

The Failure of Resource Nationalism in Bolivia

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a review of

Blood of the Earth: Resource Nationalism, Revolution, and Empire in Bolivia by Kevin A. Young, 2017, University of Texas Press

Kevin Young's *Blood of the Earth* examines the period of Bolivian history after the country's 1952 revolution, in which the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR) was able to overthrow the ruling military government with the help of popular militias led by factory workers and miners.

To paraphrase Young, it wasn't that the MNR, led by middle-class revolutionaries, was that radical, but its leadership made a conscious decision to adopt demands previously espoused only by the radicals as a way of gaining the support of the working class, which was influenced by socialist and anarchist ideas.

Although most union leaders seemed to favor reining in capitalism through government controls, many of their rank-and-file members advocated some form of workers' participation in the management of mines and factories. They had enough experience with the brutal profit-seeking of foreign corporations to also favor state control of the country's mineral resources.

Most important to the success of the revolution, