacted in 2009 was an important political victory for the indigenous peoples as it recognizes and deepens a set of collective rights, but the indigenous movement's great internal heterogeneity has been generating tensions and disputes among its actors over their distinctive objectives. Likewise, the accelerated economic growth has been allowing the State to broaden its presence in the whole of the Bolivian territory and, together with certain public policies and income transfer programs, has been improving the living standards of many previously disadvantaged social groups. Yet this has been accomplished at the cost of increasing tensions between a development process based on extractive industries, the preservation of the environment, and frequently the rights of local (mostly indigenous) actors over their territories. And some of these contradictions may even be considered a (possible) undesired effect of the success, such as when this renewed Bolivian State increases its legitimacy and openness to the participation of previously excluded groups and, as a consequence,

brings about a diminishing interest in the restoration of traditional forms of communitarian political life (especially among the newest generations), or when increased prices for quinoa crops have led to processes of social stratification and land disputes among rural communities in Oruro.

In their conclusions, Crabtree and Chaplin recognize that many of the ongoing transformations are accelerated developments of long term processes initiated in the last twenty or thirty years—some of them even longer—but they consider the amount of transformation to be paramount to the ones provoked by the National Revolution in the 1950s which themselves made possible the beginning of the current political cycle. Yet their current culmination has produced, in the authors' evaluation, enough changes in terms of the empowerment of new actors, cultural and symbolic transformations and shifts in the relative balance of power among the Bolivian peoples and elites to make any crude reversal to the *status quo ante* impossible. This would hold true even if the old elites somehow managed to oust the whole of the current power holders and return to the presidency.

This elite change is precisely the theme of Fran Espinoza Molina's doctoral thesis *Bolivia: la circulación de sus élites (2006-2014)*, defended in 2014 and published in book format in 2015. The author begins with the acknowledgment that despite the rather evident renovation of political elites in Bolivia, this topic has not received enough scholarly attention in the country or from foreign Bolivianists. One of the reasons for such has been the already mentioned tendency to focus on the "epic" dimensions of the ongoing political transformation. But the common sense Bolivian understanding of the word "elites" as something of an inherently oligarchic and negative nature and the general perception that the PC is conducted by a government formed by "social movements" whereby it would be incorrect to speak of new elites in power also seem to play a considerable role as evidenced by some of the book's cited interviews.

This perception that the Morales government is formed by the "social movements" —or "social sectors," as Espinoza Molina prefers to call them in order not to implicitly consider that social movements could not be opposed to the government (an inadequate consideration that is very often the case in many related papers)— is one of the first things that he seeks to test by looking at the cabinet composition from 2006

to 2013. He notes that 2006 does indeed show a remarkable spike in the number of ministers coming from “social sectors,” which in that year represented almost 70% of all ministers (10 out of 16), but the number decreases practically each year until it reaches a meagre 15% (3 out of 20) by 2013.

Espinoza Molina takes this fact (complemented by the surveys and the semi-structured interviews conducted) as evidence for questioning the radicalism of the elite change in terms of the founding of a new pattern of power relations in Bolivia, since ministers of a technocratic bent seem to have recovered the reins of political power despite the ascension of previously excluded social sectors. He then sets out to analyze the relationship between the governing elite (which does not control key economic resources) with two new ascending sectorial elites—the coca-growers and the *cholo*² sectorial elite—as well as the dislocated *cruceño*³ elite that still holds major economic power in the country. The characterization of the coca-growers and *cruceño* sectorial elites is pretty straightforward as they refer directly to the economic activity and geographic origin of their components respectively, while the *cholo* sectorial elite refers to the thriving members of plebeian economic sectors—mostly merchants of Aymara origin, but also cooperative miners and transporters, among others. But it felt to me that the categories proposed would have benefited from a more detailed characterization, as well as a deeper justification for their choosing, since they are not directly analogous to one another as they refer to different characteristics and are highly heterogeneous from within. For example, the coca-growers themselves could be considered, in a sense, to be part of the *cholo* elite, whose main defining feature is its ethnic origins and entrepreneurial success but as mentioned comprise a lot of economic activities.⁴

Espinoza Molina’s conclusions point to an increasing rapprochement and composition between current power holders and the formerly

² *Cholo* is an originally derogatory term to refer to urbanized Indians and *mestizos* in some parts of Latin America.

