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STATE CRISIS AND POPULAR POWER

THREE FACTORS DEFINE the functioning, stability and representative capacity of a state. The first is the overall framework of social forces: the correlation between the different coalitions, both dominant and subordinate, contesting the reconfiguration of what Bourdieu called ‘state capital’—the ability to influence decisions on matters of common import. Secondly, there is the system of political institutions and rules that mediate the coexistence of hierarchical social forces. In effect, this institutional framework is a materialization of the founding correlation of forces that give rise to a particular state regime, and the means by which it legally reproduces itself. Thirdly, every state depends upon a structure of common categories of perception, a series of mobilizing beliefs that generates a degree of social and moral conformity among both ruling and ruled, and which takes material form through the state’s cultural repertoire and rituals.

When these three components of a country’s political life are visibly healthy and functioning, we can speak of an optimal correspondence between state regime and society. When one or all of these factors is suspended or ruptured, we are presented with a crisis of the state, manifested in the antagonism between the political world and its institutions on the one hand, and the opposing actions by large-scale social coalitions on the other. This is precisely what has been happening in Bolivia in recent years. The successive uprisings and popular upheavals that have rocked the country since 2000 may best be understood as symptoms of a profound state crisis.

This crisis has a double character. In the short term, it is a crisis of the neoliberal model, and the social and ideological basis on which it has been constructed in Bolivia. But it is also, to paraphrase Braudel, a crisis of the *longue durée*: an institutional and ideological crisis of the republican state, premised since its foundation on a colonial relationship to the indigenous majority of the Bolivian people. Let us examine how these aspects are manifested at the social, institutional and ideological levels in Bolivia today.

Framework of social forces

The starting point for analysis of the balance of social forces in Bolivia since the mid-1980s is the political and cultural defeat of the labour movement organized around the COB.¹ For decades after the popular revolution of 1953, this had articulated the needs of a wide front of urban and rural working classes, representing popular demands regarding the administration of the social surplus through structures such as union membership and workers' joint management. After the dispersal of this labour movement, a social bloc consisting of business fractions connected to the world market, elite political parties, foreign investors and international regulatory bodies was consolidated, which then took centre stage in the definition of public policy. For the next fifteen years, these forces became the sole subjects of decision-making and initiative in public administration, reconfiguring the economic and social organization of the country under promises of modernization and globalization—first and second-generation structural reforms, privatizations, decentralization, tariff-cutting and so forth.

Since the turn of the millennium, this relationship of forces has been challenged from below, and the guaranteed elitism of the 'neoliberal-patrimonial state' thrown into question, as new forms of organization and politicization have reversed the footing of the subaltern classes. The protests and road blockades of April and September 2000, July 2001 and June 2002 signalled a regional reconstitution of social movements capable of imposing public policies, legal regimes and even modifications

¹ Central Obrera Boliviana: organization of workers from large enterprises in different branches of production. In the wake of labour flexibilization, closures of businesses and privatizations implemented since 1985, its social base has been reduced to teachers, public hospital employees, university students and some urban guilds.

to the distribution of the social surplus through the strength of their mobilizations.² Laws such as No. 2029, which sought to redefine ownership of water, and laws enabling the sale of state enterprises into private hands, tax increases, etc, were annulled or modified under pressure from social movements and popular uprisings. Presidential decrees such as that closing the coca market or mandating interdiction in the Yungas had to be withdrawn for the same reason. Financial legislation was amended in line with the national demands of organized popular groups (indigenous communities, retirees, coca-growing peasants, cooperative miners, policemen), demonstrating the emergence of social blocs which, at the margins of parliament, and—following the MAS successes in 2002—with support from within it, have the strength to stop the implementation of government policies, and impose the redistribution of public resources by non-parliamentary means.

The important thing to note about these popular groupings, hitherto excluded from decision-making, is that the demands they raise immediately seek to modify economic relations. Thus their recognition as a collective political force necessarily implies a radical transformation of the dominant state form, built on the marginalization and atomization of the urban and rural working classes. Moreover—and this is a crucial aspect of the current reconfiguration—the leaderships of these new forces are predominantly indigenous, and uphold a specific cultural and political project. In contrast to the period that opened with the 1930s, when the social movements were articulated around a labour unionism that held to an ideal of *mestizaje*, and was the result of an economic modernization carried out by business elites, today the social movements with the greatest power to interrogate the political order have an indigenous social base, and spring from the agrarian zones excluded from or marginalized by the processes of economic modernization. The

² [In 2000, a rate hike imposed on the department of Cochabamba's newly privatized water supply led to massive protests, with strikes and blockades shutting down the city. On April 4, some 100,000 strikers and protesters broke through the military cordon surrounding the city's central square and held a mass open-air assembly. On April 8, Aguas del Tunari's contract on the water supply was revoked by the Banzer government. The same months saw the mobilization of *cocaleros* and peasant colonizers against the threat of coca eradication, with indigenous people's organizations playing a leading role in mounting road blockades that threatened to cut food supplies to La Paz. In June 2001 *cocaleros* in the Yungas valleys succeeded in driving out the joint US–Bolivian eradication force. Two months later, Banzer ceded the presidency to his deputy, Quiroga—NLR.]

Aymaras of the *altiplano*, the *cocaleros* of the Yungas and Chapare, the *ayllus* of Potosí and Sucre and the Indian people of the east have replaced trade unions and popular urban organizations as social protagonists. And despite the regional or local character of their actions, they share a matrix of indigenous identity that calls into question what has been the unvarying nucleus of the Bolivian state for 178 years: its monoethnicity.

In addition, the elite coalition is itself showing signs of fatigue and internal conflict. The economic programme of the past twenty years—privatization of public enterprises, externalization of profit, coca eradication—has resulted in a narrowing of opportunities for some sections of the national bourgeoisie, exacerbated by the shrinking of tax revenues owing to the growth of the informal sector. As their long-term outlook has darkened, the different elite fractions have begun to pull apart, squabbling over the reduction of profits transferred to the state, the refusal by foreign refiners to adjust the purchase price of petrol, the renegotiation of gas prices with Brazil,³ land taxes, etc. Their shared project of the last decade is over.

The backdrop to the current crisis of the business bloc and to the insurgency of social movements is the Bolivian economy's primary-export, enclave character.⁴ The fact that industrial modernity is present only as small islands in a surrounding sea of informality and a semi-mercantile peasant economy limits the formation of an internal market capable of supporting value-added business activity, even if it reduces wage costs. Vulnerability to the fluctuations of world commodity prices is an endemic feature. In that sense we can say that the *longue durée* crisis of the state is the political correlate of an equally long-term economic crisis of the primary-export model, which is incapable of productively retaining surpluses, and hence unable to deploy the capital necessary for national development. Thus the Santa Cruz Civic Committees' proposals for departmental autonomy, renewed every time there is a discussion about how income from hydrocarbons is to be allocated, or the demands for self-government by the indigenous communities, not only question the configuration of state power, but also reveal the underlying crisis of the established economic order.

³ [The state-owned Brazilian company Petrobras is a major purchaser of Bolivian natural gas, along with the Spanish Repsol—NLR.]

⁴ José Valenzuela, *¿Qué es un patrón de acumulación?*, Mexico City 1990.

Political institutions

Since 1985, Bolivia's elite political parties have sought, with the authoritarian support of the state, to substitute themselves for the old regime of political mediation carried out by the trade unions, which had linked the communal heritage of traditional societies with the collective actions of workers in large-scale enterprises. The party system, under Bolivia's particularly skewed constitution, was prescriptively defined as the mechanism through which the exercise of citizenship should function. However, it is clear that the old party groupings have not proved able to turn themselves into genuine vehicles for political mediation, capable of channelling social demands towards the state. They remain, above all, familial and business networks through which members of the elite can compete for access to the state administration as if it were a patrimonial possession; connections to the voting masses are largely organized around clientelist links and ties of privilege.⁵

With the syndical basis of Bolivian citizenship destroyed, and a new form of electoral participation barely perceptible, other popular forms of political mediation began to emerge with the turn of the century. Social movements, new and old, have asserted their own modes of deliberation, mass meetings and collective action. There are thus two types of institutional system in Bolivia today. In the Chapare, Yungas and Norte de Potosí regions, community forms are superimposed not only on party organization, but also on state institutions themselves, to the extent that mayors, *corregidores* and subprefects are de facto subordinated to peasant confederations. In the case of the northern *altiplano*, several subprefectures and police posts have disappeared over the last three years and 'community police' have been created in provincial capitals to preserve public order in the name of the peasant federations. During the blockades that accompanied the anti-privatization protests of 2003–05, hundreds of communities on the *altiplano* constituted what they call the 'great indigenous barracks' of Q'alachaca, an ad hoc confederation of militant *ayllus* and villages.

The Bolivian theorist René Zavaleta's notion of the 'apparent state' is of clear relevance here. Due to the social and civilizational diversity of the country, large stretches of territory and sections of the population remain

⁵ P. Chaves, *Los límites estructurales de los partidos de poder como estructuras de mediación democrática: Acción Democrática Nacionalista*, degree thesis in sociology, La Paz 2000.

outside, or have not interiorized, the disciplines of the capitalist labour process; they recognize other temporalities, other systems of authority, and affirm collective aims and values different from those offered by the Bolivian state.⁶ Through the political and economic struggles of the last five years, these layers have undergone a process of increasing institutional consolidation, in some cases permanent (politicized agrarian indigenous territories) and in others sporadic (urban areas of Cochabamba, La Paz and El Alto). As a result, the neoliberal state has been confronted with a fragmenting institutional order and robbed of governing authority. The alternative system, anchored in the world of indigenous experience marginalized by Bolivia's uneven modernization process, is challenging the state's centuries-long pretence at a modernity based on texts and institutions that are not even respected by the elites who propound them; and who themselves have never abandoned the methods of seigneurial and patrimonial politics. The generalized corruption in the state apparatus is nothing other than the modernized representation of these habits through which elites in power take on and reproduce state functions.

The liberal-capitalist political culture and institutions that are both being overtaken by the social movements, and traduced by the actual behaviour of the elites in power, presuppose the individuation of society: the dissolution of traditional loyalties, seigneurial relations and non-industrial productive systems. These processes, in Bolivia, have affected at most one third of the population. The Bolivian state, however, including its current 'neoliberal' variant, has, as a sort of political schizophrenia, constructed normative regimes and institutions that bear no correspondence to the 'patchwork' reality of our society which, in its structural majority, is neither industrial nor individuated. The effect of the indigenous and plebeian social movements, which in Habermasian terms stress 'normative' over 'communicative' action, is thus to call into question the validity of republican state institutions that present a mere simulacrum of modernity, in a society which still lacks the structural and material bases upon which such modernity might be based.

Mobilizing beliefs

Since 1985, the ideological blueprints offered to the Bolivian population have been the free market, privatization, governability and representative

⁶ Luis Tapia, *La condición multisocietal: multiculturalidad, pluralismo, modernidad*, La Paz 2002.

democracy. All these proposals were illusions, but well-founded ones, since although they never materialized in any substantial sense, they did bring about a realignment of actions and beliefs in a society which imagined that, through them and the sacrifices they demanded, it would be possible to attain wellbeing, modernity and social recognition. The upper, middle and subaltern urban classes—the latter having abandoned all expectations of protection from the state and workplace unions—saw in this offer a new path to stability and social betterment.

