

HISTORY

Revisiting Bolivian Studies: Reflections on Theory, Scholarship, and Activism since 1980

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As both a focus and locus of vibrant scholarly work, the field of Bolivian studies burst onto the international scene, carving a distinctive niche for itself within the larger fields of Andean and Latin American studies over the past twenty-five years. Bolivia went from being the hemisphere's "least studied" country, according to a 1984 *LASA Forum* survey, to becoming a beacon of intercultural dialogue, vanguard scholarship, and postcolonial debate. This essay traces Bolivian studies' coming of age. Plotting the field's developments and dialogues across history, anthropology, and ethnohistory, it argues that a dual process of academic decentering and epistemic reinvention unfolded in Bolivia at the height of its indigenous and popular mobilizations during the 1990s and early 2000s. The article closes by identifying five thematic clusters of recent research and briefly reflects on the place of Bolivian scholarship in the wider purview of Andean studies.

Como foco y lugar de trabajo académico vibrante, el campo de los estudios bolivianos irrumpió en la escena internacional, labrándose un nicho distintivo dentro de los campos más amplios de los estudios andinos y latinoamericanos durante los últimos veinticinco años. Bolivia pasó de ser el país "menos estudiado" del hemisferio, según una encuesta del Foro LASA de 1984, a convertirse en un faro de diálogo intercultural, estudios de vanguardia y debate postcolonial. Este ensayo muestra la madurez de los estudios bolivianos. Trazando desarrollos de campo y diálogos a través de Historia, Antropología y Etnohistoria, argumenta que un proceso dual de descentración académica y reinención epistémica se desarrolló en Bolivia en el apogeo de sus movilizaciones indígenas y populares durante la década de 1990 y principios de 2000. El artículo cierra identificando cinco grupos temáticos de nuevas investigaciones, y reflexiona brevemente sobre el lugar de la investigación boliviana en el ámbito más amplio de los Estudios Andinos.

Bolivian Studies Coming of Age

Any essay that attempts to cast a critical eye on "the state of the field" is a treacherous enterprise. One has to navigate between the Scylla of fawning praise and the Charybdis of damning critique, and then chart exciting new research agendas. Be that as it may, in 1988 I was provoked into writing just such a review essay on Bolivian scholarship for the *Latin American Research Review*. What prompted me was a 1984 LASA (Latin American Studies Association) survey on field developments that had ranked Bolivia as the least studied country in Latin America (see Larson 1988; Merx 1984). Sadly, it was true, at least in quantitative terms. But even then, I could see that Bolivia, along with the Andean region more widely, was on the threshold of becoming a dynamic, interdisciplinary field of study—one located at the interface of history, anthropology, and ethnohistory.¹ I wanted to help bring the vibrant new work of Bolivianists (if only those residing in the United States) into the purview of Latin American studies.

Bolivia's fate as the hemisphere's least studied country was soon to change, however. I argue below that Bolivian studies crystallized into a legitimate field of study as Bolivia turned from being exclusively an *object*

¹ Of course, I was not the only young scholar beginning to take the measure of new research trends in Bolivia and Andean studies. See, for example, Salomon (1982), Urbano (1991), Poole (1992), and Rivera Cusicanqui (1999).

of scholarly inquiry in the global North into the primary geocultural “locus of enunciation” for scholarly theory and debate inside Bolivia itself.² The historic struggles for voice (and the politics of self-representation) among a new cadre of indigenous activists was rapidly unfolding in the Bolivian Andes in ways that would fundamentally challenge the social practices and purposes of academic scholarship (Lucero 2008). There was, I argue, a kind of dual process of academic decentering and epistemic reinvention going on in Bolivia during the 1990s that resonated with the postcolonial turn in Latin American studies more generally.

First, Bolivia emerged as a vital site of scholarship and debate, becoming a wellspring of critical postcolonial and decolonization thinking that has invigorated dialogue across several disciplinary niches of the Latin American studies landscape.³ Second, and simultaneously, the locus of scholarly research and dialogue in Bolivia moved beyond the walls of academia, staid NGO offices, and government think tanks into civil society and popular culture—that vital, unruly informal sphere of community organization, struggle, and work. In short, the axis of knowledge/power moved out of the criollo academy (Angel Rama’s metaphorical lettered city) and into what Xavier Albó (1995) has called “the pluralist base,” where knowledge, struggle, and identity were mutually constitutive. Although Albó’s prodigious scholarship has circulated widely among scholars and activists across Latin America, it has remained firmly anchored in Bolivia’s resurgent indigenous and peasant movements—the core of Albó’s pluralist base—that surfaced in the 1970s under conditions of dictatorship and repression, and flowered in the 1980s, after the partial restoration of civil society and democratic rule.⁴ This remarkable political and cultural effervescence was nurtured by local collectives of activists, teachers, and students experimenting with postcolonial and indigenous-centered research agendas and methodologies—ranging from scholarly collectives in search of silenced indigenous voices, hidden transcripts, and counternarratives to the field practitioners of an insurgent “applied anthropology” that served many highland *ayllu* communities in their ongoing land claims and quests for local sovereignty. In the present essay, then, the flowering of Bolivian studies is planted firmly in the subsoil of activist scholarship coming out of three converging fields of political contention: the indigenous-based struggles for political rights and representation in the 1980s and 1990s; the rise of progressive NGO-driven projects empowering local scholar-activists within a larger neoliberal, “multicultural” political order in the 1990s; and the crack-up of that neoliberal/multicultural framework under the pressure of popular mobilizations and epistemic disruptions in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁵

But let us not go too far in provincializing the North American academe and its community of Latin American scholars.⁶ Postcolonial modes of thinking were also the stuff of postmodernism and critical theory (including the South Asian school of subaltern studies) in the global North.⁷ But until the late 1980s, they had made few inroads into the field of Latin American studies, the precinct of embedded structuralist and dependency perspectives.⁸ And no wonder: leftist scholars in Latin America were long intent upon exploding US-exported theories of modernization and democracy in a hemisphere torn by endemic

² I borrow the term from Mignolo (2000).

