ALL WE WANT IS THE EARTH: AGRARIAN REFORM IN BOLIVIA

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Coreino Martinez, whom I met only a few days before, has his pants unbuckled and is showing me the gruesome scar that runs from his belly button down past the waistband of his pants. ‘This is where they shot me’, he says. ‘The bullet from a high-powered rifle entered me here, in my stomach’. Standing beside him, with burn scars tattooing her arms and hands, Angelica Cumasero adds, ‘I was hiding in a hut, holding my baby – they set the hut on fire with me and my baby inside’.¹ Martinez and Cumasero are members of Bolivia’s landless rural workers movement, Movimiento Sin Tierra (MST), a national organization of militant farmers who occupy, work, and live on unused lands; they are recounting an October 4, 2000 attack by paramilitary forces carried out on their squatters’ community, Los Sotos, in the Gran Chaco in the province of Tarija.¹

Stories like these – first told to me while visiting several MST settlements in Tarija during August 2006 – are not rare in Bolivia. The victims of government apathy and landowner violence, the efforts of landless peasants to gain access to land have often been met with ambivalence or force. Yet, today, these landless peasants find themselves in a different sort of spotlight.

On May 2, 2006 President Evo Morales announced a massive land reform that aims to redistribute 20 million hectares (49 million acres) to the nation’s 2.5 million landless peasants (Bolivia’s total population is 9 million). Where currently it is estimated that 400 individuals own 70 per cent of the nation’s productive land, claiming more than 100,000 hectares each, with the top 3,500 individuals together owning more than 20 million hectares,² the reform aims to distribute lands ‘exclusively to peasants and indigenous communities without land or who possess insufficient lands’.³ Agriculture accounts for about 15 per cent of the country’s GDP, and major land reforms have long been a demand of Bolivia’s landless peasants. In particular, hope for what Morales might achieve runs high.⁴ Born a poor peasant him-
self, Morales has worked as a llama herder and coca grower, rising to fame as a leader of the Six Federation of the Tropics, the coca growers’ union. His presidential election came at the end of five years of unrelenting and highly effective popular resistance to neoliberalism and support for indigenous and national struggles in Bolivia, protests in which Morales sometimes participated. From the 2000 ‘Water War’ in Cochabamba to the October 2005 ‘Gas War’ in El Alto, these movements forced two neoliberal presidents out of the country and articulated a coherent anti-neoliberal program, often referred to as the ‘October Agenda’, leading Sinclair Thomson and Forrest Hylton to describe this period as the ‘third major revolutionary moment in Bolivian history’. Since taking office, Morales has echoed the demands of the peasant movements, insisting that ‘In Bolivia the latifundio is illegal…. The unproductive latifundio has to be eradicated’.

Morales’ administration revolves around three central programmes: (1) ‘nationalization’ of the hydrocarbon industry, (2) convoking a ‘ Constituent Assembly’ to re-write the nation’s constitution, and (3) carrying out a large-scale land reform. That Morales has in fact gone forward with these three programs has proven he is far more committed to social change than any of his predecessors, and has served as evidence for his supporters that he is an ‘authentic’ revolutionary president and that his Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) is an authentic revolutionary party. Yet there remains in Bolivia anything but a consensus that Morales is carrying forward the revolution begun in 2000, or that these programs are in fact fulfilling the demands articulated by the movements during the revolutionary period of 2000 to 2005.

While the land reform has not figured prominently in international media coverage, it is equally as important to the revolutionary project as gas nationalization or the Constituent Assembly. Morales has made explicit the connections between carrying out land reform and defeating the legacy of colonialism – ‘eradicating the latifundio is about defeating colonialism once and for all in Bolivia’s rural regions’, Morales has said, alluding to the widely-acknowledged fact that the continued existence of the latifundio, or hacienda, is one of colonialism’s clearest social-economic legacies in Bolivia. In any case, MAS must carry forward an effective and sufficiently profound agrarian reform in order to satisfy a key segment of its constituency. As one analyst points out, ‘although gaining control over Bolivia’s hydrocarbons industry is the centerpiece of Morales’ program… land reform is perhaps even more important for maintaining support from his indigenous base of peasants, many of whom are landless’. Further, land reform holds the potential to incite a conservative backlash against the Morales administration. Land reform is the issue around which Bolivia’s rabid right-wing in the
east of the country has mobilized most effectively and virulently, organizing armed paramilitary militias to ‘defend’ their lands against MAS’s reform and sporadically calling for civil war.

Understanding MAS’s current land reform is thus central to understanding the larger political situation in Bolivia today. However, critical analysis of the reform is scarce. This is partly due to the fact that the reform is still under way and key developments still unfolding. Accordingly, any conclusions, including those made here, must be somewhat tentative. Nonetheless, by looking at the history of land reform efforts and focusing on one key movement that has fought for reform (the MST), landowner opposition, and the specifics of the reform itself, we can move towards a better understanding of this important effort.

**PROFILE OF AN MST SETTLEMENT**

The soil at *Los Sotos* is rich – darker and healthier than the sand that covers the ground everywhere else I’ve been in the Chaco. Thatched-roof huts dot the landscape, and rough-hewn fences cordon off cows, while chickens roam around as they please. Tall corn stalks grow everywhere. In the center of *Los Sotos* the land is cleared, and there is an impressive straw-roofed dome, the roof at the highest point reaching around thirty-five feet. In the center of the enormous hut is a large-bell – for emergencies and to convocate regular assemblies and meetings.

*Los Sotos* is disputed territory – occupied land. In May 2000, around 75 impoverished Bolivians, most of whom had worked for years as hired hands on massive haciendas, grew crops on small pieces of rented land, or worked in the cities as maids or manual labourers – or intermittently did all three – gathered to take over about 1,090 hectares (2,700 acres). The property had long been abandoned after being stripped for lumber, and when the settlers arrived the soil was barren, and the tree stumps left behind meant months of work before the land would bear any crops.

Once the farmers had occupied the area they christened it ‘Los Sotos’, and organized to clear the land, prepare the soil for cultivation, and later to plant crops. They began building huts for sleeping, constructed the large, high-roofed meeting place for assemblies, and later dug a well and put up pens for animals. Today, there are about 25 families living at *Los Sotos*, almost all of whom played key roles in the original takeover. They primarily grow corn, wheat, soy, and potatoes, half of which is for subsistence, and half sold on the market. Community members build their own private huts for homes, but all the land is worked, cared for, and defended in common, though women are charged with the brunt of child care, men with the most
physically-demanding labour. Crops and profits – which total about $100 (US) a month for the entire community – are completely shared.

_Los Sotos_ is one of more than 100 similar MST settlements in Bolivia, and virtually all of them have experienced violence in the form of paramilitary invasions orchestrated by local wealthy landowners. For example, on October 4, 2000, in the attack described above by Martinez and Cumasero, armed men attacked the settlers and shot and wounded several men, women, and children. In the months following the initial May 2000 occupation, _Los Sotos_ suffered other violent attacks. At the nearby _Pananti_ settlement, on November 9, 2001, approximately 40 local landowners and hired men armed with guns and clubs raided the camp, determined to drive the squatters out. Six MST members were killed in the attack, and twenty others were badly wounded. Some of the attackers were arrested and the Minister of Government, Leopoldo Fernández, acknowledged MST President Angel Durán’s claim that the attackers had been given weapons by local police and military officials – yet the stiffest sentences given to the paramilitaries were three-year probationary sentences. On the other hand, when MST members later encountered a commander of the attack on a back road and beat him to death, those who participated in the beating were sentenced to eight years in prison.

**REVOLUTION, REFORM, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE LATIFUNDIO**

Bolivia has a long and bloody history of land conflicts, stretching back to colonial times. If the period 2000 to 2005 was indeed ‘the third major revolutionary moment in Bolivian history’, the struggle over land has been important in each of them. The first of these moments was 1780-81 when Aymara and Quechua insurrections threatened to expel the Spanish. The second was the 1952 revolution, prior to which land in Bolivia remained distributed on an essentially feudal basis characterized by huge estates where peasants, overwhelmingly indigenous, often worked in exchange for nothing but the use of a small plot of the estate owner’s land, often accompanied by a host of unpaid service requirements, called _ponguaje_. Such estates, called _latifundios_, were the most common type of land ownership scheme, and according to a 1950 census _latifundios_ occupied 95 per cent of all cultivatable land in Bolivia, only 0.8 per cent of which was actually cultivated. The national revolution of 1952 (and the land reforms that would come a year later) aimed to do away with such arrangements via the implementation of a massive land reform and the creation of the Agrarian Reform Council, whose purpose was to legally break up the _latifundios_ and prioritize previ-
rously landless peasants by giving them land of their own to cultivate. To this end, the Council radically re-structured property law by creating the legal precedent – codified in the nation’s constitution in Article 166, known as the Social Economic Function – that ‘the land belongs to those who work it’; that is, the primary way to acquire and maintain ownership of land was to work it directly.

However, while the aims of the reform were quite radical, the new law was implemented unevenly across the country. In the western highlands the reform was somewhat successful, breaking the latifundios up into hundreds of small ‘minifundio’ plots. In eastern Bolivia the results of the revolution were quite different. While today the population of eastern Bolivia is about 4.5 million (half the country’s total), at the time of the revolution this part of the country was largely unsettled forest and plains, on which some scattered and isolated communities of indigenous groups lived. While breaking up latifundios in the west, the administration of Victor Paz Estenssoro sought to simultaneously use the 1953 reforms to colonize eastern lands. To this end, landless peasants of the west were encouraged to settle on small plots, and Bolivian and foreign elites were encouraged to settle on large estates. In search of land titles, landless peasants from the west migrated en masse to the east – until they were largely banned from doing so in 1988. As of 2000, these peasants owned only 4 per cent of all eastern lands.

The settlement of large landholdings, on the other hand, continued at rapid pace. In particular, the dictatorships that took hold in Bolivia during the 1970s exploited the mechanisms of the reform created in 1953 (in particular the Agrarian Reform Council) to distribute land through favouritism and political cronyism. In fact, MAS spokesman Alex Contreras has recently claimed that 90 per cent of the nation’s land suitable for agriculture was corruptly given away between 1953 and 1992. But perhaps more than numbers, a sense of the times can be gleaned from one exemplary episode. In 1977, dictator Hugo Banzer had charged his Undersecretary of Immigration, Dr. Guido Strauss, with attracting wealthy white immigrants from South Africa and Rhodesia to settle and create new lands in eastern Bolivia. The government offered 800,000 hectares (1.9 million acres) of land free of charge, as well as $150 million (US) in funds, part of which would be available for repressing the 120,000 indigenous peasants who already lived on the designated lands. Strauss, trying to entice the white Africans, assured them of favourable conditions: you ‘will certainly find our Indians no more stupid or lazy than [your] blacks’, he wrote.

Thus, whereas in 1953 Bolivia undertook a land reform that explicitly aimed at the eradication of all latifundios in Bolivia, in the eastern lowlands
the mechanisms of this reform, combined with the corruption of the military dictatorships, were used to create new latifundios. By the 1990s, 80 per cent of lands distributed were concentrated in the hands of just 10 per cent of landowners.\textsuperscript{17} Summarizing the effect of this period, Miguel Urioste, director of the La Paz-based Fundacion Tierra, writes: ‘The process of land distribution in the country was usurped by the military dictatorships... giving origin to the birth of latifundismo in the region’.\textsuperscript{18}

After the restoration of democracy in 1982, the same pattern continued: ‘Civilian governments did not substantially modify the discrestional use of awarding eastern lands [which] continued being distributed and concentrated along the lines of new family networks of power and party adherence’.\textsuperscript{19} In 1985, Estenssoro was again elected president and with Decree 21060 enacted sweeping neoliberal reforms that further polarized the countryside. Decree 21060 lifted all restrictions on imports, and as a result peasants across Bolivia suffered. Harry Sanabria writes, ‘The terms of trade for key crops primarily produced by peasants declined significantly after the neoliberal project [of 1985], production costs rose, important crops barely competed with less expensive imports, and as a result, agricultural production fell by seventeen percent between 1985 and 1988’. By 1998 production had declined to 45 per cent of the pre-1985 level.\textsuperscript{20} Sanabria concludes that ‘neoliberal policies have relegated peasant production to an “economically marginal” role’,\textsuperscript{21} and a 1992 study by the UN’s International Fund for Agricultural Development revealed that, seven years into Bolivia’s ‘economic miracle’, 97 per cent of the rural population were below the poverty line – the highest level of rural poverty in the world.\textsuperscript{22}

Neoliberal reforms further exacerbated peasant hardship by strengthening the eastern latifundios. With increased access to chemical fertilizers and monies from international finance institutions, including the World Bank, and with the economy geared towards exports, the latifundios were in a unique position to orient their already-industrialized farms towards monocrop production for export. A Center for the Study of Labour and Agricultural Development (CEDLA) report confirms that the only agricultural group to profit from the neoliberal revolution were the middle to large-scale farms.\textsuperscript{23}

In response to widespread dissatisfaction, including intermittent protests, in 1996 President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada passed Law 1715, establishing the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA). The stated goal of INRA was to carry out a major review of land titles in order to distribute to the landless state-owned lands, private landholdings that did not meet the Social Economic Function, and land obtained through corruption. Yet, the
reality of INRA was disappointing. Specifically, what many found objectionable was that the new reform made an exception to the 1953 maxim, ‘the land belongs to those who work it’. It now stated that the land also belongs to those who pay taxes on it – 1 per cent of the total property value, to be determined by the landowner. Many, like Manual Morales Davila, considered this antithetical to the spirit of ’53, in that it legalized absentee ownership, speculation, and very large fallow holdings, characteristics favoured by wealthy landholders, not the peasants INRA claimed to benefit. For many peasants the failure of INRA was the last straw in a long history of empty promises.

Consequently, a wave of peasant mobilizations erupted, beginning with the August 1996 ‘March for Territory, Land, Political Rights, and Development’, led by the Trade Union Confederation of Indigenous Peasants and Labourers in Bolivia (CSUTCB), one of the country’s longest-standing peasant unions. Peasants walked for 36 days from all corners of the country to arrive at the seat of government in La Paz, where they demanded, among other things, greater campesino participation in government, funds for indigenous and peasant land colonization programmes, and the modification of INRA. Four years later, in September/October 2000, after hundreds more mobilizations, the nation’s increasingly militant peasants orchestrated the shut-down of every major highway in the country, forcing the re-elected President Banzer to meet with the peasant leaders to discuss reforms. It was out of this period of militant peasant mobilization that the MST would emerge.

HISTORY OF THE MST

Since its birth in 2000, the MST has, almost alone among peasant groups, carried out land occupations to pressure local and national officials to carry out the saneamiento (revision of land titles) and redistribution of lands. Reflecting the lop-sided land distribution in the east of Bolivia, the MST has its strongholds in Tarija and Santa Cruz, with a significant presence also in La Paz, Beni, and Cochabamba. In contrast to the CSUTCB and other peasant unions, MST members overwhelmingly tend to have mixed origins and work histories that often include substantial amounts of time spent living and working in urban settings doing non-agricultural labour. The organization’s members are ‘born from the campesinos’, as one of its leaders has put it, but they do not necessarily identify themselves exclusively as campesinos.

Since the organization’s birth, the MST’s defining element has been the land takeover. In fact, the organization was born by the very act of a takeover. On February 20, 2000, a small group of landless farmers took over land
in the *Gran Chaco*. Ten months later hundreds of landless families would peacefully occupy land in Pananti, an area in Tarija, and begin working it.\(^{27}\) Much strategizing went into these initial occupations. The participants looked for a piece of land that had remained unused for a long time and thus didn’t meet the Social Economic Function.

This direct-action tactic has both an immediate function and a more distant strategic goal. The immediate goal is to take land, live on it, and work it – that is, to immediately take steps to ameliorate poverty by acquiring land to live and grow crops on. In this sense, the land takeover is a powerful political act – through communal labour the occupied land becomes a site for personal and collective transformation, building solidarities, and prefiguring non-exploitative and convivial relations of production. This conforms with the express desire within the MST to organize and function horizontally and to eschew clientelism and co-optation. ‘We think it is better this way’, says Dionisio Mamani, regional secretary of a settlement named Collana, ‘so that [MST members and leaders] don’t have to accustom themselves to knocking at the doors of NGOs, political parties, or the government’.\(^{28}\)

The takeovers also serve a long-term strategic function. While seeking to avoid clientelist relationships with the authorities, the occupation is simultaneously designed to pressure the government into action: to put pressure on regional and national government to assess the legality of landholdings in accordance with the 1953 land reform, thus clearing the way for redistribution. Further, the chances of actually being awarded land through the legal system have been proven to be greatly increased if that land is already occupied by the people making a claim for it.\(^{29}\)

During the first months after the organization’s founding, the ‘MST [identified] between 18 and 20 key un-worked latifundios, the biggest being Pananti, where the movement succeeded in consolidating the presence of 200 peasant families settled on 3,000 hectares’.\(^{30}\) As of early 2006, the group had continued to carry out occupations at a considerable pace. In 2000, the group had 3,000 members in Tarija, Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, and La Paz, later to expand to Beni and Pando; as of 2004, estimates put membership at 50,000, including the members of the 100 or so current settlements, as well as members still seeking settlements. The rapid growth of the organization is evidently related to the success of the occupation as a tactic. For example, in November 2003, after a barrage of occupations and mobilizations, the MST succeeded in pressuring the government to investigate and eventually turn over the titles to 14 settlements totalling more than 31,000 hectares (76,000 acres) of land. In their mobilizations ‘the demand for *saneamiento* was articulated with extraordinary… precision on the part of the MST… The judicial
apparatus, especially those in charge of land issues... were the object of intense pressure'. Despite its success, this tactic brings up a fundamental antinomy of the MST’s strategy: while land occupation is a highly confrontational direct-action tactic, as employed by the MST it also relies heavily on claims to legality. This underscores one of the internal tensions of the MST, the intensity of which will increase with newfound access to the government via the MAS administration: their simultaneous desire for autonomy, and their desire for recognition from legal authorities. This is what prompted Álvaro García Linera to conclude: ‘The position of the MST leaders towards the government is run-through with contradictions and ambiguities’.31

These tensions have sometimes led to conflict within the MST. In January 2004, the organization split, with President Angel Duran being dethroned by Moisés Torres. The split was provoked by tension over how much the organization should pin its political aspirations to the rising MAS party, a point of contention that had become increasingly heated within the MST. However, mobilizations – by what were now dual MST organizations (though not antagonistic to each other) – persisted in the first years of the new century and the organization developed a coherent set of demands, echoing those of earlier peasant groups, focused on a modification or reversal of INRA, the redistribution of land, and the reversal of neoliberal policies.

These demands, and the fevered pitch at which land occupations were occurring – several hundred between 2000 and 2004, the most since the years immediately preceding the 1952 revolution – revealed a burgeoning radicalism on the part of the MST and the landless in general. In particular, the experience of MST members with rural-urban migration appears to have had a strong radicalizing effect. Although urban-rural migration was a long-standing survival strategy for agricultural workers, an increase in migration was sparked by the drop in crop prices for small peasants which resulted from the 1985 neoliberal reforms. Increased migration was combined with the simultaneous closing of work opportunities in urban areas for peasants. Urban experience and the re-embracing of agricultural work and campesino identity was a common experience among the MST workers I interviewed, and this accords with Bolivian journalist Victor Orduna’s idea of ‘re-campesinazation’, according to which urban-rural migration is a key radicalizing experience for uprooted agricultural workers. As a resident from the Chirimoyal settlement told me in August 2006,

In 1998 I went to El Alto to work construction – my brother was there already. When I got there I could not find work, I could not even make enough money to survive. In the city, where I
had previously supplemented my family’s earnings, now I couldn’t even find enough work. So faced with the decision, go back to the countryside, defeated, or stay in the city and try to earn money, I decided: I will go back to the countryside, but not defeated, in fact, ready to struggle, more aware of the sources of our exploitation in the countryside. I will go back and, to ensure a better life, I will find land… This is the only way to survive, to survive with dignity.

When he returned from the city he participated in the occupation of the settlement Chirimoyal and joined the MST.

**LANDHOLDER REACTION**

While the MST has mobilized for land reform, the eastern agricultural elite has mobilized against the formation of landless settlements, and more recently against MAS’s land reform. This elite derives much of its power and ideological coherence from their large landholdings. In fact, as previously mentioned, it is as beneficiaries of the corrupt resettlement policies of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s that this new settler class was born.

While the new latifundios were getting rich through government-subsidized export farming, they were also depressing farm wages and leading a more general assault on agricultural work conditions. Workers on the latifundios are drawn mainly from the indigenous groups native to the east who were dispossessed of their land by latifundista logging and cattle-ranching, and from peasants who had migrated from west to east attracted by the (largely empty) promise of land titles. Conditions for these workers are dismal. Some have reported working from sunrise to sunset for $1.41 a day; others report having their wages withheld entirely and being beaten on the job by bosses and overseers. Yet even these experiences pale in comparison to other agro-industrial farms, like the latifundio in southeastern Bolivia where 600 families (3,000 individuals) of Guarani Indians were discovered to be enslaved for their labour by the landowner in 2005.

The fact that poor landless peasants are the backbone of the export economy does not escape the attention of the latifundistas, who recognize the threat squatter exoduses pose to their labour supply. When their labourers defect from the latifundio labour force to squat other lands landowners typically unite to attack these settlements, irrespective of whether or not it is their land that is being occupied. This violence underscores a simple fact: in the agricultural economy of Bolivia, as in other third world countries, the interests of the latifundista and small peasant producer are diametrically op-
posed. This is why the chief demand of the peasantry in the 1952 revolution was the outlawing of the latifundio; why the MST and other groups today have demanded the eradication of the latifundio; and why latifundio owners will attack and kill landless squatters, even when it’s not ‘their’ land that is being taken.

That the latifundio is the most significant source of anti-peasant violence can be clearly seen in the actions of the agricultural elite. Take, for example, the Agricultural Chamber of Eastern Bolivia (CAO), a group of agro-industrialists from Santa Cruz who in response to the May 2 announcement of Morales’ land reform announced the formation of ‘armed defence committees’ to defend their land. One mayor of a Santa Cruz rural area with protracted land tenure conflicts openly and enthusiastically supported the armed defence committees. He announced that they are prepared ‘to spill blood with each eviction of [what they consider] illegal occupants of land’. Or, take Nación Camba, a powerful group of Santa Cruz elites united around a white supremacist, separatist ideology, and their youth affiliate, Unión Juvenil Cruceñista. Brutal attacks by Juvenil Cruceñista and other groups have been numerous and well documented, and represent the vanguard of ethnic and regional hatred in eastern Bolivia. In one film the group Video Urgente shows a mob, including Juvenil Cruceñista members, beating MST leader Silvestre Saisari in the main public plaza in Santa Cruz, a beating the local press caught on tape but did not air; in another scene of the film, Juvenil Cruceñista members chase down and whip an elderly campesino man, and then kick and stomp him in the face while he is on the ground.

The group draws its name from the idea of the superiority of ‘Cambas’, the white settler residents of eastern Bolivia, relative to the indigenous Indians, an idea justified on the basis of their superior ‘Spanish’ culture and heritage. Nación Camba’s literature typically refers to their indigenous fellow countrymen as ‘collas’, a paternalistic racial epithet. Juvenil Cruceñista members explained to North American journalist Ben Dangl that Cambas were friendlier and cleaner than Collas, and then added, perhaps with unintended candour: ‘We are probably at the beginning of where you were in the US before the civil rights movements with whites and blacks’.

The Cambas seek their own nation based on ethnic exclusion, claiming they are an oppressed group, a victim of Andean hegemony and ‘Andinomania’. Echoing the west-to-east migrations of landless peasants, they write: for how much longer will Cambas ‘continue to be converted into a “vaginal receptacle” by the pluricultural and multiethnic [Bolivian] society, where the country’s various social diasporas are emptied? …Because of such dramatic conditions we believe it is necessary to recreate the nation, our nation,
our own state’.

The Camba political project, calling for regional control of resources (‘autonomy’) if not all-out secession, appeals to the large white population. While latifundistas represent a relatively small elite, a large percentage of Santa Cruz and eastern residents are white (perhaps as much as 50 per cent) and share the values and political aspirations of the agricultural elite. As Miss Bolivia 2004 infamously explained, ‘we are [not] all just… poor people and very short people and Indian people. I’m from the other side of the country, the east side… and we are tall and we are white people and we speak English’.

This Camba ideology provides powerful intellectual support for anti-Morales sentiment in the east, framing the parameters of debate and opposition to Morales’s programs in racial terms, and fusing its economic and political critique with widely held racist views. In this perspective, Morales’s administration is as much culturally repulsive as it is economically and politically objectionable. Thus the ‘Andeanization’ of the country is as much a problem to be combated as land reform or gas nationalization. That the rejection of, and separation from, the nation’s ‘collas’ might be an adequate solution for the economic, political, and cultural concerns aroused in eastern residents by Morales’s administration was reflected in the June 2006 referendum on autonomy, when a majority of citizens in all the eastern provinces voted ‘Autonomia Si!’: 65 per cent in the province of Tarija, 73 per cent in Beni, and 75 per cent in Santa Cruz.

