

Carlos Hugo Molina Saucedo. *Andrés Ibáñez, un caudillo para el siglo XXI. La Comuna de Santa Cruz de la Sierra de 1876.* 115 pages. La Paz: CIDES-UMSA, AECID / Plural, 2012.

Andrey Schelchkov. *Andrés Ibáñez y la Revolución de la Igualdad en Santa Cruz: primer ensayo de federalismo en Bolivia, 1876-1877.* 98 pages. Santiago de Chile: Universidad de Santiago de Chile, Instituto de Estudios Avanzados (Colección Libros IDEA), 2011.

Andrés Ibáñez's short-lived "Revolution of the Equals" is certainly one of the most interesting, yet least known political experiences of 19th century Bolivia. Frequently overlooked by history books, it is nonetheless remarkable as it represented one of the few truly popular-based experiences in the country at the time. The movement, which held effective power in Santa Cruz from October 1876 to March 1877, was accused by its enemies of being a communist threat to the country and remained for a long period of time in the official register as having been a mob that generated unrest in *cruceño* (Santa Cruz) society until the memory of the movement began to be reappraised by the national-popular currents that started to become predominant in the country by

the 1930s. Although these currents repositioned Ibáñez and his movement as precursors to the revolutionary struggles the country would later come to experience, they could not lift it from the relative obscurity in which this singular event still largely remains to this day.

It is then timely that Russian historian Andrey Schelchkov and *cruceño* writer Carlos Hugo Molina Saucedo (himself one of Ibáñez's great-grandsons) bring to the fore these two short but important books on the subject. Schelchkov's *Andrés Ibáñez y la Revolución de la Igualdad en Santa Cruz* is a richly documented and contextualized description of "the most amazing social experience of 19th century Bolivian history," as he himself states on page 92, while Molina Saucedo's *Andrés Ibáñez, un caudillo para el siglo XXI* is largely an interpretive essay on the ideological roots and the reach of the *Igualitarios'* project and its contemporary importance. Their joint reading is then mutually enriching and highly complementary.

Schelchkov gives us a very solid and detailed description of the facts involved in Ibáñez's saga, from his early political career as city representative and department secretary to his victorious campaign for national representative in 1874 that definitively paved his fame and prestige in Santa Cruz and the tentative revolution he was later to lead, including all of the most important background information related to the subject. Santa Cruz had up to the 1860s a much more egalitarian social structure than the average Bolivian society thanks to the vast availability of land and its common structure for its possession, although much of it rested on traditional, patriarchal values and on the relative racial homogeneity of the region, which spared it much of the ethnic tensions of the *Altiplano*. It was also the most literate city, with a school for every 838 inhabitants, as compared to one for every 8095 in La Paz (29).

That was to prove crucial in the development of events as it both allowed for a greater diffusion of written ideas (such as those from utopian socialists Fourier and Proudhon) through progressive newspapers such as *La Montaña* and *Estrella del Oriente*, where Ibáñez's *Club de la Igualdad's* future comrades had begun their careers in the early 1860s, and for the existence of a great number of highly active citizens with voting rights (Molina Saucedo tells us it was smaller in absolute numbers only to Sucre's), even among its lower classes.

By the 1870s that traditional and relatively egalitarian *cruceño* society was increasingly under the strain of social changes brought about

by the ever-more prevailing national free-market policies, which generated wide social discontent over which Ibáñez mounted his 1873-74 electoral campaign. According to Schelchkov, he identified fully with the plebeian society and consolidated himself as a popular hero when, in an act on the main square, he decided to take off his upper class garments and boots and marched barefooted with a multitude of artisans shouting his “We are All Equals” campaign motto.

Ibáñez got elected by a landslide, but also became *persona non grata* among much of the city’s elite, which started to depict him as a dangerous communist agitator, especially after 1875, when he decided to support Casimiro Corral’s attempted rebellion through armed action in the region. But his revolution was really to begin the following year, when President Tomás Frías declared a political amnesty and called for elections. Opposition candidate General Hilarión Daza, supported by a former Ibáñez college professor, campaigned with support from the urban artisan masses and a Belzu-like plebeian rhetoric, which prompted support for the *Igualitarios* in Santa Cruz. Although Daza was to implement a coup before the elections, news of it did not reach Santa Cruz in time and so the elections were held, giving the general a landslide victory that showed how popular the *Igualitarios* were. But Daza, who would soon enough abandon his national-popular rhetoric, nominated an adversary for prefect of Santa Cruz, who in turn would arrest Ibáñez as a supposed threat to the department. When in October 1876 those troops who had been holding him in custody mutinied over lack of payment and so freed him, the revolution started with Ibáñez being acclaimed in the public square as the department’s prefect.