³ I cite but one key article to illustrate Bolivia’s emerging “cosmopolitanism,” as it registered on the hemispheric radar of Latin American studies: Xavier Albó’s lead 1995 article. Echoing Jose Martí’s famous anti-imperialist call for a unifying pan-Latin American political culture and identity (in his heralded 1901 essay “Nuestra América”), Albó went in rhetorical search for a multiple and pluralist field of national identities and voices coming out of the Indian rights movements simmering in different parts of the Americas. For Albó, Latin America’s postmodern theoretical agenda was to disrupt Western paradigms of nationhood by reintroducing (sub)national and ethnic notions of “peoplehood,” empowered by their status as “First Nations” or “Testimonial Peoples,” to stake their claims to local sovereignty. In making a bid for “our identity starting from pluralism at the base,” Albó called for the hemisphere’s indigenous peoples to take rhetorical possession of their originary lands and identities by renaming America with the unitary Cuna name of *Abya-Yala*, long a symbol among Andean peoples of ethnic resistance. See also the lengthy discussion of Albó’s essay in Mignolo (1994).

⁴ On Bolivia’s grassroots indigenous movements, namely the union-based *katarista* group that controlled the nation’s largest peasant confederation (Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores y Campesinos Bolivianos, CSUTCB) in the 1980s, and the more culturally oriented *indianista* movement that flourished in La Paz, see Javier Hurtado (1986), Rivera Cusicanqui (1993, 1984), and Lucero (2008, chap. 4).

⁵ This essay, more reflexive than comprehensive, hopes to capture the spirit and trajectories of scholarly creativity both on and in Bolivia rather than offer a comprehensive literature review. It uses my earlier slant (Larson 1988) on the state of the field (which referenced recent Anglophone scholarship) as a rough baseline, although here I reflect on crucial developments unfolding in Bolivian ethnohistory during the 1980s that bore fruit in the scholarly harvests of the 1990s and beyond.

⁶ With apologies to Chakrabarty (2000), who uses the idea of “provincializing Europe” to critique Western narratives of universal progress and the unitary subject and thus to problematize the idea of subaltern peoples representing themselves in history.

⁷ Critical postcolonial and subaltern approaches have helped frame the work of Andeanist ethnohistorians, such as Thurner (1997), Thurner and Guerrero (2003), and Mallon (1995b, 2005, and 2012).

⁸ For an overview, see Wade (1997, chap. 7). See also Coronil (1996) and Mallon (1995b). The South Asian subaltern studies school was introduced to Bolivian readers in Rivera Cusicanqui and Barragán (1997).

poverty, dictatorship, and US imperial adventures. Furthermore, much of the best historical scholarship was still wedded to structural paradigms critiquing capitalist modernity and colonial legacies.⁹ And yet, the cultural turn toward power, politics, and identity began to pervade Latin American studies, especially as America's counter-quincentenary approached. The field pivoted from materialist (structural) questions to the contingent politics of power and representation (and toward a "new political history from below") (Mallon 1995a, 1995b). And the convergence of three critical fields of study—subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, and a decentered anthropology of indigeneity—created the perfect epistemic storm for thrusting Bolivia (as an emerging field) and Bolivian scholars (as knowledge producers) into the eye of the postcolonial hurricane. Those field disruptions also compelled a few outsider Bolivianists (like me) to go back to the drawing board and rethink the politics and conceptual frameworks of their own earlier work (see my critical appraisals in Larson 1995, 1998).

By the end of the 1990s, Bolivia's vigorous indigenous and popular cultures had drawn a new generation of North American scholars into their fold. They brought their scholarly passions and postcolonial sensibilities to bear on a host of new research projects: Zulawski (1995) Thomson (2002), Serulnikov (2003, 2013), and Gotkowitz (2007), for example, produced magnificent indigenous-centered histories of peasant politics and rebellion. Bolivia's contemporary ethnic movements also drew a host of social scientists studying Aymara, Quechua, and Guaraní movements, producing case studies often situated in the international context of Indian rights movements (for example, Yashar 2005; Postero 2007; Gustafson 2009). Not least, the explosive growth of NGOs in postdictatorship Bolivia (and Latin America more generally) opened new spaces at the intersection of social science and policymaking, focused on such normative issues as grassroots (or "ethno-") development, gender discrimination, and practices of democratic self-empowerment (Healy 2001; Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009; Harris 2000; Lazar 2008). That neoliberal decade of market-driven development in rural Bolivia, fueled by NGO projects in community-based enterprises or civil society projects, brought many indigenous organizations (as well as educated urban interlocutors) into the globalizing reach of transnational field researchers and their funders. In fact, over the 1990s, a whole generation of progressive (and opportunistic) Bolivian social scientists was buoyed, for a brief while, by the influx of transnational money promoting local NGO programs in multicultural democracy and social development.

Arguably, however, the most decisive shift occurred not in the transnational realm of high theory or NGO networking, but in the trenches of struggle and at the edges of Bolivian civil society. The irruption of Bolivia's unruly multiculturalism, especially in the twin cities of El Alto and La Paz, saw the flowering of hundreds of grassroots activist groups of women, workers, peasants, university students, and indigenous activists over the 1990s. Local self-governing, deliberative bodies of men and women created grassroots laboratories for dialogue and decision-making in response to the government's harsh neoliberal reforms and/or multicultural social reforms. These micropolitical contexts of "situated knowledge" soon became the sites and objects of engaged ethnographic fieldwork, some of it pioneered by Xavier Albó's collaborative work with Aymara students and scholars at his Jesuit-funded organization, Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA).¹⁰ Much of this grassroots intellectual activity was plugged into regional (and sometimes transnational) circuits of knowledge and empowerment that leveraged (as well as translated and mediated) local interests, ideas, and agendas that indigenous and popular groups were bringing to the proverbial table.¹¹ Yet, a new generation of Aymara-based activist/intellectuals—many of them first-generation college educated—emerged as primary "movement entrepreneurs" and, as such, became critical to the production of alternative norms and knowledges that fundamentally challenged neoliberal paradigms of capitalist modernity and assimilationist ideals of *mestizaje*. Inspired by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's intrepid scholarship, teaching, and activism, it was this group of Bolivian scholar-activists who, far more than the purveyors of high theory in academia, performed the epistemic work of "decolonization thinking."¹²

⁹ My generation of historians, coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s, was profoundly influenced by the historical work of Tulio Halperin Donghi and, in particular, by the breakout historical synthesis by Stanley Stein and Barbara Stein (1970). Even more widely read throughout the hemisphere was Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America* (1997).

¹⁰ Emblematic is Albó's extraordinary life work in CIPCA, which has been at the axis of investigation, movement praxis, policy design, and advocacy over the past half century. Albó's voluminous scholarship and essays are now available in *Obras selectas* (2016, 4 vols.).

¹¹ Here, I am not so interested in the politics of knowledge as an exercise in distilling a pristine nativist "cosmology" or textual corpus, as in how indigenous and social science knowledges were interconnected, translated, and deployed during the chimera of neoliberal governance and global modernity of the 1990s and early 2000s.

¹² Translated into English, this term is rather awkward, although its use is spreading. See Sanjinés (2013, 1–27) Mignolo (2000), Mignolo and Walsh (2018), Mamani Ramírez (2017), and Mallon (2012, 1–19). My purpose here, however, is not to excavate the

An iconic example of this early decolonizing work comes from the formative years of THOA, the Taller de Historia Oral Andina. Founded in 1983 by a dozen Aymara students attending the San Andrés University in La Paz (many working under the guidance of Rivera Cusicanqui, their sociology professor), the THOA collective broke new ground in several ways. First, it improvised a communal ethos and methodologies to perform a combination of deep archival research and extensive work in the collection, translation, and transcription of oral testimonies of Aymara- and Quechua-speaking elders. In sheer volume and originality, THOA built a prodigious artisan workshop of ethnohistory, oral testimony, stories, and verse, as well as breakout historical and anthropological studies. Second, THOA virtually invented a revisionist indigenous-centered historiography.¹³ Narrating the nation from “pluralism at the base,” THOA scholars produced and disseminated the evidence of “an autonomous indigenous historical memory and subjectivity [that had] persisted throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.” This work drew inspiration from the earlier *katarista* peasant movement, just as THOA’s “activist texts” were to serve resurgent ethnic movements of the late 1980s and into the 1990s (Stephenson 2002, 105).¹⁴ THOA’s activist form of scholarship coincided with the historic 1990 March for Territory and Dignity, culminating in the unification of the eastern lowland and western highland flanks of what was fast becoming a nationwide indigenous movement pressing for constitutional and social reforms. Third, THOA put its archival findings (and transcribed documents) at the disposal of indigenous groups lobbying the government for the restitution of their legally held ancestral lands. It devised tools and skills to help in the formation of ayllu federations in parts of La Paz and southern Oruro.¹⁵ And, finally, THOA broke down literate and language barriers with a torrent of inexpensive bilingual print editions and the use of other media (popular theater, *radionovelas*, videos, etc.). This intellectual and cultural ferment opened alternative arenas of public debate, “where native peoples could explore their own identities, voices, experiences of political disenfranchisement, and cultural dislocation” (Stephenson 2002, 103).¹⁶

The ferment fed by THOA’s insurgent scholarship quickly transcended it. A new generation of Bolivian scholars and intellectuals, many with deep roots in the Aymara and Quechua countryside, burst onto the academic scene to throw open new windows on indigenous history and cultural politics—to become the authors of “a history of our own that speaks to us” (the phrase is drawn from the 1973 “Tiahuanaku Manifesto,” written by Aymara rebel students). A new intellectual school of Aymara historicism, in particular, was registered in manifold ways. It was embodied, for example, in the life experiences and work of Roberto Choque Canqui, a prolific research historian and archivist who, almost single-handedly, plowed the first furrows of an Indian-centered history and historiography of Bolivian history.¹⁷ Other Aymara scholars have

layered meanings of “decolonization” but to focus on the indissoluble links among political practice, pedagogy, and contestative knowledge that sprang from the grassroots work of Aymara students, teachers, and intellectuals.

¹³ But an early pathfinder was Ramiro Condarco Morales (1965).

¹⁴ Not well known outside of Bolivia are the extraordinary empirical discoveries that came out of THOA’s archival and field excavations. In short order, THOA scholars uncovered a subterranean landscape of Aymara and Quechua peasant activist-intellectuals (from Santos Marka T’ula and Nina Qhispe to Gregorio Titiriku and others). They operated on the national stage, representing some four hundred rural communities and ayllus trying to restore, or defend, their ancestral lands. As advocates and intellectuals, activists and teachers, they intervened in politics and the public sphere from the early 1900s onward.

¹⁵ Most notably, the Federation of Ayllus of Southern Oruro, the “Quillacas-Azanques nation.” See Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe (2009, 102–103). THOA’s work also helped legitimize traditional practices of communal self-governance, for example, the significant role of community elders in vernacular governance and active roles that women performed in the daily life of the ayllu. See Rivera Cusicanqui and THOA (1992), Stephenson (2002). A parallel stream of activist studies poured forth from the venerable organ of grassroots peasant work, CIPCA, under the aegis of Xavier Albó and his Aymara collaborators.

¹⁶ Probably THOA’s most influential work was, and continues to be, the booklet entitled *El indio Santos Marka T’ula, cacique principal de los ayllus de Callapa y apoderado general de las comunidades de la República* (THOA 1984).