And here, one cannot help but notice the similarities between the political project of a ‘Nación Camba’, and the experience of latifundismo. Writing presciently in 2004, prior to the widespread emergence of ‘autonomy’ as a conservative political project, García Linera predicted that the ‘growing process of the formation of paramilitary bodies at the service of latifundio properties is such that until the government takes methods to carry out the sanemiento of lands established by law, until the latifundios are dismantled, they will continue to act as mini-states with their own national sovereignty’.

MORALES’ LAND REFORM

The eastern landholding elite has historically displayed a capacity and readiness for armed mobilization against those landless peasants that would threaten its interests. But it is the rise of the Morales administration that has provided the greatest rallying cry in the east, and in particular its land reform that has provoked this group’s most militant actions.

The reform officially began on May 2, 2006, with a series of decrees, and was passed into law on November 28, 2006, amidst much tension. By 2011 the reform aims to distribute 20 million hectares (49 million acres), a fifth
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of the nation’s total land area, to landless farmers. The law also establishes a process by which to prioritize women heads of household for titles, and to incorporate indigenous and peasant communities into its administration. It also aims to provide technical assistance to peasants. On August 2, 2006, in Ucurena, Bolivia, where the 1953 reform was inaugurated, 20,000 peasants, including leaders of the MST and CSUTCB, received 650 tractors and 700 land deeds. At the event, his voice harsh and ragged, with the MAS theme song blaring in the background, Morales reiterated his position: ‘we’re going to end colonialism and eradicate the latifundio. Today we’re taking forward a profound agrarian revolution’.

The new law is largely in line with INRA, but with some important modifications. Firstly, it gets rid of the hated exception introduced in Law #1715 that allowed landowners to pay taxes on their lands to satisfy the Social Economic Function. Lands that do not do this (excluding lands left fallow for crop rotation, ecological reserves, and projected growth) will be subject to expropriation, as will lands determined to have been illegally acquired. The government body that will oversee the saneamiento and re-titling will be a newly-formed Agrarian Reform Council, comprised of indigenous organizations, government agencies and ministers, and CONFEAGRO, a Santa-Cruz-based group of large-scale landowners. Lands that do not meet the constitutional requirements will be expropriated without compensation; all others will be compensated in full, at market value. Further, the law states that no government official or family member can receive land, and only those without land can be given it. It also exempts small farmers, indigenous people, and campesinos, from paying property taxes, while introducing a 0.25 per cent surcharge to the tax base for all other agricultural landowners, and provides that 75 per cent of these tax revenues must be used for improvements in rural basic infrastructure and healthcare. The law also declares that only holdings larger than 50 hectares (120 acres) will be targeted for investigation, and aims to stimulate environmental-friendly production.41

In all of these respects Morales’ land reform could be read as a mere extension and clarification of the 1996 law, designed to carry out the stated aim of this law more efficiently. As the Cochabamba-based Andean Information Network says in a December 2006 report, ‘the text of the law merely updates and modifies the 1996 Agrarian Reform Law [INRA] passed during the first Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada government’. Their report continues, ‘What concerns the political opposition and large-scale landowners, though, is that it appears that this government will actually implement the policy, which had been ineffectual and subject to corruption and favoritism in the past’.42
Nonetheless, and contrary to its fiery rhetoric, to date MAS has been cautious about enforcing the law. Despite MAS spokesman Alex Contreras releasing a ‘hit list’ of the top offending landowners, some with as many as 48,000 largely unused hectares (120,000 acres), to date MAS has expropriated almost no latifundio land. Instead, with the exception of some reverted Brazilian-owned properties, almost all of the lands so far redistributed have been state-owned lands, including forest reserves. And in the few cases where lands have been expropriated, they were bought by the government at market value.

Yet despite the reform’s moderation, the landholding elite did not allow it to become law without a fight. Morales sent his agrarian reform legislation to Congress in May 2006, but it was held up in the Senate, where MAS lacks a majority by three votes. Protesting the impasse, thousands of landless and indigenous marched from all over the country, arriving in November at the Congress building in La Paz. Upon their arrival, the conservative parties left the Senate, further stalling the vote. At the same time, Bolivian newspapers had discovered that Santa Cruz agricultural elites had sent two representatives to Spain to hire mercenaries to defend latifundio land and to overthrow Morales. At the final hour, the legal representatives of three of the abstaining opposition Senators switched sides and allowed the land reform to be passed into law on November 28, 2006.

Despite these conflicts, the reform effort has gone forward. As of August 2006 MAS had already given 3.5 million hectares (9 million acres) to indigenous and landless communities, and a further 2 million hectares (5.5 million acres) of the promised total of 20 million hectares had been taken over by the state in preparation for redistribution. Also very significant is the Pueblos Unidos settlement, the first MST-style settlement set up by the Morales administration. Composed largely of MST members evicted from previous settlements, Pueblos Unidos brings together 626 families on 16,000 hectares (40,000 acres) of land outside Santa Cruz. Despite the difficult access to the settlement and lack of basic services, Pueblos Unidos is a powerful sign of progress for Bolivia’s landless peasants, intently monitoring the progress of Morales’ reform.

