The Death of the Twentieth-Century Working-Class Condition

The miners’ ‘March for Life’

Every deed, and especially every social deed, is a synthesis expressing long-term determinations manifested as events, as acts. Their primary importance is that they elucidate a group of significant connections in the visible, tangible present. But there are social deeds where the present and the more prominent inheritances of the recent past are very much insufficient to understanding their real significance and transcendence. They are ‘presents’ that transcend their times; their profound truth can only be discovered in the future. We are speaking, then, about events that do not reveal at the time of their occurrence the entire truth implicit within them. Furthermore, they characterise an era, because they pull all other present and past events in a direction whereby they become complete and make sense. These are not, then, daily events, but rather condensations of an era. When they eventually supply us with the language that we need to understand previous occurrences, they divide history, because they announce that from that point on, social processes will follow new norms, though we only come to realise it years or decades later.

The August 1986 ‘March for Life’ is one such occurrence, dividing Bolivian social history into two distinct segments. In some ways, it is the heroic, and to some extent deceptive, epitome of the modernisation-project that started at the beginning of the century and revealed its limitations toward the end of the century.

1. Text extracted from García Linera 2000b.
Indeed, in Bolivia, the end of this era did not coincide with the new millennium, but rather with an event that took place in society fourteen years earlier. The ‘March for Life’ was also the synthesis of a social condition, of collective practices, of life-prospects and of the ambitions of the cultural project of a class that, given its audacity, illuminated and tried to unite the disperse threads of a nation that roamed across this country's dramatic geography. It was the most desperate cry from those who, like no other collective subject, believed in the possibility of the nation and did everything they could to create it with work, unity and solidarity. At the same time, it was the final act of a social subject that had embraced like no other the most advanced and dignifying components of modernity, such as a culture of risk-taking, affiliation based on beliefs and not on family-relationships, citizenship as self-awareness and not as a gift received, and aspirations of expanding the management of public affairs as a function of territory rather than family-ties, all of which flow from a critical and totalising internalisation of the real subsumption of labour to capital.

The truncated result of the march – which was held back at gunpoint in Cala-marca, with historical powerlessness channelled into fear and reckoning – would include the extinction of the only collective bearers of a sense of expansive modernity. The miners of the last century were the most positively modern subject that this country has seen – this country, where, at most, modernity has been cloistered in an élite circle of pretension, in which no small number have tried to make an impression and distinguish themselves from the plebeians. In contrast, the miners were the most authentic and the most socialised expression of the small degree of real subsumption that had been established in these lands. In their collective defiance of state-power, family-tradition and status quo conservatism, they demonstrated, without needing to desire or display it, an ontological confidence in history that has had no parallel throughout the republic’s existence.

The bellicosity of their language and the audacity of the hopes for the future with which the miners heated up the temperament of the twentieth century conferred the density of a multitude to the collective plans and dreams that, now seen from a distance, stand in stark contrast to the cultural hypocrisy and political cowardice of those insipid thinkers and court-administrators who have tried to replace this social giant with their own flimsy ideas. Nonetheless, the moral impoverishment of the latter stands proud, victorious at the dawn of this new century. But it is not the kind of triumph where one understanding of the world replaces another because of the pertinence of its reasoning or the all-encompassing breadth of its perceptions. The meaning of the neoliberal world, its abstract symbols of money, individualism and dull suit-wearing subjects – which have replaced the assembly, the guardatojo (miner’s helmet) and the solidity of the drill-runner’s muscular body – are not there due to their merits: