

FIGHTING FOR PROSPERITY: REFLECTIONS ON THE CRISIS AND POLITICS OF POVERTY IN BOLIVIA*

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I. INTRODUCTION

After five years of protest in which many protesters and police have been killed or injured, public building burned, roads blocked, and two national presidents ousted from power, the national elections in 2005 mark what many in Bolivia hope is an end to political unrest and a return to peaceful democratic process. It must be realized, however, that these are uneasy hopes that are tempered by conflicting concerns and expectations. The successful campaign and winning of the presidency by the Movement for Socialism (MAS) and its controversial leader, Evo Morales, have generated new questions both in and outside the country about the direction and viability of the country's new government. While the new government is celebrated by popular and principally marginalized sectors of the country's population for its pledge to secure for social spending, larger profits from the nationalization of the ownership of the country's oil and gas deposits and to end the war on drugs in the country's coca growing regions, foreign donors and interests look fearfully at the possible wider regional ramifications of the new administration's "left-wing" program for political change. As such, it is clear that although the fighting in the streets has stopped, serious political and social conflicts over what constitutes prosperity and democratic government remain in and beyond Bolivian borders.

In this paper it is my aim to outline and discuss these political and social differences. By drawing on continued research in the country since

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1997 and a range of secondary media and academic sources I will demonstrate that these differences are at the root of recent political conflict, and a cause of the continued growth of poverty in the country. As such the paper refers back to key events in a longer political history in Bolivia that starts at the beginning of the 1990s. This is a history in which, in contrast to Bolivia's contemporary image as a country overwhelmed by conflict, it was previously characterized by the World Bank and other international organizations as one of the world's "good practice" examples of participatory democratic reform and pro-poor policy. In looking more closely at this history we see the introduction of reforms that transformed the economy and political structures, and that ostensibly sought to secure social justice in the country. At the same we also see a rising gap between rich and poor and an increasing number of people and civil society organizations that are not only dissatisfied with their level of political representation, but lack the opportunity to take part in and directly influence key aspects of political and economic decision-making.

I highlight here the conditions responsible for creating such a gap between policy and practice. I also argue that while this situation can be explained as a result of structural incapacities and internal prejudices in national politics, its persistence must also be connected to a series of prejudices and contradictions within international development policy and institutions. A key aim of this paper is then to underline, to a greater extent than existing academic writing, the role of conservative policy thinking in generating the frustrations that spilled over in the form of protest. I highlight that within and beyond Bolivia there exists a political culture that while praising democratic participation, multiculturalism, and pro-poor reform, in practice acts to limit and discredit the generation at the grassroots of initiatives aimed at these goals at the local and national levels. I argue that it is because of the conservatism of thinking at both the national and the international levels that whilst many voices and alternatives could be heard in contemporary political debates in Bolivia, too few of them were listened to until protest and recent elections forced the leading parties from power.

I further outline what these voices and alternatives are, and in making these observations seek to further echo the cosmopolitan warning that "[w]e cannot both want democracy, on the one hand, and yet, on the other, rule out certain choices, on traditionalist grounds, because of their 'foreignness'" (Sen, 2004:53). Linked to this idea I demonstrate that despite the gloom of an international climate that upholds prejudice and undermines claims for rights, the coincidence of changes in Bolivian social movements and the coexistence and spread of influential and radical

discourses on development, and specifically deliberative democracy, suggest that there are realistic alternatives that could assist what may be a vital opening and example of democratic culture.

II. PRO-POOR POLICY IN BOLIVIA

In the 1990s a new series of government policies were introduced in Bolivia. These policies were specifically targeted at the reduction of poverty in response to a set of growing internal and external pressures. The strategies adopted aimed not only at creating new development and market opportunities, but equally importantly, were supposed to open up political spaces for marginalized sectors of the population. Changes to the national constitution recognized the pluri-cultural nature of the country's population for the first time.¹ International agreements on human and indigenous rights were also ratified by Congress. In addition, the Bolivian government introduced a number of important changes to the ways local political decisions are made. In terms of their social impact, the Laws of Popular Participation (1995) and the Administrative Decentralization (1996) have been widely recognized as the most important of these changes (Booth, Clisby & Widmark 1996, 1997; UDAPE 2000). Taken together, these reforms had the goal of decentralizing decision making and finances in favor of previously impoverished local municipalities. At the same time, they also introduced a new system of local government that promised to be accountable and transparent to the local population, and to create a marriage between local liberal democratic government and traditional leadership and organizational structures.

Other important social policy initiatives taken by the Sanchez de Losada administration included the introduction of a new Agrarian Reform Law (INRA) designed to guarantee and regulate existing private and communal land titles, reform of the schooling system, including an attempt to introduce bilingual education, and a new system of pensions (BONOSOL). Micro-credit and micro-financing schemes were also set up during this period and continued with state and international support (Rivera-Cusicanqui, 1996).

Although the next elected president was a former military dictator, General Hugo Banzer, the Bolivian government retained a commitment to democratic measures as a means of combating poverty. In fact, the share of public investment outlays directed at poverty reduction rose from 18 percent of all public sector investment in 1990 to 60 percent in 1999 (UDAPE 2000).² Indeed, Banzer's campaign slogan "Bread, Roof and Work" appealed directly to the interests of the poor in basic needs. Despite the fact that the military actions against the coca growers in the Valleys of

the Chapare continued, the Banzer government also continued municipal- and national-level administrative reform as well as appointing a commission to look into the upholding of human rights.

Following the World Bank's introduction of the Poverty Reducing Strategy guidelines in 1999, Bolivia became the only country in South America to join the World Bank's Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. As well as the creation of a more favorable debt repayment climate and the capital investment this was to afford, the initiative involved the government in the creation of a Poverty Reducing Strategy Paper (PRSP) in 2003. The PRSPs are the World Bank's response to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), goals through which extreme poverty and hunger are to be halved by 2015. The rules governing the PRSPs ensure that debt relief money is directed to poverty reduction, and respond to the criticisms of previous reforms for what came to be termed "weaknesses in ownership," by involving broad-based participation by national governments and local civil society in all operational steps. In order to qualify for debt relief, the PRSP must state clearly how governments intend to target poverty in national development as well as respond to the needs and interests of the national population (Bendana 2002). In Bolivia the local version of the global initiative is the Bolivian Poverty Reduction Strategy (EBRP, *Estrategia Boliviana de Reducción de la Pobreza*).