³ Gentile word for the people from Santa Cruz department in Bolivia.

⁴ Which unfortunately also do not receive the same coverage, with the Aymara merchants occupying most of the section.

adversarial *cruceño* elites who still control a great part of the economy, something also alluded to by Crabtree and Chaplin. But he also points to the government's conformity with the other sectorial elites' direct interests in its public policies and initiatives in exchange for political support, although the coca-growers have been more directly engaged in government while the *cholo* elite seem to act more as a social veto point from outside government posts. But it would also have profited from further elaboration on the different leverage these groups subdivisions have. Do the Yungas and Chapare coca-growers hold the same power over the government? What about merchants' federations, transport unions and mining cooperatives within the *cholo* elite? Do they share the same interests, aims and leverage in their relationship with the government? This would have been the more desirable since there is a wide perception in the country that some social groups⁵ hold more power to pressure than others.

Meanwhile, Ximena Soruco, Daniela Franco and Mariela Durán's *Composición social del Estado Plurinacional. Hacia la descolonización de la burocracia*, published in 2014, focus on the changes in the State bureaucracy in PC times. With the aim of trying to grasp possible transformations on the matter, the Social Investigation Center (Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, CIS) from the Bolivian Vice-presidency in association with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted a survey with the employees from three selected Executive bureaucracies chosen with the aim of balancing between social, geographic and political heterogeneities, as well as the different levels of government. Those were: the Education Ministry in La Paz, chosen for its early foundations and recent political continuity (the same minister had been its head for more than six years); the Departmental Government of Chuquisaca, mostly rural and located in the Bolivian Valleys; and the Municipal Government of La Guardia, an expanding intermediate city in the lowlands near Santa Cruz de la Sierra which experienced recent political turmoil as new, younger generations mostly descending from highland migrants (which would fit into Espinoza Molina's *cholo* elite category) have replaced older elites in the municipality. It also conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with some of the employees with the aim

⁵ Such as the cooperative miners, for example.

of evaluating the symbolic and personal effects and perceptions of those changes on the actors themselves.

The study, then, uses the one and only public employee's census ever conducted (2001) throughout the whole Bolivian independent political life, together with some sparser information taken from related questions in the general censuses since 1976 and household surveys since 1990 to evaluate changes in terms of recruitment, social origins, educational qualifications, and gender and indigenous identity among other variables. The authors recognize the results are not necessarily generalizable to the whole of the country, but consider that they do suggest some interesting patterns of transformation which they hope will raise interest for a new full public employee's census capable of presenting the whole picture and better illuminating the design of adequate public policies.

The findings show, for instance, that a total of 46% of public employees identify as being indigenous among the three bureaucracies, although with important variations: 18% in the municipality of La Guardia, 45% in the Education Ministry and a staggering 63% in the departmental government of Chuquisaca. Sadly, the 2001 census did not care to ask about ethnicity so it is not possible to assess the evolution of indigenous presence in the bureaucracy over time. But these figures in themselves call into question one of the first criticisms made against the Morales government, that the first indigenous president was surrounded by a "whitey-environment" [entorno blancoide] that supposedly really dealt the cards and which Espinoza Molina's book partially echoed for the ministerial level, although his concern wasn't so much ethnicity as it was political origins as a technocrat or a militant from some of the "social sectors." But regarding this particular dimension, the results also relativize a bit of Espinoza Molina's conclusions about the exclusion of social sectors since another important finding is that 37% of the bureaucrats in the three institutions report being members of some social organization, 65% if we take the indigenous employees into consideration alone.

