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Introduction to Fabiola Escárzaga's 'The EGTK (Tupac Katari Guerrilla Army): Aymara Insurgency in Bolivia'

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Abstract

This Introduction presents Escárzaga's essay on the Ejército Guerrillero Tupac Katari (Tupac Katari Guerrilla Army), presented here for the first time in English translation (<https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206X-00001978>). Context for Anglophone readers is given regarding the group's significance within the broad sweep of Bolivia's history, as well as noting the scope of this chapter and where it fits within Escárzaga's 2017 work *La comunidad indígena insurgente*.

Keywords

indigenous – identity – revolution – armed struggle – Bolivia – García Linera – Mariátegui – el Mallku

As of December 2021, the Southern Cone boasts a rare conjuncture of left-wing governments, poised to consolidate recent victories and push on potential allies in upcoming heavyweight elections in Colombia and Brazil. In 2019, a mass insurgency in Chile brought about the appointment of a participatory assembly to re-write the neoliberal, Pinochet-era constitution. That assembly's make-up is dominated by representatives from the social movements, which then saw a presidential candidate, Gabriel Boric, victorious amidst critical

weakness for the traditional centre-left and right parties. Meanwhile, Perú has elected a rural teacher from a Marxist party, breaking with the taboo left over from the Shining Path guerrilla disaster, and bringing into the government, however precariously, the long-excluded indigenous countryside. Pedro Castillo's entry to the Peruvian presidency has caused comparisons with the first indigenous president of neighbouring Bolivia, Evo Morales Ayma, whose MAS party (Movement towards Socialism) is firmly back in power after being removed in a 2019 US-backed coup.

Two regional specificities catch the attention with this development. The first is the control over a near-majority of the world's copper and lithium reserves, an eventuality that caught the attention of observers from Elon Musk to the grandson of former socialist president Salvador Allende. The spectre of Allende's nationalising of a mineral central to the world economy (copper is a privileged conductor of electricity, as lithium is for storage) is unavoidable, as is the violent attack this incited from the capitalist class at the time. The second historical association, related to the first, is the renewed attention this contingency brings to Morales's call for returning land-locked Bolivia to the sea – an inhibition resulting from the late nineteenth-century War of the Pacific by England-aided Chile against Bolivia and Perú, which awarded Chile large territorial expansions and, by eliminating maritime egress for Bolivia's mines, greatly contributed to the latter's impoverishment during the twentieth century.

Optimism over a socialist 'outbreak' in Latin America, and its perpetual deferral, is perennial – but these developments do much to vindicate and recall our attention to the region's vibrant theoretical and militant movements crossing the axes of Marxism and indigeneity. Chile's newly elected left-wing coalition, the Frente Amplio, has been unsuccessful in partnering with the largely autonomous Mapuche nation, whose unceded territory spans a large swath of southern Chile and Argentina, states against which continue ongoing conditions of war without negotiation. That antagonism between rural anti-colonial struggles and urban social-justice movements is an obstacle-in-waiting for any renewal of the Pink Tide project. Bolivia's recent history offers both a background to this antagonism, as well as invaluable breakthroughs in the co-development and interpenetration of Marxist and indigenous worldviews.

In 2006, Morales became Bolivia's first indigenous president, interrupting the succession of governments beholden to the military and oligarchy, under whom it had been one of the poorest nations in the hemisphere. That poverty was a focus of Eduardo Galeano, who reports that in the 1960s the miners extracting the riches of Potosí had a life expectancy of no more than 30 years. Evo's vice-president Álvaro García Linera also marked the ascension to power

by a former combatant from one of the numerous guerrilla groups that had risen up during the twentieth century, among which Che Guevara's failed launch in 1967 was merely the most notorious.¹ Some of García Linera's former comrades in the EGTK would split with Morales's Movement to Socialism (MAS) party, his former partner Raquel Gutiérrez even welcoming their deposition during the 2019 coup.² The following article offers a detailed account of the EGTK's activity from its formation in the 1980s to its eventual dissolution into and against the MAS. It presents readers with an overview of key groups, the balance of forces, and radical ideologies in the Andean nation. While the peasants and indigenous people at the heart of this struggle may seem to have no corollary in contemporary Western politics, their struggle to overcome the stasis of their conferred identity positions produces radical lessons for confronting a reactionary 'deep state' and intransigent capitalist forms elsewhere.

Fabiola Escárzaga's essay profiles several figures who would go on to become principals in recent debates between the MAS government and its left-opposition.³ In mainstream media and academic circles, Morales is often criticised from eco-feminist perspectives, who find fault with his tilt towards Chinese capital, alleged authoritarianism and extractivism.⁴ No-one questions his compact with García Linera, whose critics portray him as a caricatural ideologue dazzled by Marxist economics and blind to the subalternity of eco-indigenous struggles. Some geopolitical observers such as Noam Chomsky and the Grayzone warned of the convergence between such criticism and the US's destabilisation efforts, with Trump hinting at the pivot to Bolivia in 2018, apparently surprised at Venezuela's resilience to meddling. Indeed, during an unprecedented economic take-off under the MAS's long decade in power, a rising urban middle class adopted liberal expectations and cultural politics similar to those of US student and anarchist movements. However, it is important to note that criticism of MAS is not of a unitary nature. Unrest among the largely indigenous city of El Alto is of a different class-character than, for example,

1 Che's Bolivia diaries attest that the crucible of their defeat, like the many guerrillas that had preceded them, or that of Teoponte two years later, was the inability to link together Bolivia's variously segmented social groups. Although the EGTK would underachieve militarily, in this regard it symbolised a breakthrough.

2 For example, in an editorial for the online journals *Zur* and *Towards Freedom* in November 2019.

3 For a good sense of the terms of the debate, see, for example, García Linera 2016 and Rivera Cusicanqui 2015.

4 For a recent expression of this perspective on Evo and Álvaro García Linera, see Yaku Pérez's interview with *Página Siete* in April of 2021, following his role in the Ecuadorian presidential elections. One example of how far-reaching this narrative goes can be seen in a *Guardian* report on the replacement of the old colonial palace (Collins 2018).

the academic and art orientation of the Mujeres Creando group. A leading young Katarista, Abraham Delgado Mancilla, focuses on the crushing of an indigenous officers' protest against the segregation of the upper and lower military schools. This *de facto* racialised system helps to perpetuate the nation's structural inequality, with the military representing a base of wealth and power preceding and ulterior to the indigenist government. According to Mancilla, all of the over 100 petition signatories were summarily discharged, without the MAS leadership recognising their demands.⁵ This criticism has the benefit of identifying one of the revolution's main obstacles, the persisting sway held over matters of national importance by the elite (which became acutely clear amidst the 2019 coup), and it hints at the crucial tool of coalition-building for breaking through the impasse.

Escárzaga's comprehensive account of the EGTK's rise to influence has been lacking in English, and it provides a relatively impartial background and context for crucial debates around socialist governance. Having conducted her research and the principal interviews relatively early, that is, prior to 2006, this is a definitive history. The chapter comes from her comparative analysis of three indigenous uprisings in the 1980s and '90s, in Peru, Bolivia, and Mexico, *La comunidad indígena insurgente*.⁶ Escárzaga is a sociologist in Latin American studies at the Autonomous Metropolitan University of Xochimilco and former colleague of Raquel Gutiérrez at the UNAM. One of the larger themes of her book is the polaric effect of Mexico City in the twentieth century as a meeting and dissemination point for many insurgent exiles and correspondents with revolutionary movements across Latin America. She also tracks the influential thought of the Peruvian communist José Mariátegui, who anticipated that the indigenous and peasantry were far from marginal to the fate of Marxist revolution, placing them at the centre of the developing dynamics between land, labour, and capital. Escárzaga narrates the militant struggle of recent peasant armies alongside the theoretical lineages of Marxism's non-teleological origins, which cite the endurance of communist social formations among non-European people as well as a decisive role for peasants in the construction of socialism.

The story of the EGTK is at heart the dual development and alliance of a group of Marxist radicals emerging from the miners' union milieu, and the tradition of anti-colonial resistance by Bolivia's indigenous groups. While the text focuses on the two vanguards, each tendency represents a mass base whose

5 Delgado Mancilla 2018. Mancilla is also known for his collaboration with Sinclair Thomson; see *Historical Materialism's* Zavaleta Symposium from 2019, Volume 27, Issue 3.

6 Escárzaga 2017.

ideologies and practices constituted the actual movement. Offering an overview of the katarista movement's history and theoretical currents, Escárzaga also emphasises the strong leadership role assumed by Felipe Quispe (*el Mallku*) during the course of events. Although the article ends with his influence weakened in 2006, he was seen to rebound in the last decade at the lead of major blockades at Achacachi in the highlands between La Paz and the Peruvian border, resuming the region's legend as a bedrock of Aymara resistance. At the time of his death in January 2021, Quispe had led stoppages against the 'interim' Añez government and was a candidate for governor of the La Paz department. Few treatments of detail exist in English about this major figure.⁷

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⁷ Works of note include Webber 2011 and Hylton and Thomson 2007.