The PRSP process encourages the use of qualitative consultative methods to gauge the interests and opinions of social actors or "civil society." In Bolivia these regulations created the basis of a "National Dialogue" whereby the population was to be consulted about national economic policy, the allocation of HIPC resources, and public interests in development (UDAPE, 2000). The first phase of this process produced various positive outcomes, principally an agreement to foster a program to reduce poverty and boost economic growth. The Operational Plan of Action taken over by the second Sanchez de Losada administration (from 2002), which had been designed by the Bolivian government's Social and Economic Policy Analysis Unit (UDAPE) for 1997-2002, was based on the four pillars identified by this process: i.e., opportunity, equity, dignity, and institutional reform. With these pillars and its lengthening record of pro-poor reform, Bolivia appeared to most external analysts to be moving promisingly towards achieving international standards for development and democratization.

III. FORCED COHERENCE

As a result of its record of taking the pro-poor agenda seriously, Bolivia was hailed by leading figures in the World Bank and the international community as a “good practice” example of development and democratic government reform.³ However, despite the exuberant backing for the Bolivian model of democratization and poverty reduction by the international community, there was now growing recognition among both researchers and development practitioners alike that the positive impacts of the measures had been exaggerated.

Even though questions might be asked about the quality and validity of some of the available quantitative data on the country, by any estimates Bolivia remains one of the poorest countries in Latin America.⁴ Although the UNDP claims that a better infrastructure for dealing with poverty has been created as a result of the recent rise in social investments, it admits that little progress has been made in welfare measured by income and levels of consumption (UNDP, 2002). Indeed, UDAPE reports that between 1999 and 2002 a further 382,000 people were forced below the official poverty line (measured as income below US\$2 a day) (UDAPE, 2000). As a result, poverty rose from 62 percent to 65 percent of the population, and in some rural areas in the Highlands of the country is estimated to be as high as 82 percent (Hernani, 2002; Landa, 2002). Furthermore, in the years 1999 to 2002 the gap between rich and poor has also increased. The median income of 90 percent of the population is now 15 times larger than the poorest 10 percent.⁵ Although the Bolivian economy continues to grow by 2.8 percent annually, most of that economic growth has occurred in areas of high productivity (principally the finance sector). That economic expansion has absorbed only 10 percent of the work force. It is now estimated that 67 percent of the Bolivian work force is employed in the informal sector (UDAPE 2000).

There also seems to have been little improvement in terms of expanding the country’s democratic development. Despite its promising record of “pro-poor” reforms, the outbreak of social struggle in Bolivia indicated that large numbers of people were still marginalized, or at least unsatisfied by the terms and conditions of these developments. Indeed, the frequently violent public reaction to their introduction demonstrated that rather than being seen to open up new possibilities for development, the state-sponsored reforms of the last decade were experienced as an attempt to establish control over the population. Indeed, evidence of what might be called a “forced coherence” (Ferguson, 1990) was picked up in recent studies of the PRSP process.⁶ The first phase of the Bolivian “National Dialogue” attracted significant criticism because of the strict limitations

placed on its formation. Although representatives from civil society participated in this process, their role was limited to commenting on strictly social issues, i.e., gender, generational, and cultural issues (CEDLA, 2003). Analysis of the process has revealed that little, or no, opportunity was given to civil society actors to discuss and debate the national macroeconomic policy.⁷ In addition, “a basic fault of the National Dialogue 2000 was the lack of participation of rural and urban workers’ unions and the limited treatment of the concerns and demands of society, above all of the impoverished sectors of the country” (CEDLA, 2003:20; Aguire and Espada, 2001). Nevertheless, the joint assessment of the process by the government, the IMF, and World Bank in May 2001 did not mention these academic criticisms, the heated press debates, or the demonstrations held during the Dialogue process. Although it continued to support the idea of the National Dialogue, the Sanchez de Losada government’s decision to siphon off about US\$30,000 from funds originally designated by the World Bank for the Bolivian PRSP (Decree 26878) was also taken as a sign of its inability or lack of willingness to respond to the interests of civil society.⁸

In July 2004 a national referendum was held in Bolivia in which voters were asked to decide on the future of the country’s vast oil and natural gas reserves. The national government hoped that the referendum would end the unease that had continued in the country since the violent uprising of October 2003. With the majority support it secured from the referendum for its policy proposals, the Bolivian government seemed to have recovered the legitimacy needed both to retain power and to continue with its plans to liberalize the export and sale of natural gas. The backing conferred by the referendum was, however, to be short lived. In the first place, a large proportion of the country’s population (the majority, according to some reports) did not even take part in the referendum.⁹ Indeed, large sectors of the Highland rural and urban population as well as important civil society organizations including union, ethnic, and political organizations¹⁰ had long made clear their open opposition. While a minority of those opposed the use of a referendum because they were unsure of its democratic value, the majority opposed it because of the way in which it was carefully controlled by the government. Rather than representing the full span and extent of the protesters’ demands, the questions of the referendum were carefully tailored to consult the public on a limited set of policies for the liberalization of export and sale of natural gas (Arze, 2004).¹¹

Although the public was asked its opinion about the return of gas wells to state ownership, the wording of the referendum questions steered voters away from the solutions proposed by more radical sectors of

Bolivian politics. This setting of limits to the debate left many, including many who cast their votes, unsatisfied with the results. Indeed, this dissatisfaction was set to grow as a result of the government's failure to negotiate access to the sea with Chile¹² or renegotiate the terms of the Hydrocarbons Law. Although the referendum granted the government space to continue with plans to liberalize the sale of oil and gas, it also committed the government to negotiating with the gas companies a new 50 percent rate of return on revenues. Even though the MAS (Movement for Socialism¹³) and the oil company Petrobras were willing to agree on this, the new government of Carlos Mesa was convinced that the step-up from 18 percent, the previous rate of return, would prejudice further foreign investments in the oil sector. As a result, the government dragged its heels in pushing the ratification of the new law, thereby frustrating opposition hopes for rapid change. The response of opposition movements was to step up the pressure on government by adopting a more radical demand: full nationalization of the oil industry.

IV. POPULAR PARTICIPATION

Despite a rhetoric of participation, the unwillingness of government and its international backers to open genuine spaces for dialogue is unfortunately a feature of wider policymaking and indeed reflects the recent, and not so recent, history of social and political development across the country. As Laurie and Marvin (1999) and Assies (2003) make clear in their studies of what became known as the "Cochabamba Water War," the roots of conflict in Bolivia must be understood in the context of neoliberal economic reform and the widening credibility gap between economic reforms on the one hand, where most effort was concentrated, and the efforts to introduce a social development platform that stressed participation in and autonomy for local government on the other. Prior to the capitalization reforms introduced in 1993-1997,¹⁴ regional taxes paid by local industries generated important funds for regional infrastructure and social investment. This revenue was raised and managed regionally and locally and was, therefore, outside the direct control of the government in La Paz. However, with the sale of public utilities under capitalization this revenue was lost. Moreover, the money earned from capitalization was seen by central government as largely a national rather than as a regional resource. Opponents to capitalization in the COB (the Central Bolivian Union, Central Obrera Boliviana), the CSUTCB (Bolivian Peasant Workers Union¹⁵), and provincial municipalities questioned this loss of revenue from the regions to the central government, and also questioned the investment agreements written into different concessions. Despite the

government's promise that gas revenue would bolster the weak national economy, opponents highlighted that as a result of the agreement with the consortium only 18 percent of future profits would remain in the country.

The loss of income was not the only problem capitalization brought. With the introduction of Law 2029 on Potable Water and Sewage, the legal framework was changed so that concessions and licenses could be granted to any institution with legal status (Assies, 2003). However, the conditions for granting concessions clearly favored the formation of large enterprises that functioned according to market criteria (Assies, 2003:17). The law further stipulated that concessionaires would have exclusive rights over the concession area, which meant that existing local organizations such as cooperatives or neighborhood associations would be forced to enter into contracts with the concessionaires (*ibid.*:17).

This removal of local resources and control clashed entirely with Popular Participation's stated goal of decentralizing fiscal and political power to local municipalities and to smaller institutions known as Grassroots Territorial Organizations. These comprise various social groups, including those based on class as well as indigenous forms of organization. As a result the perception grew among the local population that while Popular Participation may have set out to promote regional autonomy, the process of capitalization was taking away regional and local control.

This perception grew as local people realized that their participation in local planning processes as legislated by the reforms was actually limited. This is further detailed in my PhD research (McNeish, 2001, 2002). In the course of studying the local impact of Popular Participation and Decentralization I discovered that local consultation and participation could take place only within the prescribed parameters of a state methodology (see also Calla Ortega & Peres Arenas, 1995; Blackburn, 1998; Gray-Molina, 1999; Lee Van Cott, 2000). Contrary to the pervading rhetoric of responsiveness and openness, my research showed that the formulation of municipal development plans was heavily influenced by the external consultants belonging to the Regional Development Corporation (CORDES). These consultants' duties included facilitation and training in participatory methodologies to help local people articulate needs, perceptions, and priorities. However, the same consultants were also required by the government to fit local priorities into a standard format to be presented to departmental authorities (*cf.* Blackburn and Holland, 1998). Rather than provide a real sphere for democratic deliberation on public policy, then, decentralization and popular participation allowed only certain groups to participate in public policymaking on the state's own terms.

Moreover, there were also clear signs of conflicts based on differences in culture and tradition. Although the Laws promised a marriage of liberal representative democracy and ethnic community-based structures, local traditions and forms of organization often clashed with the requirements of state law and office (McNeish, 2002). In public planning meetings, state technicians shook their heads when local leaders and inhabitants asked to prioritize the rebuilding of the central square, to build accommodation for the pilgrims that flocked to the town for the festival in September, or to renovate religious shrines and add to the sponsorship of local festivals. The technicians did not understand the importance local people placed on the festivals as religious events, celebrations of the importance of their community, and major contributors to the local economy. Indeed, there were no criteria in the planning regulations which would allow the technicians to incorporate such priorities. They considered these suggestions to be an unacceptable waste of money and out of line with the infrastructural and productive goals demanded by central government. It was proof that a tight rein needed to be kept on municipal spending, a sentiment reflected in a comment made by one of the technicians at the time:

Nobody wants to hear about tax...look take Quillacas for example. A person only has to pay twenty, twenty-five bolivianos in tax under the new system. However, this same person who has long resisted the payment of their twenty bolivianos will go to a fiesta and spend two hundred bolivianos on beer...they can't pay their twenty bolivianos, huh! (McNeish, 2001:233)

V. CHECKS AND BALANCES

The contradiction between the Bolivian government's rhetoric of participation and its strict controls on decision making contributed to a growing disillusionment with the government. Indeed, this is an observation that was strongly supported by local political leaders in Bolivia. Oscar Oliviera, one of the main leaders of the 2000 water protests in Cochabamba, writes (2004), for example, with reference to broader Bolivian political culture that "[p]olitical participation and decision-making is limited to spaces designed by the parties and lacking in content, which they then attempt to pass off as deliberation and dialogues. The Bolivian state – the new state that has been taking shape since 1985 – is a state that listens only to itself." In the long run, such a situation completely disqualifies democratic channels in the eyes of the ones excluded from influence and suffering the consequences of policies decided in this way.

Explanations for the ongoing control of political space and political decision making in Bolivia can be drawn from Bolivia's well-known

history of corruption and homogenous nationalism. As such it is correct to highlight the contradiction of governmental logics and systemic failure as the cause of protest (Salman, 2004). However, I think it is also important to stress deeper motives, principal among them the fact that the Bolivian state lacks respect for poor Bolivians. In 1997 a local mayor gave me a cynical characterization of Popular Participation. He said, “[C]entral government always seems to have a different perspective from us. They seem to have real problems integrating our ideas with the Departmental Development Plan.” His perception of the hollowness of participation in local politics and development was repeated by many people throughout my period of research in Santuario de Quillacas in 1997 and 1998. Indeed, the literature on popular participation frequently makes this kind of commentary (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Regardless of their content, the opinions of the poor are neither trusted nor respected. As well as everyday exclusion, the lack of trust indicates the often hidden but nonetheless potent structural violence of class, racial, and gender prejudice that many Bolivian social scientists highlight (Albó and Barrios, 1993).

In raising our focus a little, it is also quite evident that these kinds of structural prejudices are not limited to the local level. In an ever more globalized world we must ask why blockages to participation are rarely of any concern to the international system, despite the formation of growing numbers of regulations on governance, planning, and rights. Some responsibility must lie at the international level. Indeed, it can be argued that contradictions in international development policy and shared prejudices mean that there is considerable complicity at this higher level.

Some indication of this complicity can be observed in some of the policy documents and actions of international organizations. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recently published a report called *Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizen’s Democracy* (2004). The report aims to stimulate debate on constructive strategies for tackling the region’s economic and political problems, and ultimately to reinvigorate democracy (Gibbs, 2004). In its brief to the UN Secretary General, the report suggests extending the definition and practice of democracy to include citizen participation in determining the economic model: “Debate on the economy, and on diverse ways on which markets can be regulated, should be brought into a public agenda and made subject to citizens’ preferences” (Gibbs 2004). However, even though it states that such a shift is essential, the report uses an Indicator of Economic Reform¹⁶ as indicative of overall economic and democratic development. This indicator measures moves towards market-oriented reforms and is used alongside the report’s Indicator of Electoral Democracy. The use of

economic reform as an indicator suggests that market reforms (and electoral reform) are an unproblematic and necessary aspect of development rather than a highly contested area of policymaking. Yet the report also claims that “70 percent of those surveyed support state intervention in the economy and only 26.7 percent prefer the market” (Gibbs 2004:2). It also suggests that “progress towards democracy and towards the establishment of clear and legitimate macro-economic norms must be seen as mutually reinforcing” (ibid.:2).

In the current context of neoliberalism we can assume that “legitimate macro-economic reforms” are consistent with the economic reform agenda supported by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. The UNDP agenda calls for “poverty alleviation” in the context of reform, but does not identify poverty as a possible consequence of those same reforms. Indeed, in mainstream development circles the basic parameters of economic policymaking are already agreed upon as a rule; it is only after the fact that poverty and inequality can be discussed. As Tony Gibbs has suggested, we are caught in a paradox: “How can the agenda of neo-liberal reform – macroeconomic stability and liberalising markets – be up for public discussion when the outcome of that discussion must be that the neo-liberal reforms are essential?” (2004:2). The maintenance of healthy macroeconomic indicators requires neoliberal reform, and carrying out such reform is therefore essential for a country to maintain credit with the international financial institutions and to retain (or gain) investor confidence in its economy. Yet this process also requires a government to ignore the wishes of many, if not most, of its citizens. When alternative wishes are expressed, the weight of agreement on the existing economic agenda means that people such as Nestor Kirchner, Lula, Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales, and Felipe Quispe are branded and ignored by the system as radical, inexperienced, problematic, unrealistic, and dangerous.¹⁷

As well as contradictions, there are signs of conservatism similar to that identified in Bolivia lurking within the international system, something that is reflected in its persistent paranoia about the mentality and possible political actions of the poor. For example, returning to the UNDP’s report on Democracy in Latin American, particular note is given to the growing disenchantment of national populations in the region with the fact that poverty in the region is worsening, because elected political leaders are perceived as ineffective. Latin Americans are less and less confident about the ability of electoral regimes to seriously address poverty, provide adequate healthcare and education, and redistribute wealth. However, instead of seeing the crisis of confidence in democracy as connected to

neoliberal policies, the authors of the UNDP report emphasize a supposed Latin American predilection towards authoritarianism. Although the statistic has now been toned down because of complaints by Chilean poll researchers about its statistical methodology (see Carol Graham's article "Latin America is Far From Rejecting Democracy" in the *Financial Times*, 2 August 2000). The UNDP maintains that 43 percent of Latin Americans would prefer an authoritarian leader who could improve their economic situation over a democratic one who could not (UNDP 2004). This is a generally worrying and convincing observation, but it is notable that the authors of the report are more concerned about the instability caused by Latin Americans contesting neoliberal policies than they are about authoritarians who are able to improve the economic situation of their countries. In the desire for stability at all costs, international support is granted to states and elites to maintain a common agenda that retains economic and political hegemony at the expense of political choice for ordinary people.

The application of a common agenda at the expense of political choice has also been observed in several recent studies of the World Bank's now global PRSP agenda. Analysts of the application of PRSPs in different parts of the world argue that their understanding of ownership of and participation in the policymaking agenda is inadequate and does not represent a true broad-based process for enhancing the national ownership of the development agenda (Jubilee, 2000). They point to a growing body of research that demonstrates the extent to which the PRSP conclusions remain governed by international policy and technocratic interests. For example, reports from Nicaragua, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Cambodia all demonstrate the extent to which citizens' participation in the PRSPs was purposely limited (Gariyo, 2001; Bendana 2002; NGO Forum Cambodia, 2002; Bretton Woods Project, 2003; McNeish, 2003). In all these examples peasant groups, trade unions, and some religious groups were not given a place within the consultation process. Moreover, some analysts draw attention to the fact that although PRSPs claim to be responsive to local needs and interests, there is an undeniable similarity between different nations' "tailor-made" plans (Bendana, 2002). While researchers point to an improvement in participatory language and practice as a result of the PRSPs, they agree that macroeconomic policy and poverty reduction remain two unconnected goals, each with its own contradictory policies and targets (May 2003). Indeed, some critics now argue that the PRSPs may well be best understood as "old wine in new bottles" (Cling, Razafindrakoto and Rouband, 2002),

the rediscovery of poverty being used as a way to disguise an economic model that produces poverty and corruption (Bendana, 2002).