¹⁷ Born in 1942 in the provincial town of Caquiaviri, province of Pacajes, Choque came of age in that pivotal postrevolutionary era when the children of *ex-colonos* were released from servitude and granted the civil liberty to attend school (among other newly won civil and labor rights). He attended a small rural school and, anxious to advance, took lessons with an indigenous woman teacher in her home. Eventually, Choque won his father’s blessing to seek opportunities in the city. Once resettled in La Paz, Choque apprenticed as a shoemaker with his uncle. But bench work, hammering soles, was but a way station en route to higher education. And along with other Aymara students, Choque was caught up in the swirl of cultural effervescence in the 1970s. He gained entry into the Universidad de San Andrés, where he entered the Department of History and later, along with other students, helped rescue and deposit a massive cache of historical documents from the District Supreme Court that had been earmarked for the dustbin. That intervention helped launch Choque’s illustrious career as Bolivian archivist and historian. An indefatigable researcher, Choque turned the archive—once the symbol and preserve of colonialist knowledge/power matrices—into a vault of “hidden transcripts” and muffled and mediated voices that might be made to shine new light on indigenous historical actors who had, over decades and centuries, engaged with the language, laws, and documentary power of Rama’s metaphorical lettered city (personal communication). Aside from the citations to his work below, see especially Choque’s important 2005 synthesis of Bolivia’s indigenous movements in the lead-up to the MNR revolution of 1952.

traversed the Altiplano in pursuit of moral memory and Indian-centered reinterpretations of the past. Whereas Choque, for example, excavated documentary sediments to uncover the tracks of indigenous actors, Waskar Ari tapped into oral memory and plumbed the depths of cacique and community archives to open a window on the obscure Alcalde Mayor Particular (AMP) movement and its novel uses of essentialist legal discourse, nativist schooling, and local knowledge to fashion a quasi-nationalist project of territorial and nativist redemption.¹⁸ The intellectual work of sociologist Esteban Ticona Alejo, by contrast, moved the compass between literary analysis, oral testimony, and narrative history to critically engage colonial and postcolonial epistemologies, as well as to locate the subject of indigenous movements, and Aymara thinkers and activists specifically, at the core of his larger counternarrative of modern Bolivian history and memory.¹⁹

Stepping back to survey the larger canvas, it is possible to see the transformative effects that Bolivia's robust social movements (as well as the wider hemispheric Indian rights movement) has had on postcolonial "border thinking" and practices, particularly in anthropology. In her provocative 2008 article "Bolivia: Bridges and Chasms," Rossana Barragán describes Bolivia as a vital field laboratory for observing the interplay between "research and academic thinking and practices, on the one hand, and political action and social movements, on the other" (Barragán 2008, 32; see also Rivera Cusicanqui 1999). Just as indigenous confederations reached out to the THOA group for help in negotiating the restoration of local ayllu territories, so too did indigenous leaders deploy the scholarly work of certain Bolivian anthropologists to leverage their local political and ethnopolitical agendas. To be sure, this sort of indigenous and popular ferment was not exclusive to Bolivia. Surveying the activist role of Andean ethnography in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Frank Salomon (1985, 92) chronicled stories about formally trained anthropologists intervening in policy debates, "less as experimenters in applied work than as expert witnesses in defense of Andean interests," or as advocates for restoring Andean traditions of farming and healing practices; or, in defense of Andean traditions of growing and chewing the coca leaf; or, to validate and make official the use of native languages in public schools; or to adapt church practices to the demands of Aymara parishioners. But nowhere else in the Andes did anthropologists and grassroots political activists seem to be so impactful as in Bolivia, especially after they joined forces to push for fundamental changes at the state level. Those efforts culminated in the 1990s under the neoliberal regime of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada ("Goni") and his indigenous vice president, Victor Hugo Cárdenas. They presided over a symbolic and institutional reorganization of the Bolivian nation-state, redefined as being both "multiethnic and plurilingual" (if not yet plurinational).²⁰ Spurred by indigenous activists and their allies, the government conferred legitimacy on the normative categories of *pueblo indígena* and ethnic *nacionalidad*, and thus began taking seriously indigenous claims to their ancestral cultures and languages, territories, and autonomies. A pluralist framework of ethnic and individual rights was finally beginning to supplant Bolivia's restrictive homogeneous ideal of national belonging.²¹

Of course, there were troubling signs that Goni was setting a new kind of political trap, as his regime tried simultaneously to co-opt or suppress the more militant factions of the Aymara and urban popular movements, while trying to mask the state's repressive, racist, and exclusionary politics in the celebration of multiculturalism.²² Rivera Cusicanqui's penetrating critique was echoed in other corners of Amerindian America and reverberated in other camps of critical social science scholarship on neoliberal state-indigenous relations, including Charles Hale's influential 2002 article broadly warning against "the menace of multiculturalism" (Hale 2002, 485, 491). But menace or not, by no means did the fog of official

¹⁸ Ari (2014) makes a provocative argument that members of the AMP network engaged in a radical hermeneutics, turning the republic's law codes into their own moral and legal philosophy, dubbed "Indian Law." Several other classic oral histories and historical ethnographies burst onto the scene, including the masterful three-volume study (1992–1997) on the Aymara region of Jesús de Machaca: *Jesús de Machaca: La marka rebelde* (Choque et al. 1992–1997), involving the collaboration of a historian, sociologist, and anthropologist: Roberto Choque, Esteban Ticona, and Xavier Albó, respectively. See also Mamani Condori (1991) on the ayllu network of Taraqu and their fight for communal revindication; Choque et al. (1992) and Choque and Quisbert (2006) on indigenous education initiatives; and Fernández (2000) on Aymara practices of communal justice.

¹⁹ See Ticona Alejo (2005) as well as his coauthored 1992 oral history of Leandro Condori Chura, an important Aymara scribe and activist in the early twentieth century (Condori Chura and Ticona Alejo 1992). Spurred by THOA, oral and testimonial history quickly became a critical historiographical genre among Aymara scholars. See, for example, Flores Apaza et al. (1999).

²⁰ "Plurinational" refers to the widening parameters of pluralist constitutional reforms under Evo Morales. Meanwhile, Bolivia's homegrown indigenous movement fed into the hemispheric movement sweeping across Amerindian regions of Latin America during the late 1980s and 1990s. See Postero and Zamosc (2004), Maybury-Lewis (2002).