The *Igualitarios* were the effective rulers in the department with great mass support. In order to pay the soldiers’ salaries, they imposed compulsory loans and taxes on rich businessmen, even jailing most of them until these financial contributions were made. They made a concerted effort during that time to reassure their loyalty to the central government and reach some kind of collaborative agreement, but to no avail. Failing at that, they proclaimed Santa Cruz a federal state in December 1876 while continuing to declare loyalty to the Union, but on more autonomous terms and inviting other departments to join. That prompted the central government to order a full-scale repression against the movement and having no chance of standing up to the Union’s troops, Ibáñez and 300 of his comrades left the city in March of 1877 in an attempt to reach the Brazilian border. Ibáñez and what was left of his

group were captured in the village of San Diego and executed on May 1, 1877.

Molina Saucedo points out that a particular set of conditions made the insurrection possible, including a great diffusion of pre-Marxist socialist ideas, a division among Santa Cruz's elites, an increasing political consciousness on the part of urban plebeian sectors, an increase in urban migration and the corrosion of traditional privileges (57). This evaluation coincides with the one made in the official press at the time and reproduced in both books (Molina Saucedo 42; Schelchkov 69), which links the insurrection to the bond between the *caudillo* (leader) and the popular masses, the intransigence of the elites and the diffusion of socialist ideas. Both authors point to the link between the implementation of free-market policies (and its repercussions) at the time and the generating of social discontent that made the insurrection possible, for it deeply affected the artisans and *labradores* (farmers) who became deeply indebted because of it. As Schelchkov shows, many of the punitive measures and new levies enforced by the movement were indeed targeted at the businessmen class, a new economic elite generated precisely by these new economic policies.

For Molina Saucedo, the movement's legacy must be taken as a whole, in both its federal decentralization proclamations and its egalitarian economic measures and aspirations. He points to the great similarities between the *Igualitarios* insurrection and both Proudhon's thoughts and the Paris Commune's practices, which he insists could not have simply been a coincidence given the egalitarian principles, the importance of local autonomy and popular participation, the similarities between the fundraising measures taken by both movements, etc. He also claims the brutality with which the movement was crushed and the hostility it sparked among the elite could not have been explained if it had been just a movement for federalism *qua* local autonomy without the redistributive measures that posed a real challenge to status quo interests. That comment is best understood when one takes into account that Ibáñez's legacy has been later claimed by many proponents of greater decentralization within the historically highly centralized Bolivian state, which has, however, "forgotten" this other key aspect of the caudillo's movement. That is also noted by Schelchkov, who ends his book with the observation that more than once in the country's history have the issues of federalism and autonomy been used as "pure

scenography to mask real political contradictions and the incapacity of Bolivian elites to seek and find a real historical compromise with the growing popular movement for justice and equality” (98). A sarcastic comment without doubt directed at the recent autonomous movement led by the eastern departments in opposition to the Evo Morales government up to at least 2008.

It is interesting to note the similarities between the *Igualitarios* and perhaps the only other major episode of mass popular participation in 19th century Bolivia, the Manuel Isidoro Belzu administration (1848-55), a similarity which is hinted at by Molina Saucedo, but not fully developed. In some sense, both were resistance movements against the dissolutive effects of capitalist penetration, each with egalitarian contents and broad-based mass support. Both were profoundly denigrated by official historiography for a long time and later rehabilitated as precursors to the national-popular currents that would lead to the 1952 Revolution. Although more than twenty years separate the two experiences and there is no evidence that Ibáñez might have been directly inspired by Belzu, those similarities are not entirely coincidental, as they reflect the great contradictions of the Bolivian oligarchic society and the attempts at resistance by those most affected by them. And Belzu himself had also allegedly been influenced by some of the same utopian socialist thinkers as Ibáñez.

The philosopher Walter Benjamin once said in his theses “On the concept of History” that revolutionary movements are much more influenced by the memories of enslaved ancestors than by the visions of a free future. That is to say that failed past experiences, those hampered from coming to full fruition, remain as sparks capable of igniting present struggles. And that is why Ibáñez’s legacy is still present, so much so that the country’s current decentralization and autonomies law, enacted in 2010 by a government that presents itself as promoting social justice, participation and equality, is named after him (a fact that Molina Saucedo criticizes on page 16, footnote 2, as being opportunistic for not corresponding to Ibáñez’s proposals). Unfortunately, he doesn’t further develop the argument, leaving us to wonder why he believes so. Could it be because the autonomy given is not as radical as true federalism or perhaps he thinks the government’s self-proclaimed goals of equality and participation are not being truly carried through? Molina Saucedo asks himself (72) how different would Bolivia have been if Ibáñez had prevailed in his ideas, and the fact that this is a truly valid question to be

asked shows the importance of knowing about this unique experience; something towards which these books are certainly an invaluable contribution.

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