In short, there are indications that the international system does not trust Latin Americans or “third world” nations in general to make their own economic choices, largely because of what it considers to be flawed political values. In fact, external judgments of flawed political values are rather common in development policy, debate, and practice. In this sense I argue that academics and development practitioners are also complicit in creating blockages to participation in development, albeit often unwittingly. Development writing often links flawed political values and what are considered to be weaknesses of culture and morality (O’Conner 2001). Development studies and poverty research are premised upon a social critique of the society of the poor, rather than the society that produces the poor (Escobar, 1995). Indeed, the whole notion of development is premised upon an explicit desire to transform societies deemed as poor and thus somehow dysfunctional. A moral judgment implying social failure is constantly present.

Although small-scale sanitation and latrine projects may seem very different on the surface from the recent drive to foster strong social capital through civil society support programs, both kinds of interventions rely on a shared assumption about the unsuitability or inappropriateness of existing social organizations and practices, or about the association between poverty and particular social and institutional forms (Adair, 2001). As a further example, there is no doubt that the idea of giving cash as opposed to food aid in famine situations is still widely resisted because of the belief that this would benefit the undeserving poor, despite the evidence that this would be cheaper and more effective in supporting grain markets and empowering local people (de Waal, 1989). With roots going back before the 1960s discourse on a “culture of poverty” (O’Connor, 2003), the notion that certain individuals and social groups are undeserving of assistance because they somehow cause their own poverty has become pervasive in both U.S. and British welfare policy, where it often informs racist discourses on non-white low-income groups (Adair, 2001).

VI. AGENTS OF CHANGE?

In a context in which participation is considered an essential norm of development there should be room for visions of change and prosperity that differ from those of existing elites. However, this is difficult not only because of the blockages of access discussed above, but because of an intellectual tradition of perceiving poverty in ways that, through making poverty the focus of analysis, obscure the social processes that make people

either poor or prosperous. Such a tradition also abstracts poverty from people and thus obliterates the agency of social actors in creating and transcending limitations of resources and entitlements (Rabinow, 1989). Taking poverty as a given, or as a set of indicators to which standard measures can be applied, misses the contextual and cultural complexity of the terms “poverty” and “poor,” and the abilities and desires of people to transform their situation remain invisible. As a result we end up with an abstract picture of something both static and inevitable. For example, where focus has been given to the opinions and thoughts of the poor individuals as in the World Bank’s “Voices of the Poor” survey (2002), they remain characterized as the victims of severe conditions, with little attention given to their contribution to personal survival or as the motors of endogenous social change. In an article written for the World Bank–supported “Culture and Public Action” project, Debray Ray tells us that “poverty stifles dreams or at least the process of attaining dreams” (2003:1), a perspective that reinforces the perception that poor people are psychologically incapable of initiative because of their poverty.

Returning to Bolivia, we might find some support for an argument that considers the poor to be lacking in initiative, or the victims of their own inabilities to conceive of a better future. In a recent paper Salman (2006) rightly highlights that “protests against Mesa’s policies have increased ... but most actions and manifestations do not reveal a coordinated or even cognate cluster of views and proposals on the part of the protesters. Many incidents are ad hoc and isolated, triggered by contingencies. They have an opportunistic countenance and are not geared to one another.” This description clearly demonstrates the fragmented nature of the protesters and their demands. However, I would not be satisfied were it to be interpreted as evidence of a lack of sufficient “social capital” in the sense that Bolivians lack the networks and vision sufficient for change. Indeed, although as a result of regional, class, ethnic, and political differences the protesters have been unable to form a united political movement, the protesters’ formation of *Coordinadoras* (or coordinating bodies) demonstrates the will and innovation of people to overcome sectoral differences and channel common interests through a new political entity.

As Assies (2003) and Crabtree (2005) describe in the case of the Cochabamba Water War, the *Coordinadora* emerged as a loosely organized movement that from 1999 managed to gain broad sympathy among the population. Although based on neighborhood associations and civic committees, the Cochabamba *Coordinadora* was expanded across traditional class lines and beyond city limits through strategic alliances

with producers' organizations. In the heat of the mobilization, the Coordinadora brought together rural farmers, industrial proletariats, disillusioned recent in-migrants, largely invisible members of a growing informal economy, environmentalists, retirees, left-leaning economists and technocrats, as well as sympathetic foreigners in provincial towns, peripheral shanty towns, and the urban streets, in an ultimately successful and spectacular demonstration of popular consensus (Albro, 2005).

Although it started as a single-issue movement and retains a network-like structure, the Coordinadora then expanded to include a range of different and at times conflicting interests. Indeed, it not only inspired the protests that resulted in the removal of the Aguas de Tunari water concession in Cochabamba and a review of Bolivian Water Law, but continued in use to review other issues such as electricity rates and the recovery of privatized state enterprises. It did so through its promotion of direct democracy in town meetings, referendums, and media debate. In the course of 2000 to 2005 the idea of the Coordinadora spread and made an impact on the formation of political demand making elsewhere in the country. There, similar network-like structures have been developed in order to mobilize specific, but shared, demands. Although the Movement for Socialism (MAS) and the Central Bolivian Union (COB) had a central role in the protests of 2003, it was not until other sectors joined in a Coordinadora that demonstrations reached the sufficient critical mass needed to topple the government. The National Coordination for the Defense of Gas mobilized 30,000 people in the Departments of Cochabamba and 50,000 in La Paz to demonstrate against the planned pipeline on the 19th of September.