**LAND REFORM VS. ‘ANDEAN CAPITALISM’**

But despite the achievements of Morales’ reform so far, there have been substantial criticisms of its shortcomings, ranging from observing that the residents of Pueblos Unidos are still labouring on marginal lands to pointing out that MAS has expropriated or redistributed virtually no latifundio land.43
Perhaps the most telling critique is offered by the Center for the Study of Labour and Agricultural Development, a La Paz-based independent research organization established in 1985 and dedicated to action and research on rural and urban labour issues. CEDLA argues that the continued existence of large-scale landholdings demonstrates that Morales’ reform is deliberately continuing to rely on the neoliberal export model of agro-industrial development, in which the latifundios play a central role. In a report titled *The National Development Plan is neither Nationalist nor Anti-Neoliberal*, CEDLA points out that the main thrust of the government’s ‘National Development Plan 2006-2010 is, in its own words, that of “maintaining the competitiveness of the external sector”’.\(^4^4\) This will mean a continuing emphasis on restricting domestic demand, which will in turn lead to the ‘depression of the purchasing power of national salaries’ and ‘guarantee the overexploitation of the workforce’.\(^4^5\) This, together with the stated goal of increasing foreign direct investment (including in agriculture) from 0.8 per cent of GDP in 2006 to 8.6 per cent of GDP in 2011, provides the grounds for CEDLA’s conclusion that the National Development Plan ‘preserves neoliberalism… [d]espite “the widening of State participation in certain sectors”’. Enrique Ormachea, the lead land researcher at CEDLA, sums all this up: ‘the agricultural development model proposed by MAS in the National Development Plan is based on export agriculture and the privileging of the external over the internal market. In this model, the latifundio is the core productive unit of growth. And this is not going to change’.\(^4^6\)

On May 28, 2007, Vice-President García Linera openly confirmed CEDLA’s analysis when he said ‘we have to work together with Crucenño landholders to re-strengthen the agro-export model of development…’.\(^4^7\) According to García Linera, the prime architect of the administration’s development strategy, MAS’s strategy is based on ‘capitalism with a big state presence’, aiming for a ‘pluralist modernization’ combining ‘the modern industrial economy… urban family micro-enterprises and…the communitarian campesino economy’. Linera calls this ‘Andean capitalism’.\(^4^8\) That the policy is to continue with the neoliberal development model is also confirmed by the nature of the new loan which the Morales government is currently negotiating with the World Bank to subsidize future phases of the land reform. As of June 2007 this loan had not been finalized, but the text of the loan, obtained by this writer, indicated that it would be used to support a ‘land bank’ micro-credit scheme, a programme that has already been implemented in Brazil and widely attacked by the Brazilian MST and other progressive sectors.\(^4^9\)
The current land reform in Bolivia is based on a search for class harmony, offering state support for poor farmers, under the rubric of their incorporation into the larger scheme of maintaining a model of development that relies on large-scale agro-industrial exporters. Perhaps the biggest danger here is that rather than either meaningfully incorporating peasant farmers or exploring alternative paths of agricultural development based on small-scale farming, peasants will be relegated to the status of economically quaint, folk novelties in the overall picture of ‘Andean capitalism’. Yet, despite the dubious nature of their development plan, MAS has offered landless peasants some tangible benefits and has combined these with a radically pro-peasant and pro-indigenous rhetoric and symbolism. Because of the success of MAS’s hegemonic project, and because of earlier contradictions within the landless movement itself, MAS’s land reform, despite its significant shortcomings, has been overwhelmingly supported by the MST and others. Indeed, since May 2006 the MST leadership has respected a call from MAS that no more land occupations take place, so as not to jeopardize the legal process of government-led redistribution. But this also halts the very process by which MST members build solidarities and construct new political communities based on egalitarianism. It now shifts the MST’s focus entirely to the legal terrain. Instead of putting pressure on the courts primarily via mass mobilizations – a tactic at which the MST has proven particularly capable – the key site of struggle has shifted to the legal realm, where landless peasants are seriously disadvantaged.

The typical justification of MAS’s demobilization of the peasant movement has been the party’s need to consolidate power in the face of intense pressure from all sides. And indeed, MAS has skilfully parried a host of real threats – their survival as a political party has no doubt depended on it. First, there are legitimate fears about agricultural development and production, particularly considering the crisis in productivity among peasant farmers. What effect would dismantling the medium to large-size latifundio land holdings and redistributing those lands to peasant farmers have on Bolivia’s national economy? If it had a negative impact on the economy, would the Morales administration remain able to govern, or even remain in power? This fragility is further reinforced by the ever-present threat of massive right-wing violence, as well as by Bolivia’s limited manoeuvrability due to its relative dependence on international financial institutions – a dependence it is in some ways reducing, but in other ways perpetuating.

The effect for MAS’s search for class harmony, as Thomson and Hylton have concluded, is that the ‘Morales government has brought the current revolutionary cycle to a provisional close. It has partially fulfilled the major
demands of the “October agenda”, especially nationalization and the constitutional assembly, by quickening the administrative pace and centralizing power at the highest levels of the executive…. While the [present] reforms represent a response to the popular mandate, they are also a bid for state hegemony’. They continue, ‘This, in turn, has demobilized and fragmented the movements that brought MAS to power’.

