**The Other Side of Cooperation: Cooperative Mines in Bolivia**

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The city of Potosí, Bolivia seems to exist against the odds. Perched at a nose bleeding altitude of 13,000 feet, sun scorched by day and teeth-numbingly cold by night, Potosí leaves normally intrepid visitors literally breathless. It is hard to believe that this tawny-colored, dusty city of 170,000 people once had a higher population than both London and Paris. The reason for its rapid urbanization, which began in the mid-16th century and continued strong until the end of the 19th century, is visible from any major street in the city: a perfectly cone-shaped yellow mountain that looms up in the south. During the colonial era, the Cerro Rico — which literally translates as “Rich Mountain” — was home to the most important active silver mines in the world; a common lament among Bolivians is that enough silver was extracted from the Cerro Rico to build a bridge of silver between South America and Spain. Regardless of the actual quantity of silver extracted, however, its historical relevance is indisputable: it provided the necessary economic lubrication for the industrial revolution in Europe while also forever changing patterns of land use and social organization in the Bolivian *altiplano* (highlands).

The Cerro Rico is still riddled with active mineshafts, though they are no longer operating at the same scale or under the same ownership structures that they once were. Instead, the Cerro Rico’s mines are now almost entirely operated by mining cooperatives or groups of independent miners who extract small quantities of minerals from otherwise abandoned mineshafts. Although cooperative mining practices exist in a handful of other countries around the world, Bolivia is unique in the degree to which the mining sector is dominated by cooperatives, both in terms of total workforce and political clout. According to 2012 data prepared by the Bolivian Ministry of Mining and Metallurgy, there are currently about 60,000 incorporated *cooperativistas* compared to 12,000 miners employed in the public and private sectors combined. These cooperatives are militantly organized, and they are very willing to take to the streets with dynamite when threatened by anti-cooperative policies.

My research focuses on the role of these mining cooperatives at the nexus of contemporary and historical interactions between the Bolivian state, international capital flows, and land in the altiplano. Mining cooperatives were generated as the byproduct of a series of economic crises and reactionary policies enacted throughout the 20th century, but over the last several decades the cooperatives’ increasing numbers and economic strength has translated into a more active role on the national political stage. In many instances, the cooperatives’ presence has been advantageous for state and private mining companies, as cooperatives absorb workers whose positions are rendered superfluous by contracting economies. Until very recently, these workers functioned as a labor reserve for the eventual upswing in commodity prices; with changing technology, however, this labor reserve is no longer strictly necessary for mineral extraction and wealth accumulation. Now the only way for non-skilled workers to profit on an individual level from rising commodity prices is by joining cooperatives.

Increasing numbers of rural residents are choosing to do just that, in part because the flexibility of cooperative membership means that agriculturalists can become miners — or “*agro-mineros*” — without abandoning their land. This relationship has been encouraged both by a series of laws passed in the last decade and by a more general willingness of the state not to tax the cooperatives and to turn a blind eye to their labor and environmental practices. At a time when Bolivia is celebrated around the world for its progressive environmental policies and its championing of indigenous values, such state support for mining cooperatives seems out of place. In this context, it is important to ask how these cooperatives have risen to their current position of relative power and what work their proliferation is doing in terms of shaping national political economy.

But first it is important to ask how cooperatives operate on a daily basis. Although my research will eventually focus on mining cooperatives in other parts of the Bolivian altiplano, understanding the politics and working environs of the Cerro Rico, birthplace of the earliest mining cooperatives, remains vital to understanding cooperatives as a whole. In the late 1930s, Cerro Rico miners who had been laid off in the recession started organizing themselves into groups to facilitate the continued exploitation of private mines that had been shut down in response to diminishing profits. These organizations called themselves cooperatives for reasons that are not entirely known, though some people I interviewed speculated that the idea of cooperativism had entered with European anarchists in the 1920s and spread to miners during Bolivia’s Chaco War with Paraguay in the early 1930s. Most of the earliest cooperatives in the Cerro Rico are still operational, though numerous others have joined them over the decades.