Through the formation of Coordinadora, Bolivian civil society made it very clear that there were common development interests at stake. These took two main lines. First, there were and are widespread demands for a national debate on the nationalization of natural gas resources and in opposition to proposals for Bolivian membership in the Free Trade Agreement for the Americas (ALCA). The proposals channeled by the National Coordinadora asked for a rise in concessionary profits rates from 18 percent to 50 percent. Although considered unrealistic by the government and international community, MAS, the National Coordinadora, and a growing number of neighborhood associations have argued that Bolivia is surrounded by potentially big gas consumers. Argentina, which uses gas to generate about half its electricity, is short of it and eager to import more. Brazil, the region's industrial powerhouse, wants to reduce its reliance on hydropower. Oil prices are high and the current tax regime is not oppressive, so there is room for a greater government share.¹⁸

Second, there is also widespread support for the formation of a Constitutional Assembly in the country. According to Olivera, the Constitutional Assembly should be understood as

a sovereign meeting of citizen representatives elected by their neighborhood organizations, their urban and rural associations, their unions, their communes. These citizen representatives would bring with them ideas and projects concerning how to organize political life in the country (2004:136-7).

The actions of the Coordinadoras indicate both the interest of large numbers of Bolivians to engage in political life and the innovative manner in which differences have been and continue to be overcome. Indeed, as a result of their emphasis on heterogeneity the Coordinadoras are different from political constructions in the country's past and require us to rethink existing definitions of old (class, material) and new (single-issue, rights-based) social movements in Latin America and elsewhere. Moreover, the maintenance of different identities in the protests should make us aware that a plurality of alternative development proposals are both valued and sustained by the Bolivian public. While MAS clearly has a radical profile, the constant references of Morales to Aymara tradition and the party's reliance on the goodwill of the Coordinadoras for electoral support should also help to underline the fact that the new administration must steer a course that is in reality more heterogeneous than left-wing in nature.

VII. ALTERNATIVES FOR PROSPERITY?

In recent years many of the academics and colleagues I have spoken to have referred to the problems they faced in the country as a conflict of "dreams." Although these dreams might in our opinion be unrealistic, or be considered by some members of Bolivian and foreign governments to be dangerous, they are nonetheless forcefully made and clearly crave some kind of response, if not resolution.

As well as controls on and profits from the export of gas, these dreams include the coca farmers' demands for the right to continue growing a half hectare of coca per family, and the suspension of the military build-up in the Chapare. In a 2004 interview with the Latin American Social Science Council (CLACSO) the then cocalero leader, Evo Morales, stated that his movement was "the synthesis of poverty in Bolivia," i.e., the movement that had become the focal point of diverse interests in its engagement with the state and international system.¹⁹ These diverse interests include the opposition of peasant farmers and indigenous people to the Agrarian Reform Law (INRA) and the recent Mining Law, because of their threat to land titles and the natural environment. They include the demands of the growing lowland membership of the Bolivian

MST (Movimiento Sin Tierra) for access to land. They include teachers' demands for wage increases, taxi drivers' opposition to raised road taxes, protests against the rising costs and privatization of local water supplies, municipal citizens' calls for the prosecution of corrupt municipal officials, demands by peasant and indigenous communities for technical and infrastructural support, elderly people's demands for state support, teachers' and students' calls for more university funding, and property owners' dissatisfaction with the raised costs of land transfers introduced by the new national property law.

The dreams also include the calls of regional business interests, both large and small, for increased governmental autonomy. Although there have long been demands for regional autonomy in different parts of Bolivia, the growth of economic power in Santa Cruz²⁰ over the last ten years has led to the formation of a separatist movement that calls itself the Nación Camba, i.e., the Camba Nation.²¹

Unfortunately, the dreams also include the racist statements of Felipe Quispe and local people's vigilante actions of physical punishment and summary execution of petty criminals. In recent years there has been a rising tendency for people to take the law into their own hands. The rich build their gated communities and hire private security guards. The poor hang straw dummies by their neck at the entrance to their streets to warn of their response to real and suspected criminality. These acts of violence and fear are spectacular events that demonstrate serious conditions of insecurity in the country, and local people's growing lack of faith in existing forces for public law and justice (Goldstein, 2004).

At a more localized level, people also have very clear agendas of their own. As well as ideas of what might contribute to the formation of a "good" life in normative terms, Andean peoples, as a number of studies show, have a keen cultural understanding of prosperity and poverty. Indeed, there are indications, both from the stress of the Coordinadoras on a politics of "usos y costumbres" and from Albro's (2005) comments on the formation of a more inclusive notion of indigeneity, that these cultural understandings are expanding in social significance.

In a recent paper on local Andean ideas about the good life, Komadina (2005) comments that

[amongst] the inhabitants of Huancani, and particularly between people on their own, the networks of reciprocity are a necessary feature of the different daily activities as well as ceremonial, as in the interior of the family economy and written in the logic of the ancestral system. Something that is permanently revalorising what is called the economy of solidarity.

Komadina's example plays out in a demonstrable form the argument of Polanyi (1971) and other Andean scholars working on markets and exchange (Larson, Harris and Tandeter, 1995) that economy is embedded in non-economic as well as economic institutions. Komadina highlights that people who are *ch'ulla*, *waqcha*, *waqcha migrante* – loosely translated as orphans, widows (or single adults), or migrants with local families – are considered vulnerable because of their lack of strong reciprocal relations of exchange. This perspective is further supported by the work of Widmark, where she states that in Quechua and Aymara, the definition of being poor is “to be without kin and social relations” (Widmark, 2003). Xavier Albó (1989) highlights that ultimately all people's efforts should lead to *suma qamaña* – to living well, or harmony. The central idea is that balance and reciprocity should be maintained through the union of contraries. This applies to the natural environment; to social relations at the level of households, couples, family, and community; and ultimately, in a cosmological sense, in relation to the supernatural world. There is then a common notion of, and agenda for, prosperity in the Andean region that crucially combines the material equally with the social and the spiritual.

VIII. THE INACTION OF GOVERNMENT

What these demands, or dreams, show is that alternative visions of prosperity and the future do exist. They also demonstrate that recent conflicts have had nothing to do with marginalized Bolivians' lack of abilities to aspire to something better. Instead, what is indicated is perhaps a lack of capacity and will in the country to deal with such a range of interests democratically. Given the breadth of demands and the depth of cultural understanding required to make an adequate response to poverty, it is perhaps not surprising that it is easier to continue with existing logics of government. The sheer range and scale of these forces means that while Bolivia has democracy, it is unable to do democracy. Indeed, the fact that some of the cultural interests are expressed in violent and illegal ways that are beyond state control makes any desired dialogue even more difficult.