The way MAS is navigating the tenuous political environment largely reflects its precarious position as a reformist party vis-à-vis the conservative and mobilized eastern elites at home and its relatively weak and dependent position vis-à-vis the international finance institutions in the global capitalist economy. Yet, it does not follow that the only option for Bolivia is ‘Andean capitalism’. MAS’s land reform seems to go too far in the direction of supporting the latifundio, when the latifundio monopolizes land and continues to be a key source of the racism, violence and inequality that MAS has vowed to combat. It is, of course, an obvious fact that there exist no clear alternatives to MAS’s agricultural development plan. Yet, in an important sense, MAS itself is at least partly complicit in this lack of alternatives. While the administration has adopted the language of the Zapatistas, of ‘mandar obedeciendo’ (governing by obeying), its actions have largely been to the contrary. For instance, in a much-criticized move, MAS sought to exclude virtually all grassroots groups from participating directly in the Constituent Assembly in the name of consolidating political power. One of the groups initially excluded was the MST, which has articulated some alternative proposals – albeit undeveloped – for agrarian reform. In their demand that the MST stop land occupations MAS has also adopted the dominant thinking about autonomous occupied settlements – that it is something to be stopped, not a source of creative regeneration to be supported. As Raquel Gutierrez has put it, ‘today there is a tapering off of the social movements in Bolivia. The state is not acting as the interlocutor for the movements, but instead is subordinating them’.

Contrary to Gutierrez’s analysis, Pablo Stefanoni and Hervé Do Alto correctly point out that the vast majority of social movements in Bolivia support MAS and their reformist policies. They argue that the movements are no further to the left than MAS and that MAS and the movements essentially share the same political aspirations. ‘The border between “moderates” and “radicals” is porous and does not refer precisely to a confrontation between socialism and capitalism’, they write. Rather, Stefanoni and Do Alto say the key issue that divides moderates from radicals is the nationalization of hydrocarbons. According to this analysis, ‘radicals’ are those who support a
'radical version of state capitalism’, ‘moderates’ the continuation of foreign direct investment under state control.55

Yet, something seems amiss with this attempt to unsettle the dichotomy between capitalism and socialism: in effect, it replaces it with the dichotomy between liberal or social-democratic capitalism and neoliberal capitalism. This would seem to suggest that the only desires of Bolivia’s social movements, and the only realistic options for the country, are those of either social-democratic state capitalism (the ‘radical’ position) or neoliberal capitalism (the ‘moderate’ position). To be sure, it does appear to be the case that, whatever impressive changes MAS has introduced since it took power, socialism, at least as traditionally conceived, is not on the current government agenda. Indeed, García Linera confirmed this when he said at the end of 2005 that ‘Bolivia will still be capitalist in 50 or 100 years’.56 But to say socialism is not on the government’s agenda is a very different thing from saying that there exists in Bolivia no real desire for socialism. This is a claim that sits uneasily with the demands of the country’s social movements between 2000 and 2005, as well as with my own experiences at the MST settlements.

NOTES

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1 Interview with author, August 2006.
3 Decreto Supremo 28733, Republica de Bolivia, 2 June 2006.
7 Speech in Ucurena, 2 August 2006.
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12 Based on the combined populations of Santa Cruz, Tarija, and Beni according to the Instituto Nacional de Estatistica, Republica de Bolivia.

13 Álvaro García Linera, Marxa Chávez León and Patricia Costas Monje, Sociología de los movimientos sociales en Bolivia: estructuras de movilización, procesos enmarcadores y acción política, La Paz: Diakonia, 2004, p. 546; Cabrera, ‘Interview with Morales’.

14 Miguel Urioste, La Revolucion Agraria de Evo Morales, La Paz: Fundacion Tierra, August 2006.

15 Alex Contreras, El Diario, 24 November 2006.


17 Cabrera, ‘Interview with Morale’.

18 Urioste, ‘La Revolucion Agraria de Evo Morales’.

19 Linera, León and Monje, Sociología de los movimientos sociales, p. 570.

20 Ibid., p. 545.


25 Linera, León and Monje, Sociología de los movimientos sociales, p. 120.


27 Linera, León and Monje, Sociología de los movimientos sociales, p. 547.

28 Ibid., p. 558.

29 For a discussion of this, see Friedsky, ‘Land War in Bolivia’.

30 The quotations and data in this paragraph are drawn from Linera, León and Monje, Sociología de los movimientos sociales, pp. 548ff.

31 Ibid., p. 576.


33 Personal Interview, August 2006.


36 Ibid.


40 Linera, León and Monje, Sociología de los movimientos sociales, p. 571, my emphasis.


42 Ibid.

43 Regarding Pueblos Unidos, James Petras goes so far as to say that ‘Government-promoted land settlements in remote lands with precarious soil, distant from markets, transport and credit facilities will doom recipients to failure, as has occurred in the past’. ‘A Bizarre Beginning in Bolivia’, Counterpunch, 4/5 February 2006.


45 Ibid.

46 Personal communication to the author, June 2007.


49 World Bank, Bolivia Land for Agricultural Development Project.


51 This is seen, on the one hand, in the MAS government’s participation in the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas and its pulling out of the World Bank’s International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes, and, on the other, in its participation in the pending World Bank land reform loan, discussed above.

52 Forrest Hylton and Sinclair Thomson, Revolutionary Horizons, London: Verso, p. 158.

53 Morales titled a speech given on January 22, 2006, ‘Mandare Obedeciendo’ (I will govern by obeying).