²¹ Goni's neoliberal order has been the object of passionate polemic and critique, but for a judicious historical synthesis, see Barragán (2008, 44–46).

²² Among others, Rivera Cusicanqui was a relentless critic of the state's official rhetoric of "pluri-multi," revealing it to be a façade camouflaging harsh austerity measures and repression against the poor and all those indigenous activists and intellectuals who did not conform to the state's ideal of the compliant Indian citizen, "*el indio permitido*."

multiculturalism shroud Bolivia's vibrant sphere of indigenous and popular knowledge/activism over the 1990s. Intense transnational networking opened communication between indigenous groups within Bolivia and across Latin America, and plugged some local organizations into advocacy NGOs. There were some "trickle-up effects." Some multilateral agencies repudiated earlier technocratic development schemes and began reconceiving culturally appropriate and interactive programs in the new field of ethnodevelopment, by recognizing indigenous people as co-participants in designing and implementing local development projects. Comparative case studies of the "NGO-ification" of Ecuador and Bolivia over the 1990s reveal how a variety of grassroots development organizations managed to hook into indigenous-movement issues and agendas (Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009, 34–35). Bolivia's political and institutional climate proved especially receptive: the 1994 constitutional redefinition of the nation as multicultural and plurilingual; the 1994 education reforms establishing national-level bilingual and intercultural curricula; the 1994–1995 Law of Popular Participation (LPP) aiming to diversify local politics by shifting power to municipalities and giving recognition to indigenous civil organizations; and the 1996 provision for original community lands (Tierras Comunitarias de Origen, TCOs) recognizing collective property titles. That cascade of government reforms, fueled by NGO money and activity, had an enormous generative effect on the training, status, and employment of Bolivian social scientists-turned-practitioners.²³ Yet, as noted, the NGO/neoliberal pact also provoked strong countercurrents of opposition and dissent, not only among radical groups of young urban intellectuals but also within militant factions of Aymara-based and Quechua-based movements.²⁴ Ultimately, the contradictions of globalization and its local brand of neoliberalism (with its mantra of multiculturalism) surfaced, triggering a chain of events that was difficult for Bolivian elites to anticipate, and impossible to reverse. Popular and indigenous waves of insurgency, beginning with the 1999–2000 Water War in Cochabamba and followed by the 2003 Gas War in La Paz, unleashed a wave of "intercultural" popular mobilizations that propelled Evo Morales into power by the end of 2005. From the vantage point of the new millennium, Bolivia came to symbolize Latin America's most spectacular failure of state-controlled multiculturalism; the regime had crumbled before the specter of the popular disavowal of neoliberalism's false promises and, by the early 2000s, increasingly austere and repressive policies.

How to capture the intellectual synergy that came out of Bolivia's indigenous counterpublic sphere and local activist scholarship over the 1990s? How to plot the shifting tensions among scholarly research, social movements, the NGO world, progressive organs of the Catholic Church, and the public universities in that heady decade? These questions cry out for robust research on Bolivian cultural politics and intellectual ferment spanning two cycles of neoliberal reformism and the rise of populist hegemony under Morales.

From this vantage point, I can't help but admire the richness and originality of the research being produced by Bolivian scholars, whether more activist or archivist in their orientation, over the past twenty-five years. Much academic work in anthropology and history, as I have argued, originated from the base, flowing from the kinetic imperatives and arguments animating Bolivia's social movements rather than developing in mimetic relationship to the academic fashions in the global North. This effervescence is all the more impressive when we remember the material hardships and institutional fragility under which most local scholars in Bolivia continued to work. Barragán has observed how, during the 1990s, "the conditions within Bolivian academia, as well as social and political demands [on Bolivian academics], led to two very different pathways: [funding and] stability for the privileged community of [foreign] Bolivianists, and the dispersion and nomadic existence for local Bolivians" (Barragán 2008, 39). In spite of these gross disparities

²³ The IAF and a host of European NGOs generated opportunities for training and employing hundreds of local fieldworkers, agents, and interlocutors to work in various niches of rural development. The flood of NGOs was also a boon to young Bolivian anthropologists and sociologists (and other social scientists), as well as to agronomists, veterinarians, and other technically trained professionals, all of whom carried out an extraordinary range of basic and applied research projects in the service of their NGO-funded programs in such fields as: environmental sustainability; the recovery of Andean ecological and agrarian knowledge and practices (potato farming and llama rearing, for example); the extension of social welfare services and public education into the territory of the Guaraní and other eastern lowland zones; the articulation of communitarian values and civil society under the LPP; the study and restoration of the ancient art and craft of weaving, along with other cultural revitalization programs; all kinds of community-based popular education programs, particularly those targeted to empowering women's organizations; the implementation of "intercultural" ideals and practices in various institutional venues, etc.

²⁴ Most notably, Oscar Oliveira emerged as the leader of Cochabamba's broad coalition for the Defense of Water and Life that exploded in the region's Water War of 1999 against the privatization of water resources, "the source of all life." Meanwhile, Felipe Quispe ("El Mallku") surfaced as a militant leader in Aymara-based guerrilla and *indianista* politics over the 1980s and 1990s, and played a central role in fueling popular mobilizations on the Altiplano and in El Alto during the Gas War of 2003. Finally, lest we forget, during those years Evo Morales was gaining power and notoriety for his militant union activism on behalf of the confederation of coca producers, especially those based in the Chapare region of Cochabamba.

of wealth and privilege, Bolivian scholars have contributed to important transnational dialogues in several thematic and conceptual areas.

Briefly, I suggest several areas of recent scholarly activity and exchange—currents of critical scholarship and research agendas flowing out of Bolivia (South to North, and South to South)—that have stimulated, in turn, new currents of scholarly activity on Bolivian history and society in North America. Here, I identify several thematic research agendas that have drawn Bolivianists into transnational conversations, creating the kind of metaphorical bridges that Barragán wrote about in her 2008 state-of-the-field appraisal.

Studies of internal colonialism

Aymara scholar/activists have produced what might be thought of as a Bolivian school of postcolonial (or “decolonial”) theory and history, though there is nothing doctrinaire about it. Arguably, Rivera Cusicanqui’s (1993) book-length essay “La raíz: Colonizadores y colonizados” remains the seminal study that works to historicize the concept of “internal colonialism” in its myriad guises and to trace its narrative arc (bending toward injustice) through successive historical stages—the long colonial cycle, the liberal-republican cycle, and the recent populist cycle. In that early work, writes theorist Walter Mignolo, Rivera posited these historical periods not as progressive stages of state-society formation but as “coexisting temporalities that produce and explain [the continuity of] structural violence in Bolivia” (Mignolo 1994, 61).²⁵ Here, she set down the foundations for examining the compound workings of modernity/coloniality and civilization/violence as two sides of the historical coin (a *problemática* that dialogues with postcolonial theory in the work of scholars like Aníbal Quijano (2001), Walter Mignolo (2000), and Javier Sanjinés (2004, 2013). Critical theory of “decolonization” and “decoloniality”—interrogating the logic of modernity/coloniality, Western ideas of time, and global politics of knowledge—represents the latest conceptual development in First World academic settings. See, for example, Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018), and Pablo Quintero (2015). Here, too, was the impetus behind a new generation of Bolivian scholars, men and women seeking to understand the manifest historical forces behind the power and perpetuation of racial and gendered hierarchies and exclusions in Bolivian society (to mention but a few works, Choque 2005; Cárdenas 1988; Sanjinés 2004; Ticona Alejo 2005; Soruco Sologuren 2011; Yapu 2006). And to tackle, straight on, the carapace of colonial racism that has structured inequality in Bolivia, even as it was silenced by modernist discourses of *mestizaje* and multiculturalism (Mamani Ramírez 2017).²⁶

In myriad ways, a local cultural studies literature has taken up the challenge “to provincialize Europe” by problematizing “the homogeneous time of European modernity.” Inspired by South Asian studies, and also invoking the Aymara concept of *nayrapacha* (captured by the aphorism “mirando al futuro-pasado, caminaremos por el presente”), several Bolivian historians and cultural theorists have interrogated the West’s metahistorical categories of time and knowledge, history, and memory—all the while working toward a critical understanding of the intrinsic violence that Western linear notions of universal progress and modernity have represented for the rights of Bolivia’s indigenous cultures to civil equality and cultural coexistence (or coevalness).²⁷

²⁵ See Mignolo’s critical appraisal of Rivera’s essay (1994, 60–66). See also Rivera’s incomparable synthesis, *Oprimidos pero no vencidos* (1984), which came out of the era of *katarismo* (a militant indigenous trade union movement in the 1970s and early 1980s) and which set the research agenda for a new generation of (mostly Aymara) historians and sociologists. Its 2003 edition contains an important essay placing this work in historical perspective and laying out a devastating critique of Bolivia’s experiment in neoliberalism and multiculturalism.

²⁶ See the Bolivian-authored articles in Gotkowitz (2011), particularly the antiracist agenda (in the era of the Plurinational Constitutional Assembly) written by Pamela Calla and the Research Group of the Observatorio del Racismo. See the decentering approaches to Andean ethnohistory in Larson, Harris, and Tandeter (1995), Larson (1998, 2004), Gruner (2015), Kuenzli (2013), Canessa (2005), and Ehrinpreis (2018), as well as Iruruzqui’s classic work on the matrix of neocolonial power and knowledge under the Bolivian oligarchy (1994).

²⁷ Illustrative is Rivera’s foundational work on the cultural politics of indigenous memory (the politics of “long” and “short” memory) that helped define Aymara ethnic platforms and identities revolving around the commune, on the one hand, and Quechua peasantist agendas and identities that were more attuned to agrarian unionist politics. She takes up this theme again in the 2003 reedition of *Oprimidos pero no vencidos*. See her essay “Mirando al pasado para caminar por el presente y el futuro (qhip nayr uñitasis sarnaqapxañani)” (2003, 11–62). See also the ethnographic classics on temporality, Abercrombie (1998) and Wachtel (2001); see also Sanjinés (2013, chap. 1) and Hylton (2003). That literature also recognizes how the forging of moral memory has performed an essential role in sustaining the Aymaras’ struggle for cultural identity and justice over a long period of time. See also Farthing and Kohl (2013) and Dangl (2019).

The indigenous city

Popular culture, the plebeian, and the ambiguity of identity on the racial/spatial borderland between *indio* and *cholo/mestizo*, or between rural and urban, make up the thematic cluster of themes first explored in the early 1980s by Xavier Albó, Tomás Greaves, and Godofredo Sandoval. In the 1990s, a spate of scholarly studies began complicating the dualist geography of race by looking to the liminal spaces of the city—with its thriving peasant-controlled, women-dominated outdoor market economy; the strong circular migratory paths connecting rural community to city; the sprawling urban barrios of Indians; the symbolic saturation of urban public spaces and civic festivals by indigenous and popular sectors; and the reworking of gender, ethnic, and class relations within urban working-class communities, robust trade union and anarchist movements in La Paz, Oruro, Cochabamba, and other cities.²⁸ El Alto, America's largest "spontaneous" Indian city, has become a social laboratory for urban ethnographers and social historians, among others, to study the invention of a distinctly local popular economy and communitarian citizenship practices that defy Western liberal norms of market and citizenship behavior. It is also the terrain of innumerable NGO projects supporting local research-action programs. But as Lazar (2008, 51) notes, in recent years much local research on El Alto has sought to understand "the process of making a distinctive and separate identity for El Alto," one that [became] increasingly "bound up with political radicalism and indigeneity."