The explanation of incapacity and stalemate certainly has some value. However, considering the longer history of modern development in the country sketched above, it can only be a partial explanation of current conditions. What this longer history makes clear is the unwillingness on the part of Bolivian elites to question their own positions in government. It also makes clear that the international system has had little more than a rhetorical interest in questioning existing social structures, as illustrated by its continuing defense of the equation that economic growth equals development and its persistent fear of civil society in the region. From this

point of view the current state of conflict is to do not only with a political stalemate, but a lack of political will and excess of caution in the creation of real political openings.

The slowness with which the Mesa government acted following the 2004 referendum demonstrates this excessive caution, and subsequent events highlighted the political and social costs of inaction. On the 5th of May 2005 Carlos Mesa finally introduced a new Hydrocarbons Law, committing the state to its referendum pledges and the recovery of 50 percent of the revenues generated from the sale of oil and gas. However, because of his obvious foot-dragging and the bias shown towards international business in the discussion of taxation levels, opposition movements in the country had already agreed to reject the reform. Although Mesa managed to get the bill passed using his presidential powers, the law's introduction sparked off a new round of protests, now focused on the complete nationalization of the country's oil and gas reserves. While publicly committed to the proposal of a new Constitutional Assembly,²² the government's indecision on this issue further encouraged protest. This is also a proposal for which the Catholic Church, non-governmental organizations, and the military repeatedly announced their support for during 2004-5. On the 3rd of June 2005 Carlos Mesa announced that he was now willing to hold elections for the Assembly and a referendum to address the issue of regional autonomy. However, because of the government's delay and its obvious reluctance to address these issues in previous months, the leaders of the different opposition movements in the country refused to end their protests, seeing instead that it was only through force that the government had been convinced to act in the past. Mesa's resignation was the result of this stand-off.

IX. A CLIMATE CHANGE IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY?

The lack of will and excess of caution contradicts earlier state policy that expressed a concern for participation, transparency, and dialogue. Moreover, it is a position that, while intelligible in a post-rights, post-9/11 world that confuses human security with security against terrorism, is inexcusable given the expressed capabilities of Bolivians and the alternative possibilities raised by recent academic analysis and developmental policy proposals. The global policy prescriptions recently made by the UNDP and the World Bank break with their otherwise schematic and econometric faith and practice, and now argue for the recognition of both cosmopolitan cultural liberty (UNDP, 2004) and a recognition of the capacity (Rao and Walton, 2004) and capabilities (Sen 1999) of the poor. None of the documents question existing prejudices and

the hegemony of market models in development directly, and it is here that questions of intentionality in their adoption need to be asked.²³ However, they do appear to assist the foundation of an international policy agenda in which privilege is no longer given to purely econometric ideas of prosperity. Indeed, the addition of culture and the capacities of the marginalized should have an impact on who decides and what is decided in development policy. It would be naïve to presume that opposition leaders and protesters in Bolivia are unaware of these possibilities, given the capacity-building activities of non-governmental organizations and the global linkages that now exist between both indigenous and anti-globalization movements.

In academic writing there have also been significant developments, in which understandings of the importance of civil society have moved from static to active, from limited to expansive, and from consensual to confrontational, e.g., from social capital (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti, 1993) to the multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2004). This is a shift in meaning that helps to explain both the divisions and the common goals of recent social movements. Renewed, and now more clearly stated, support has also been given by development scholars to ideas of participation. In a recent publication Amartya Sen stresses the need for participatory decision making “based on open discussion, with adequate opportunity for the expression of minority positions” (Sen, 2004). Indeed, while examples of the failure of participatory development abound (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; McNeish, 2001, 2005), there are now clear examples from Brazil, the U.S., and India in which participatory budgeting and planning have succeeded in addressing the diverse needs of the poor (Fung and Olin Wright eds., 2003; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). These examples demonstrate that participation can lead to a process of local democratization that is very different from the now recognized harmful results and limitations of neoliberal-inspired policy regimes.

Linked to these academic discussions there has also been a growing interest within the international development policy debates in development ethics and “deliberative” democracy. Drawing on the work of Rawls, Gargarella (2003) argues that democracy should be seen as a deliberative forum where we all have the opportunity to re-evaluate, clarify, and/or change our established views. Further support for a “deliberative” approach has also been forcefully made by Pogge (1994), a key figure in UNESCO’s current efforts aimed at the creation of an international convention in which poverty is recognized as a violation of human rights. Pogge makes a critique of Rawls’s ideas of deliberative justice by questioning his loyalty to liberal ideals premised only on the

individual citizen and the failure to account for the impact of international structures. Pogge makes a clear case for a deliberative democracy which rests on tolerance and recognition that other communities may autonomously and reasonably decide not to follow some of our most fundamental recommendations (1994:216). This is a proposal that should have more than philosophical value to a country where serious discussions about the formation of a Constituent Assembly are underway.

X. CONCLUSIONS

Bolivia seems to be on the verge of a genuine period of democratic possibility. However, this is a period that is likely to be marked by competing visions and pressures that can have seriously divergent paths and consequences for the country. Reflecting on the above, it is quite clear that there have been and remain deep-seated conflicts over the meaning and means of prosperity and democratic government in Bolivia.

Recent elections have created hopes and real possibilities for the democratization of Bolivian politics and society, but recognition must also be made of the real dangers to substantive political change that also exist as a result of the persistence of a national and international political culture that, while praising democratic participation, multiculturalism, and pro-poor reform, acts in practice to limit and discredit grassroots initiatives aimed at these goals. This political culture is characterized by a series of ambiguities visible in the contrasting rhetoric and practice of recent developmental history in Bolivia. As I have demonstrated above, this political culture has arisen as a result not only of the history of prejudices and social divisions within the country, but also of the coexistence of a series of contradictions in international development policy and practice. Despite a decade of democratic reform and pro-poor policy in which popular participation has been a key mechanism for gaining government legitimacy, decision making on the future of the country has been strictly limited. As a result of the national and international blockages, open debate on the country's development future has been stifled and kept to conservative economic formulas – a condition of stalemate that has resulted in the failure of policies to reduce poverty and laid the foundations for recent political conflict in the country.

During the recent protests and electoral campaign, this wider political culture aimed to discredit Bolivian civil society as fragmented along ethnic and class lines, and incapable of mounting a common and innovative platform. However, the organization of recent protests and the election success of MAS demonstrate that the opposite was true. Indeed, through the Coordinadoras many Bolivians have found an innovative means to

express a common desire for the rethinking of state and natural resource ownership. Contrary to earlier “culture of poverty” assumptions, local Bolivians have demonstrated their capability to aspire to a better future, as do the poor everywhere. While these capabilities are at times difficult to “voice” because of their embeddedness in cultural practice and because of the competing positions of elites, they constitute a source of serious alternatives for national development. Their main thrust is to point to a need for official acceptance of the connection between economics and the social, and between development and culture. These are also alternatives that resonate to some extent with the changing terms of recent development policy discourse.

These proposals and debates are likely to be ignored by conservative sectors of government and business, just as they will by conservative sectors of academia, but taken seriously they represent a resource of allies and ideas that are not only possible, but that now have vital support in both academic and international policymaking circles. As such they also underline the responsibility of the new Bolivian government to take action, to restructure the social economy of the country, to take the idea of a Constitutional Assembly seriously, and to structure a response to the diverse class, ethnic, generational, and gender interests that now consider participation in government a natural right after more than a decade of development rhetoric. In recent days Morales appears to be following through on his pledges to take these responsibilities seriously. These are, however, early days for his government, and it is likely that earlier claims of his party’s synthesis and inclusivity will be tested to the limit by the counter-claims and ambiguities of a population that is not only willing to aspire, but to fight for better terms of prosperity and government.

Notes

¹ Bolivia has an indigenous population of just over 50 percent made up of ca. 32 different ethnic groups.

² Of course this meant a reduction in the total funds available for other sectors of government investment.

³ Comments made by Dr. Deepa Narayan, editor of the World Bank’s “Voices of the Poor.” NORAD Conference, Oslo, Norway, October 2002. Similar comments have also been repeated in recent research findings focused on government and economic reforms in the country; e.g., “Decentralization and local government in Bolivia: An overview from the bottom up” by Jean-Paul Faguet, London School of Economics, Crisis States Programme, Working papers series no. 1, May 2003.

⁴ Only Haiti, Honduras, and Nicaragua are ranked above it in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2004).

⁵ Gini index coefficient of 0.56.

- ⁶ See the report on Fernando Mayorga, a well-known Bolivian political scientist, in “La consultitis aguda puede disvirtuar los mecanismos participativos serios,” *La Razon*, 7 July 2003.
- ⁷ In its assessment of the Dialogue, the European Network on Debt and Development (EURODAD) reported that the “IMF emphasised that the impact of the National Dialogue would be limited to social spending and would not impinge on the macro-economic model” (see EURODAD 2000).
- ⁸ See “HIPC II: anularon el control social,” *Los Tiempos*, 15 April 2003.
- ⁹ See “Los dirigentes ajustean sus discursos a los resultados,” *La Razon*, 20 July 2004.
- ¹⁰ I.e., The Movement for Socialism (MAS) being principal among them.
- ¹¹ The precise questions were: Are you in agreement with the reform of the Hydro-carbons Law No.1689 introduced by Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada? Are you in agreement with the recovery of the hydro-carbon well-holes as the property of the Bolivian State? Are you in agreement that YPFB should be refunded for the Bolivian state’s decision to recover property from the petrol concessions, such that they can continue to participate throughout the productive chain of hydro-carbons? Are you in agreement with President Carlo Mesa that gas should be used as a strategic resource in order to secure practical and sovereign access to the Pacific Ocean? Are you in agreement with the export of gas as part of the national policy that involves its consumption by Bolivians, helps to develop the industrialization of gas in the nation, and the charging of taxes and revenues from the petrol companies up to a level of 50 percent of the productive value of the gas, to be used principally for education, health, roads, and employment? My translation based on report in *La Razon*, 20 July 2004.
- ¹² Renegotiation of access to the sea has been a major bone of diplomatic contention with Chile ever since its loss during the War of the Pacific (1879-84).
- ¹³ “Movimiento al Socialismo”.
- ¹⁴ Capitalización is the specifically Bolivian version of privatisation introduced by Sanchez de Lozada in which the state retains partial ownership of public utilities and national industries.
- ¹⁵ “Sindical Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia”.
- ¹⁶ This indicator measures moves towards market-oriented reforms.
- ¹⁷ A series of statements by the U.S. and European governments as well as leading Latin American academics and politicians have raised these concerns. See, for example, Mario Vargas Llosa’s comments about the protests in the Ecuadorian daily newspaper *El Universo*, 11 Nov. 2003. These comments were reproduced in the editorial and debate columns of many Latin American national papers.
- ¹⁸ This is not so different from the argument used by the Norwegian government in its dealings with private business at the start of its oil and gas industry in the beginning of the 1970s.
- ¹⁹ <http://www.clacso.org/wwwclacso/espanol/html/fprincipal.html>
- ²⁰ Santa Cruz generates 30 percent of the nation’s revenue. It is a region where over 50 percent of foreign investment is concentrated.
- ²¹ “Camba” is the slang word for residents of the eastern part of Bolivia. The equivalent term for highland people is “colla.”
- ²² In theory the Assembly would create a new democratic space for all sections of the population to express their demands and to take part in constitutional reform.

²³ Here I am thinking of Charles Hale's (2004) recent comments about the "indio permitido" – a term borrowed from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui to refer to the way in which governments and the international system use cultural rights to divide and domesticate indigenous movements. Hale's comments make clear the possible double-sided nature of recent multicultural politics, i.e., an emphasis on cultural rights at the expense of political and economic rights.

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