By 2000, the gulf between expectations and realities was driving a disappointed population into conflict with state authority. The promise of modernity had resulted only in intensified exploitation and an increase in informal labour (from 55 to 68 per cent in 20 years); that of social betterment, in a greater concentration of wealth and a refinement in forms of ethnic discrimination. Privatization, especially of hydrocarbons, far from expanding the internal market, has seen an accelerated flight of earnings into foreign hands. This breakdown between official schemas and lived reality has left large sections of the population highly receptive to new loyalties and mobilizing beliefs. Among these are the national-ethnic claims of the indigenous masses, which have produced a sort of indigenous nationalism in the Aymara section of the *altiplano*; state recovery of privatized public resources—water, hydrocarbons—and the broadening of social participation and democracy through recognition of non-liberal political practices of a collective and traditional bent (indigenous community, union, etc). These convictions are actively displacing loyalties to the liberal, privatizing ideology of the state.

We could say that the Bolivian state has lost its monopoly over the capital of recognition, and that we are passing through a period of transition in the structures of allegiance. A striking feature of the new movements is that they dispute both the discourses of neoliberal modernity and the founding certainties of the republican state—that there is an inherent inequality between indigenous and *mestizos*, and that Indians are not capable of governing the country. The fact that the Indians, accustomed to giving their votes to the ‘mist’is’ (*mestizos*), have over the past few years voted extensively for the emerging indigenous leaders, denotes a watershed in the symbolic structures of a profoundly colonial and racialized society. For indigenous social forces, the construction of urban hegemony is posed as a central strategic task, for it is here that their identity

confronts its own hybridity or dissolution in face of the composition—not without ambiguities—of *mestizo* identities, both elite and popular.

In Bolivia, then, the pillars of both the ‘neoliberal’ model and the republican state have deteriorated rapidly. It is this conjunction of crises that helps to explain not just the radical nature of the political conflict over the past five years, but also its complexity and irresolution. Such crises cannot endure for long, because no society can withstand long periods of political vacuum or uncertainty. Sooner or later there will be a lasting recomposition of forces, beliefs and institutions that will inaugurate a new period of state stability. The question for Bolivia is what kind of state this mutation will create. There could be increased repression, leading to the introduction of a ‘neoliberal-authoritarian’ state as the new political form, which might perhaps solve the crisis of the *courte durée*, but not that of the *longue durée*, whose problems would soon manifest themselves again. Or there could be instead an opening of new spaces for the exercise of democratic rights (multicultural political forms, combined communitarian-indigenous and liberal institutions) and economic redistribution (a productive role for the state, self-management, etc), capable of addressing both dimensions of the crisis. In the latter scenario, a democratic resolution of the neoliberal state crisis will have to involve a simultaneous multicultural resolution of the crisis of the colonial republican state.

Hegemonies, Zavaleta argues, can grow tired: there are moments when the state ceases to be irresistible, when the population abandons the ideological frameworks that allowed it to accept the elite’s ordering of society as desirable. The uprising of October 2003 was the maximal expression of the masses’ dissent from the ‘neoliberal-patrimonial’ state, and hence of the exhaustion of its form of hegemony.⁷ If each state crisis generally goes through four phases—manifestation of the crisis; transition or systemic chaos; conflictive emergence of a new principle of state order; consolidation of the new state—October, with its hundreds of thousands of Indians and urban masses in revolt in

⁷ [Protests at the Sánchez de Lozada government’s scheme to export gas reserves through Chile (a national enemy since it had robbed Bolivia of access to the sea in the 1879–83 War of the Pacific), rather than process them domestically, escalated into a full-scale insurrection in La Paz and El Alto in October 2003, ending in the ouster of the president—NLR.]

the cities of La Paz and El Alto, and its culmination in the flight of President Sánchez de Lozada, inescapably marked the Bolivian state's entry into the transitional phase. The initial acceptance of the constitutional succession of Vice-President Carlos Mesa was due not so much to deference towards parliamentarism as to a popular attachment to the old prejudice of the personalization of power, the belief that a change of personnel is in itself a change of regime. But there was also a certain historical lucidity with regard to the further consequences implicit, given the present correlation of forces, in the abandonment of liberal-democratic institutions.

