

Book Review

– *A revolution in fragments. Traversing scales of justice, ideology and practice in Bolivia*, by Mark Goodale, Duke University Press, 2019

This work lays the results of a long-term investigation to the recent social and political transformations in Bolivia, under the government of first indigenous president Evo Morales. Arriving to power with the support of social movements and vast popular marginalized sectors in 2006, in his almost 14 year long government Morales sought to implement a very ambitious political agenda. Nothing short of a revolution, these profound transformations would give way and deepen the so called ‘process of change’: a process by which multidimensional exclusion and oppression (ethnic, political, social, economic, and epistemological) would be changed at the core. Covering the period 2006-2015, the book aims to portray and comprehend the Bolivian ‘process of change’ as it unfolds before Goodale’s eyes. The ambition of the project is exemplified by the deep methodological and ethical reflections that are deemed necessary to prelude the analysis, that result in the combination of a ‘multiscalar longitudinal ethnography’ with a ‘disengaged anthropology’ to produce a better methodological fit to the challenges and growing complexity presented by the object of study. This translates into a nine year research project based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork to a wide set of key actors, including ‘different institutions, different political parties, different regions, different social movements, different trade unions, and different social classes’ (p.13), to grasp the various and varying interpretations and valorizations of the revolution. In the discussions and insights found in the chapters the author is able to strike a delicate balance between ethnographic immediacy and the contemplation of the larger (national) economic, political, historical, and ideological context. In this way, the book certainly delivers in its aim to yield serious and committed ‘ethnographic truths’ (p.10).

Through the main scales of analysis, *justice, ideology and practice*, each chapter examines a key theme of the period 2006-2015 to assess Bolivia’s ‘revolution’, balancing between a normative and a phenomenological approach. Following a loose chronological line, the book looks at the evolution of a ‘patchwork state ideology’ as the discourse that would underpin the changes

of the revolution, and the following contradictions and conflicts between the competing visions that emerge from that process (chapters 1 and 3). It examines the use of law, first as a mechanism of structural transformations in a ‘revolution by constitution’ (chapter 2) and then in the form of ‘strategic juridification’ as a means to the consolidation of state power (chapter 5). Chapter 3 interrogates the most important forms of resistance to the ‘process of change’ that are characterized by the use of violence, collective memories and the mobilization along ethnic and racial lines. The last chapter discusses the contradictions of a ‘revolution by identity’ (p. 232) that demonstrate the elusiveness of (ethnic) collective identity in the political project. These substantiate the main argument that the ‘fraught process of change’ was ‘constituted through a series of shifting crystallizations, historical, ideological, and institutional fragments that were often in tension with each other... The result was a polyvalent vision of transformation that was powerful and compelling despite its diffuseness – or, perhaps, precisely because of it’(p. 29).

Reflecting on extensive fieldwork on a period of almost ten years, while building on previous ethnographic work in the Bolivian highlands, the book displays the author’s extensive knowledge of, and passion for, the histories of the country. Each chapter presents deep and longitudinal analysis of the central themes. And yet the dense and comprehensive accounts are lively and engaging, resulting from the ethnographic character of the study in which the insightful interpretations of the author flow from the explanations of his subjects. Particularly the extended extracts of interviews, accompanied by descriptions of the scenery and the author’s (emotional) reactions to them, would almost make you forget that you are reading a very compelling theoretical account of Bolivia’s revolutionary process and overall radical social transformation.

Ideology being one of the main scales of analysis, it may seem odd that relatively little is said about the anti-United States sentiment, quite predominant and explicit in the larger anti-imperialist and decolonization narrative, which in turn is central to the discourse of ‘the process of change’. The anti-imperialist sentiment is common to several of the ideological watersheds that feed the rhetoric of ‘the process of change’, but also to previous governments that have opposed disadvantageous economic relations with the United States. Among others, it found visible expression in the foreign relations of Bolivia under Evo Morales, particularly in the Bolivarian regional project, underlying its importance in the ideological articulations of the Latin American left. It also encounters a clear connection to the cultural discourse of indigenous emancipation through the element of ‘decolonization’. As the author rightly points out, the post-neoliberal subject meant to endeavor to live well (*Suma qamaña/vivir bien*). An indigenous value, *vivir bien* has been more widely embraced precisely for serving as a powerful critique of the neoliberal dogma of continuous economic growth and consumerism specifically, and capitalism more generally. The ‘process of change’, as one of the post-neoliberal political projects, is to a significant extent also the early twenty-first century expression of a much

older resistance movement to imperialism and United States dominance in the region.

At the moment of writing, Bolivia is in the midst of a political crisis, enduring a transitional government and awaiting elections that will, at least nominally, leave the Morales era behind: arguably a turning point. At disturbing levels of polarization, dense flows of (dis)information carrying accusations of corruption, abuse of power and misgovernment, back and forth, legitimacy and credibility seem scarce. The moment aches for clear answers from sound, long-term and impartial academic analysis: a verdict. But none is given. Except the ‘ineffable’: the process of change is ‘too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words’. As disappointing as it may appear at first, it is perhaps the most poignant, necessary and difficult point to make. It lays bare the absurdity of reductionist appreciations as well as politics’ insatiable crave for heroes and antiheroes. And yet Goodale’s book makes the point compelling, almost effortlessly, as it were merely the channel through which we hear the voices of the revolution.

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