CHAPTER 13

Revolution against ‘Progress’: Neo-Extractivism, the Compensatory State, and the TIPNIS Conflict in Bolivia

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Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.

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In the two and a half months that passed between mid-August and late-October of 2011, the Bolivian government of Evo Morales entered into its worst crisis to date. From a high of 70 percent popularity in January 2010, Morales had plunged by mid-October 2011 to an average 35 percent approval rating across the major cities of La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz. The President’s green light to a decades old project to build a highway connecting Villa Tunari (in the department of Cochabamba), north to San Ignacio de Moxos (in the department of Beni), through the indigenous territory and national park known as TIPNIS (Territorio Indígena del Parque Nacional Isiboro-Sécure), was the catalyst of crisis in this instance. Beginning on 15 August, lowland indigenous movements – in alliance with fractions of the highland indigenous movement, and later with the support of the urban labour movement – launched a 600-km, 65-day march of protest from Beni to La Paz to prevent the construction of the highway. The march, after having been denounced by state managers as an imperialist conspiracy, and violently repressed en route by police forces on 25 September, eventually forced the Morales government to capitulate to its demands, at least temporarily. There would be no road through TIPNIS. The bureaucratic leader of the principal highland indigenous peasant confederation (CSUTCB), Roberto Coraite, a prototypical steward of MAS interests embedded in a popular organisation, embarrassed the government by calling the lowland indigenous protesters ‘savages’. But the political fallout would

2 Página Siete 2011j.
3 Página Siete 2011a.
run deeper still. The Minister of Defence, Cecilia Chacón, resigned in disgust at the police repression of unarmed protesters on 25 September. The highest echelons of the regime, Evo Morales and Vice-President Álvaro García Linera, sought to distance themselves from the police raid once it proved unpopular, allowing Chief of Staff and Minister of the Interior Sacha Llorenti to take the hit for the team.\(^4\)\(^5\) A masista peasant leader outed as an adherent of old-school modernisation theory. Two high profile ministers gone. A president and vice-president scrambling in the dark for convenient scapegoats. Encapsulating the tenor of the times, the so-called Pact of Unity, an eclectic coalition of various urban and rural social movements and trade unions that had lent support to the MAS at different junctures since 2004, has imploded. It was reduced from 11 pillar organisations to merely three at its last national assembly in November 2011, as a consequence of key lowland indigenous groups and urban labour confederations leaving en masse after having been denounced as traitors and forces of the opposition by government officials.\(^6\) The TIPNIS conflict is the most recent, and in some ways most intense, expression of the class contradictions – or ‘creative tensions’ as government functionaries prefer\(^7\) – underlying the development model of reconstituted neoliberalism introduced by the Morales government after its assumption of power in January 2006.\(^8\) How did we get here?

**Revolutionary Moments and Bureaucratic Stagnation**

Evo Morales was elected as Bolivia’s first indigenous president in December 2005 on the heels of a revolutionary epoch. Left-indigenous insurrection shook the city streets and countryside over the first five years of this century. Two neoliberal presidents were overthrown through mass extra-parliamentary mobilisation in under two years – Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in 2003 and Carlos Mesa in 2005. A counter-power from below emerged in opposition to the capitalist state, in which the popular classes ‘practiced that democracy that we have always wanted: direct, participatory, without intermediaries, in

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\(^4\) *Página Siete* 2011a.
\(^5\) Stefanoni 2011.
\(^6\) *Pagina Siete* 2011i; 2011k.
\(^7\) García Linera 2011b.
\(^8\) I defend the idea that the Morales administration represents a project of reconstituted neoliberalism at some length in Webber 2011b. I develop this thesis further at a later point in the present essay.