Lowland Bolivia

A burgeoning literature brought lowland Bolivia out of the dense undergrowth of historical obscurity and into the limelight of national narratives. Much of it engages such themes as missionary and state projects of colonization, agro-development schemes and the rise of Santa Cruz as the nation's eastern axis of power, and the problem regionalism and racial politics (Gill 1987; Soruco Sologuren, Plata Quispe, and Medeiros 2008; Lema 2009; Pruden 2012; Langer 2009). Inspired by the 1990 indigenous March for Territory and Dignity; the simmering Guaraní movement for land and bilingual schools during the 1990s; massive indigenous land-claim movements in the east before the growing threats of state-sponsored violence and extractive capitalism; and, most recently, by the TIPNIS (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécuré) mobilizations for environmental justice, territory, and ethnic autonomy, a critical anthropological literature is attempting to dislocate, pluralize, and complicate Bolivian politics and discourses of region, ethnicity, and class by mapping it across the multiple folds and tensions spanning the Andean/Amazonian divide (see Gustafson 2009; Fabricant 2012; Fabricant and Postero 2015; and Postero 2007).

Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario

Another wave of historical research on Bolivia's nationalist revolutionary state has used the vantage point of more than a half century to move beyond an earlier set of ideological polarities that either paid nationalist homage to the MNR as Bolivia's revolutionary gift to Latin America (and to itself) or punctured that balloon with sharp-edged sociohistorical critique (including the early wave of Marxist critique of the MNR's betrayal of the working and peasant classes, various literary "requiems" for a dead revolution, and postcolonial assaults on the MNR's racist-clientelist apparatus of rule). A new generation of scholars has gone into the archives and gathered oral histories to people the narrative with protagonists left out of the picture by an earlier generation of nationalist historiographers, to reappraise the "unfinished" nature of the MNR revolution, and to probe its "unresolved tensions" that eventually came back to haunt Bolivia around the turn of the new millennium.²⁹ The resonance between past and present—the mobilization of disparate

²⁸ The landmark four-volume study *Chukiyawu: La cara aymara de La Paz* was published between 1981 and 1987 (Albó, Sandoval, and Greaves 1981–1983). Less than a decade later, Rossana Barragán's historical work (1990, 1992) on the urban popular classes of La Paz opened new windows on spatial, racial, and gendered hierarchies and transgressions in the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Her work mounted a challenge to earlier dualist approaches to the Indian/mestizo binary by reconceptualizing "the third republic" of men and women (classified as "cholo" by elites) who colonized this liminal space of hybridity. She also showed the key role that Aymara women played in colonizing the "third republic," articulating hybrid identities and bridging the rural/urban and *indio/cholo* divide. Other important studies of labor, gender, and race would have to include Lehm and Rivera Cusicanqui (1988), Stephenson (1999), Medinaceli (1989), Soruco Sologuren (2011), Gill (1994), Goldstein (2004). Inspired by the radical labor historiography pioneered by Guillermo Lora, a new labor history has sprung up: see Rodríguez Ostría (1991), Rodríguez García (2012), and Barragán (2017). From North America comes the work of Zulawski (1995), Mangan (2001), Smale (2010), Shesko (2012), and Young (2017).

²⁹ Key studies that reappraise the role of peasants and the struggle over land rights leading up to, and during, the MNR era include Choque Canqui (2005), Gordillo (2000), Gotkowitz (2007), Solíz Urrutia (2014, 2017), and Hylton (2018). Intellectual heirs of Bolivia's preeminent labor historian, Guillermo Lora, Dunkerley (1984, 2007) and John (2009) revisit the terrain of mine workers, labor militancy, and the tradition of radical parties in the revolutionary era. Vibrant new political and environmental history casting new light on the MNR era includes Young (2017) and Hines (2015). Two major studies revisit the revolutionary nationalism,

working-class, student, and peasant groups into broad popular coalitions; the demand for nationalist and egalitarian alternatives to market-driven capitalism; the constitutional fight for a pluriethnic state; the darkening shadows of US military (anti-drug) presence and globalization; and the call for nationalization of Bolivia's strategic (mostly energy) resources—has provided an opportunity for scholars to cast historical light on the present political moment, as well as to reflect back on the shifting possibilities and perils of national-popular revolution as it evolved, and faltered, some sixty or more years earlier.³⁰

Popular resistance

Finally, popular resistance to neoliberal hegemony in the late 1990s has been the midwife of critical postcolonial scholarship. Bolivia's most recent insurrectionary moment was the result of popular pressure that not only ousted the governing elites but also mandated the recasting of Bolivia as a plurinational state. Although resistance has been well chronicled in the press and scholarly literature, it is worth remembering the scope and intensity of popular mobilizations that culminated in the Gas War of 2003, when multitudes gathered in open-air assemblies to coordinate civil unrest and other insurgent activities. El Alto quickly emerged as the staging ground for mass marches, demonstrations, hunger strikes, and propaganda campaigns. By the end of 2003, well before the 2005 landslide election of Morales, those mobilizations were pushing for a popular referendum on the nationalization of hydrocarbon resources and, beyond that, for a constitutional assembly that would "decolonize" the state, giving various popular constituencies a hand in reshaping state-society relations in a more populist and plurinationalist mold.

Bolivia's fin de siècle popular revolutionary activity fired up political imaginations, stirred fundamental debate, and unleashed a stream of politically charged scholarship which, in the view of Forrest Hylton and Sinclair Thomson (2006, 22), "resulted from a rare convergence between Indian and national-popular horizons" that animated the most recent cycle of unrest. This scholarly literature might be seen as falling into two basic categories. The first comes out of urgent dynamics of local politics and struggle: a surge of praxis-oriented research and theory produced by Bolivian activist-scholars in the fury of the moment. (By now, some of those individuals have moved into, and maybe out of, Movimiento al Socialismo governing circles, or else gone into the political opposition.) The second wave flows from the global North, where scholars have examined the millennial mobilizations through the prism of social science disciplines, the hermeneutics of postcolonial theory, and/or the genealogies (the long view) of indigenous and popular struggles. One way or another, narrative analyses of contemporary Bolivian politics and history see the watershed victory of Evo Morales as a convenient hitching post for a wide variety of scholarly purposes. Indeed, just as the Sandinista revolution drew academic interest for a few years in the 1980s, so now does Bolivia seem to be a hot spot for a new generation of North American scholars.³¹