But if there can be no state domination without the consent of the dominated—progressively eroded in Bolivia since the blockades of 2000—there can be no successful opposition without the capacity to postulate an alternative order. This is precisely what the insurgents discovered: they were able to paralyse the state with their blockades but were unable to put forward an alternative and legitimate power project. Hence the ambiguous and confused truce of the Mesa period (2003–05), during which the distinguished broadcaster attempted to channel the insurgents' minimum programme (resignation of Sánchez de Lozada, constituent assembly, new hydrocarbons law), while leaving in place the entire governmental machinery of neoliberal reforms.

Revolutionary epochs

It was Marx who proposed the concept of the 'revolutionary epoch' in order to understand extraordinary historical periods of dizzying political change—abrupt shifts in the position and power of social forces, repeated state crises, recomposition of collective identities, repeated waves of social rebellion—separated by periods of relative stability during which the modification, partial or total, of the general structures of political domination nevertheless remains in question.

A revolutionary epoch is a relatively long period, of several months or years, of intense political activity in which: (a) social sectors, blocs or classes previously apathetic or tolerant of those in power openly challenge authority and claim rights or make collective petitions through direct mobilizations (gas and water *coordinadoras*, indigenous, neighbourhood organizations, *cocaleros*, small-scale farmers); (b) some or all of these mobilized sectors actively posit the necessity of taking state

power (MAS, CSUTCB, COB);⁸ (c) there is a surge of adherence to these proposals from large sections of the population (hundreds of thousands mobilized in the Water War, against the tax hike, in the Gas War, in the elections to support Indian candidates); the distinction between governors and governed begins to dissolve, due to the growing participation of the masses in political affairs; and (d) the ruling classes are unable to neutralize these political aspirations, resulting in a polarization of the country into several 'multiple sovereignties'⁹ that fragment the social order (the loss of the 'authority principle' from April 2000 till today).

In revolutionary epochs societies fragment into social coalitions, each with proposals, discourses, leaderships and programmes for political power that are antagonistic to and incompatible with one another. This gives rise to 'cycles of protest',¹⁰ waves of mobilization followed by withdrawals and retreat, which serve to demonstrate the weakness of those in power (Banzer in April and October 2000 and June 2001; Quiroga in January 2002; Sánchez de Lozada in February and October 2003). Such protests also serve to incite or 'infect'¹¹ other sectors into using mass mobilization as a mechanism to press their demands (teachers, the retired, the landless, students). At the same time, these mobilizations fracture and destabilize the social coalition of the ruling bloc, giving rise to counter-reactions (the so-called business-civic-political 'crescent' in the east of the country), which in turn produce another wave of mobilizations, generating a process of political instability and turbulence that fuels itself. Not every revolutionary epoch ends in a revolution, understood as a change of the social forces in power, which would have to be preceded by an insurrectionary situation. There are revolutionary epochs that lead to a restoration of the old regime (coup d'état), or to a negotiated and peaceful modification of the political system through the partial or substantial incorporation of the insurgents and their proposals for change into the power bloc.

⁸ Movimiento al Socialismo: political organization led by the indigenous peasant leader Evo Morales. Rather than a party, it is an electoral coalition of several urban and rural social movements. CSUTCB: organization of indigenous and peasant communities founded in 1979, led by Felipe Quispe.

⁹ Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492–1992*, Oxford 1993.

¹⁰ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, Cambridge 1994.

¹¹ Anthony Oberschall, *Social Movements: Ideologies, Interests and Identities*, New Brunswick 1993.

The present political period in Bolivia can best be characterized as a revolutionary epoch. Since 2000, there has been a growing incorporation of broader social sectors into political decision-making (water, land, gas, Constituent Assembly) through their union, communal, neighbourhood or guild organizations; there has been a continual weakening of governmental authority and fragmentation of state sovereignty; and there has been an increasing polarization of the country into two social blocs bearing radically distinct and opposed projects for economy and state.

At one pole, the fundamental nucleus is the indigenous movement, both rural (peasant) and urban (worker) in composition; this clearly represents a different political and cultural project for the country to any that has previously existed. The economic programme of this pole is centred on the internal market, taking as its axis the peasant community, urban-artisanal and micro-business activity, a revitalized role for the state as producer and industrializing force, and a central role for the indigenous majority in driving the new state. At the other pole is the ascendant agro-export, financial and petroleum business bloc, which has played the most dynamic role in the liberalizing sectors of the economy. This bloc has a clear image of how Bolivia should relate to external markets and of the role of foreign investment, and it favours the subordination of the state to private enterprise and the preservation, or restoration, of the old political system. Anchored in the eastern and southeastern zones of the country, beyond the current organizational reach of the social movements, it deploys an openly racialized discourse.

This political polarity is further structured by three underlying cleavages: ethno-cultural (indigenous/*qaras-gringos*), class (workers/businessmen) and regional (Andean west/Amazonian crescent). In the case of the 'left' pole, the mobilizing identity is predominantly ethno-cultural, around which worker identity is either dissolved (in a novel type of indigenous proletarianism) or complements indigenous leadership at a secondary level. For the 'right' pole, mobilizing identity is primarily regional in nature; hence the importance of the Civic Committees, agitating for regional autonomy, for these conservative forces.

This polarization has led to a dissociation between economic dominance and political dominance, creating a period of instability since the components of power are divided between two different zones, neither of which has any immediate possibility of displacing the other. Economic

power has moved from west to east (reinforced by foreign investment in hydrocarbons, services, agro-industry), while the sociopolitical power of mobilization has been reinforced in the west, giving rise to a new geographical uncertainty at the level of the state. The interesting thing about the ‘paradox of October’, the period opened up by the insurrection that overthrew Sánchez de Lozada, is that this regional separation simultaneously expresses a confrontation of sharply differentiated ethnicities and classes: businessmen in the east (Santa Cruz, Beni, Tarija), and the indigenous and mass sectors in the west (La Paz, Cochabamba, Potosí, Oruro), both waiting to pounce on a state administration which, in territorial, social and cultural terms, can no longer express the new economic and political configuration of Bolivian society. It is true that there are businessmen, indigenous, *mestizos*, workers and peasants in every part of Bolivia; but the ascendant discourses and identities articulated within each region are differentiated by these class, ethnic and territorial roots.

Overall, the map of sociopolitical forces in Bolivia shows a highly political field, with tendencies on both sides pushing for solutions through force, either by coup d’état (MNR)¹² or insurrection (CSUTCB/COB), or through electoral resolution, either via a restoration of the old regime (ADN)¹³ or its progressive transformation (MAS). None of these tendencies has yet managed to construct a bloc with a majority over the other components, still less over the other sections of the population that would be indispensable for a social leadership capable of a long-term hold on state power.

From the point of view of the social movements and their prospects for an indigenous-popular transformation of the state, there are two alternatives: a path of gradual, institutional change by electoral means led by Evo Morales, and an insurrectional path for the revolutionary transformation of the state. The first would require the construction of an electoral bloc around Morales, negotiated with other leaders and social movements, that would be strong enough to generate a unified popular and indigenous pole with the ability to rule. The broad social backing needed would require proposals for change robust enough to attract

¹² Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario: nationalist party that led the popular revolution of 1952 and in the 1980s pushed through the liberal reforms of the Washington Consensus.

¹³ Acción Democrática Nacionalista: party founded in 1979 by the dictator Hugo Banzer, which he led in subsequent elections, gaining the presidency from 1997–2001.

those urban sectors—middle-class, upwardly mobile popular, and even business layers linked to the internal market—who are at present reluctant to accept an indigenous governmental solution, and without whose support an indigenous electoral triumph would be rendered unviable.

The two paths, electoral and insurrectionary, are not necessarily antagonistic; they could turn out to be complementary. On both, however, the indigenous-popular pole should consolidate its hegemony, providing intellectual and moral leadership of the country's social majorities. There will be neither electoral triumph nor victorious insurrection without wide-ranging, patient work on the unification of the social movements, and a practical education process to realize the political, moral, cultural and organizational leadership of these forces over Bolivia's popular and middle strata.