The day I set out to climb the mountain for the first time, I made a few stops in the city market to buy two bags of coca leaves — one to *pijchar* (chew) myself, as a remedy against altitude sickness, and one to share with miners, who chew coca to minimize the effects of hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. Then I took a bus to the edge of the city and started up one of the many footpaths that zigzag up and across the mountainside. Near the entrance of each major mine is a small collection of houses for families whose job it is to guard the mine against unauthorized miners. I hadn’t climbed very far — though the altitude had already made me breathless — when a group of children from one of these mine towns ran towards me asking if I wanted a tour of the mine. Many cooperative members make extra money by offering guided tours of mines to foreign tourists who will pay for the pleasure of crawling through narrow tunnels whose interior temperature reaches 100ºF and exclaiming over the extent to which working conditions have remained unchanged since the 16th century: tools are hand-operated, protective gear is minimal, and daily risk is high. I explained to the kids that I had already been on a mine tour and that I just wanted to see the *bocamina*, or mine entrance. They brought me to the bocamina and introduced me to the Enzo, the mine guard. Enzo’s wire frame glasses leant him an unexpectedly academic look that contrasted with his coveralls and rubber boots. As I sat and chatted with Enzo, a steady stream of miners passed by on their way to work, each one stopping to share some coca leaves and ask what a *gringa* like me was doing hanging out around a mine.

These miners were all part of the same cooperative, but they do not work cooperatively per se. Although structures and practices vary wildly across cooperatives, internal social differentiation is very common: the cooperative’s mining concession area is divided among the *socios*, or official cooperative members, each of whom might hire a group of workers, or *peones*, to mine the region to which he has rights (it is almost always a “he,” except in cases where a widow inherits her husband’s cooperative membership). Peones do not receive the benefits of cooperative membership, which include some life insurance and the ability to participate in decision-making processes, and they are most often paid only a very small percentage of the value of the minerals that they extract. Most of the workers with whom I spoke were men in their early 20s who were working as peones for socios. Armed with bags of coca leaves, bottles of 98% alcohol, and several sticks of dynamite, they take tremendous risks on a daily basis to scrape together a living.

The mineshafts in which these cooperatives work officially belong to COMIBOL (Corporación Minera de Bolivia), the state-owned mining company that was created as one of the primary outcomes of Bolivia’s 1952 national revolution. Although at the time of its inception COMIBOL owned and operated nearly all the mines in Bolivia, at present it exists as a largely administrative entity with only a handful of fully public mines. Economic challenges at various points throughout its history forced COMIBOL to seek international financial support and to trim its workforce; cooperatives became a strategic means for COMIBOL to downsize without sparking insurmountable unrest.

Archival documents show that as early as the late 1950s USAID was recommending that the Bolivian state encourage the proliferation of mining cooperatives in order to relieve widespread discontent among laid-off workers. A similar but more dramatic event occurred in the mid-1980s, when falling international mineral prices, pressure from the World Bank, and general economic disarray prompted the state to privatize virtually all of COMIBOL’s mining concessions and “relocalize,” or lay off, some 20,000 miners. Many of these miners joined or formed cooperatives, which were now concentrated not only in Potosí but also around the city of Oruro (the heart of Bolivian tin mining and the country’s most important economic center from the early 20th century through the 1980s) and in the northern part of the department of La Paz. The vast majority of these cooperatives pay nominal fees to COMIBOL to rent sub-divided mining concessions, an arrangement that affords the cooperatives a degree of stability while releasing COMIBOL from its responsibility to exploit less-productive mineral deposits.

The most recent decade in Bolivia has been witness to yet another, much less well documented, spike in the number of *cooperativistas*. Responding in part to rising commodity prices, many rural residents with no previous mining experience or affiliation have started joining cooperatives. The incentives for such action spring not just from the international market prices, however. Since coming to power in 2005, current President Evo Morales and his party, the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo), have also passed a significant number of political reforms that benefit the cooperatives. In the new constitution, which was approved in 2009, cooperatives are recognized as equal players in the mining sector alongside private companies and COMIBOL; the first Minister of Mining and Metallurgy under Morales was an ex-cooperativista who blocked attempts to nationalize privately-owned mines if it seemed that it would restrict cooperative access; and, perhaps most importantly, no attempt has been made to pass laws that would require cooperatives to pay state taxes, respect national labor and environmental standards, or in any other way conform to the expectations made of private mining companies.

Given this favorable economic and political climate, a cooperativista with a lucky corner of the mine has the opportunity to generate a surprisingly good income, and increasing numbers of *campesinos* and indigenous communities are willing to risk poor health and water pollution in the hopes of benefiting from the boom. Bolivia is currently in the process of rewriting its mining law, which has not been changed since the 1980s. The drafts under review indicate ever more favorable political conditions for cooperatives: reduced royalties, indefinite contracts with COMIBOL, and potentially easier means for cooperatives to form direct alliances with private companies. Mining cooperatives are poised to play a progressively more dominant role in Bolivian economic and territorial dynamics, a situation that implies serious contradictions within the “new left” politics that Morales and the MAS purport to defend.