as viewed through the lenses of *cruceño* regionalism and official MNR political and public culture, respectively: Pruden (2012) and Gildner (2012). See also Pacino (2015, 2017) on the MNR's gendered politics of public health programs, as well as various chapters in Grindle and Domingo (2003) and Crabtree and Whitehead (2008). In 2012, Rossana Barragán, in charge of the Latin American program of the International Institute of Social History (IISH, Amsterdam), initiated an ambitious program to digitalize the oral history of Bolivia's labor and indigenous movements, preserved in taped recordings between 1982 and 1997 in the National Museum of Ethnography and Folklore (MUSEF, La Paz). This extraordinary archival project has rescued the voices of peasants and indigenous people, mine workers, coca producers, teachers, and artisans who met in congresses and other kinds of meetings to advance their social and political agendas during those tumultuous decades.

³⁰ Rethinking the MNR era from the perspective of today has naturally led to reflexive essays on the leading theorist of the MNR era, René Zavaleta Mercado. See the new English-language edition of his work *Towards a History of the National-Popular in Bolivia* (Zavaleta Mercado [1986] 2016). Zavaleta's Boswell is Luis Tapia ([2002] 2018). Limitations of space force me to short-change discussion of important new work on U.S.-Bolivian relations during and after the MNR era, but see especially Field (2014) and Siekmeier (2011).

³¹ Aymara sociologist Pablo Mamani Ramírez (2004, 2012, 2017) has emerged as a major intellectual, scholar, and activist regarding the formation of Bolivia's plurinational state and urban popular uprisings. Félix Patzi Paco (1999, 2000, 2003) is a noted social analyst of the Aymara community mobilization who served briefly in the Morales administration. Meanwhile, La Comuna, a prolific cabal of urban intellectuals, was the source of rebel scholarship working over the 1990s and early 2000s. Álvaro García Linera, a founding member, emerged as its leading theorist of Bolivia's popular and indigenous ("plebeian") movements, even as he went underground, took up arms, and suffered time in prison. Long before ascending to the vice presidency, García Linera and his comrades flooded the public sphere with an activist literature that brought currents of Marxism and Indianism into fluent dialogue. See, for example, García Linera (2008), Gutiérrez Aguilar et al. (2002), Gómez (2004), and Gutiérrez Aguilar (2014).

From the global North has come a timely burst of revisionist social history and contemporary political analysis, mapping history backwards, as it were, from the conjuncture of popular mobilizations, the electoral victory of Evo Morales, and the plurinational state-building process. See Hylton and Thomson (2006) for an elegant rendering of the cultural politics of revolutionary insurgency (inspired by the work of Adolfo Gilly). See also Kohl and Farthing (2006), Schultz and Draper (2008), Webber (2011), Dunkerley (2007), Pearce (2011), Sivak (2010), Crabtree and Chaplin (2013), Fabricant and Gustafson (2011), Postero (2017), and Ellison (2018).

Conclusion

In sum, the resonance of this intellectual work, and the rebel spirit nourishing it, have imprinted Bolivian studies with an originality and integrity of its own making. If, looking back to the year 1988, Bolivian studies had yet to gain recognition as a legitimate field, by the turn of the millennium it had certainly crashed the gates and entered the big tent of Latin American studies. One small index is the fact that thirteen scholarly panels were devoted exclusively to things Bolivian during the 2016 LASA conference.³² Paradoxically, as I have argued here, Bolivian studies slowly gained currency in international circuits precisely because it broke away, turned inward, and provincialized the North American academy over the last two decades of the twentieth century.

Most recently, the Bolivian case stands as a transcendent example of neoliberalism's arc of (multicultural) consolidation, profound crisis, and partial transformation between the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. If Bolivia has morphed from a forgotten corner of the Andes into a hotspot of antiglobalization and decolonial "border thinking," it is arguably because of this historical cycle in our own time. Never in Bolivia's history, since its founding two centuries ago, has the country mattered so much to the world. The proliferation of innovative scholarship both inside and beyond Bolivia is a fundamental reflection of the country's deep pluralist strain of emancipatory politics, even in times (like the present?) when the utopian tides of pluriethnic possibility inevitably crash against social reality, or else evaporate in the face of insidious betrayals by a governing party perhaps too long in power.

If there is an undertone of ambivalence here, it should not be allowed to distract from the main premise of this essay, that through two or three decades of scholarship and struggle, *lo boliviano* has become emblematic of engaged, pluriethnic modes of knowledge production, dissemination, and praxis. Indeed, Silvia Rivera and Virginia Aillón (2015) recently made this case in their important anthology of critical Bolivian thought. So, too, does the dazzling new collection *The Bolivia Reader* (Thomson et al. 2018). Arguably, the most original Bolivian scholarship has been moored, in ethical and epistemic ways, to ongoing decolonizing struggles against imperial, gendered, class, and ethnic forms of oppression. On the wider canvas, earlier Andean studies paradigms and utopias may have faded in fashion, but to judge by the vitality and density of Bolivian scholarship over the last quarter century, we can rest assured that a multitude of new voices, struggles, and scholarly projects are cropping up in vertical niches across the Andean studies landscape.

Acknowledgements

For their commentary and encouragement, the author thanks Sinclair Thomson, Laura Gotkowitz, Carmen Solíz, and the two anonymous *LARR* reviewers.

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³² Another index is the thriving *Bolivian Studies Journal/Revista de Estudios Bolivianos*, published by the University of Pittsburgh. LASA also now has a robust Bolivia Section.

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How to cite this article: Larson, Brooke. 2019. Revisiting Bolivian Studies: Reflections on Theory, Scholarship, and Activism since 1980. *Latin American Research Review* 54(2), pp. 294–309. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.352>

Submitted: 16 March 2017

Accepted: 31 December 2017

Published: 25 June 2019

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