The strong indigenous presence in the public workforce was somehow expected as it conforms to the shifts in political and public discourse that have assigned a positive valence to being indigenous in PC times, but many had feared this change would also imply a general downgrade in the employees' educational qualifications, which has not

happened. To the contrary, the proportion of employees holding professional and post-graduate titles has risen in general but also among its indigenous public servants. With the exception of La Guardia, where high school degrees became the most prevalent followed by technical degrees, on the other two surveyed institutions graduate and post-graduate degrees prevail in this order and have maintained or increased their relative proportions. This has occurred without major proportional differences between indigenous and non-indigenous employees in terms of educational qualification⁶. Also, the hiring by public notice as opposed to direct invitation has risen in general and become the prevalent recruitment channel (in a 6 to 4 proportion) with the exception of Chuquisaca where there hasn't been much change on the subject and direct invitation still prevails (in a proportion of almost 2 to 8). The data also exhibit an important increase in the proportion of young bureaucrats, which shows the generational shift and hints at the ongoing elite change, with the latter being confirmed by the information that only one in every ten of the surveyed employees had at least one of their parents already working for the State.

Last, but not least, María Teresa Zegada and Jorge Komadina's 2014 *El espejo de la sociedad: poder y representación en Bolivia* aims to describe the transformations and continuities in political representativeness in this new phase of Bolivian democracy. The book starts by describing the comings and goings of representative democracy in the country since the transition from authoritarian rule started in 1978. This starts from the governability crises of the first years to the consolidation of "pacted democracy" with its dominant tripartite party system and the increasing detachment between represented and representatives that would ultimately lead to its demise. It also includes the 1994 reform that attempted to address the problem by instituting a mixed representative system with over half of representatives elected in first-past-the-post uninominal districts. Although it did not help much in improving the quality of Bolivian democracy, as the systemic collapse by

⁶ The sharpest differences cluster on the two poles of the educational scale where 11% of the indigenous employees hold only an elementary school degree vis-à-vis 6% of the non-indigenous ones, while 17% of the indigenous employees hold post-graduate degrees compared to 23% of the non-indigenous in the aggregated data for the three institutions.

the mid-2000s attests⁷, this was an important transformation that increased the power of territorial-based social groups and which still constitutes one of the fundamental bases of representation in the new Plurinational State. Then, in the following chapters, it sets out to describe who the new representatives are (both from the opposition and the government support base) in terms of social and political origins and the effects (if any) these changes in composition—together with the institutional changes brought about by the 2009 Constitution⁸—have effected the nature of political representation in the country.

The changes in composition in the Legislative are quite visible: from a predominantly male, creole and middle-class dominated organ, the Bolivian parliament is now far more diverse with a much greater ethnic and gender balance⁹ and variation in the representatives' professional origins, where artisans, blue-collar and primary sector workers now represent the biggest single group of the 2010-2014 Legislature with 26,3% of its members. But the authors question if these changes—which in themselves could be considered to have increased the Legislature's "descriptive representation" in Hanna Pitkin's famous terms—have led to a better substantial representation, i.e., if these new social origins have led to an effective representation of these newly included sectors' demands.

Also relying strongly on surveys and semi-structured interviews with representatives and former representatives in the national Legislature, as well as in the new departmental assemblies in Cochabamba and Santa Cruz, Zegada and Komadina find that the different modes of election (whether through the proportional lists, the uninominal districts or the ethnic representation quota or whether it is the national or a departmental assembly), the personal political trajectories of the elected

⁷ Though they mention that the population did indeed feel better represented by these uninominal representatives vis-à-vis the ones elected through the proportional list.

⁸ Which include the creation of departmental legislatures, full proportionality for the Senate list, a mandatory alternation between male and female candidates in the lists for both chambers and the reservation of a number of seats—both in the national and departmental legislatures—for the minority ethnic groups, among the most important changes.

⁹ Indeed, were it not for the uninominal seats, the country would be very close to full gender parity in the Legislature as shown in the study.

and the fact of being in the opposition or supporting the Executive all influence their legitimation strategies and the essence of their representation. Recognizing that “representation” has several distinct aspects that should not be blindly taken as the only legitimate one, they propose a typology of four modes of “substantial representation” in current Bolivia which they call the representation of general, territorial, corporatist and indigenous-communitarian interests and whose actual materialization they try to assess.

The authors found that representatives elected through the proportional lists—and especially the opposition legislators among those—tend to cling to general representation strategies, focusing on the discussion and proposition of “grand national themes” in their parliamentary activity as the votes that elected them were not cast directly on them, but rather linked with the presidential vote, which gives them a higher degree of freedom in their mandates. On the other hand, those elected through majoritarian uninominal (for the national legislative) or provincial (in departmental assemblies) circumscriptions tend to have more limited options as the personalization and the territorial base of their election leaves them more vulnerable to the social pressures for an imperative mandate in which they have to deliver their constituency’s demands. Many of them thus opt for a “territorial representation” strategy in which they see themselves primarily as a bringer of resources and projects to their regions. But also many both from the uninominal or plurinominal lists adopt corporatist representation strategies, acting primarily as a representative of the social organization (trade unions, transport federations, peasant communities, business associations etc.) that propelled them to political life. This kind of strategy is particularly common among representatives from the governing MAS party which organizes itself as a sort of federation of social organizations from where it recruits most of its members who still profess allegiance to them,¹⁰ sometimes even to the detriment of party strategies and governmental aims.

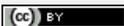
Finally, Zegada and Komadina propose the “indigenous-communitarian representation” ideal type, which they consider to be the

¹⁰ President Evo Morales himself still remains officially the head of coca-growers federation from the Chapare, for example.

least substantial of the proposed representative typology as they consider that the indigenous representatives mostly fall short of effectively representing the indigenous peoples' interests due to their reduced numbers, partisan interferences or other issues. But this typological category seems a bit problematic in that it is not very easy to define the specificity of those "indigenous interests" vis-à-vis non-indigenous ones because there are many complex internal cleavages among the Bolivian native peoples whose populations are already mostly urban and occupying all sorts of "modern" professions. In that sense, they too are prone to territorial or corporatist pressures placed upon their mandates, but on a more philosophical level of discussion, it could be debatable whether "indigenous-communitarian" interests are really a substantially different representative dimension or a sub-type of territorial/corporatist (depending on the specific cases) interests unless one adopts an essentialist position that takes Native Americans as a fundamental Other of Western civilization and whose interests are necessarily on a different dimension. The fact that—as shown in Soruco, Franco and Durán's study—most of the bureaucrats who identify themselves as being indigenous are at the same time professionals holding college degrees who would mostly qualify as members from the middle classes, serves as a telling example of the difficulties of defining what could distinctive and "properly indigenous" interests be. It also exemplifies the mistake of reducing them to issues of cultural identity and communal landholding as the typology apparently does.

All in all, the proximity of those things studied by the four books—which somehow makes them look as if they are examining four different dimensions of one single object—makes their joint reading very complementary to each other even as they disagree on important aspects. Is the nature of "Indian-ness" really changing as implied in Crabtree and Chaplin's account and defended by Soruco, Franco and Durán or have their interests really fallen short of materialization in the Plurinational State as implied by Zegada and Komadina's typology? Is the government building a client-patron relationship with the sectorial elites as Espinoza Molina suggests or is it a sort of symbiosis as Soruco, Franco and Durán contend? Their points of disagreement notwithstanding, taken together, the books seem to illuminate some of each other's blind spots and offer an invaluable reading of the current whereabouts of Bolivian politics that should become part of the essential

“starter’s kit” for new scholars seeking to delve into the politics and society of this fascinating country.



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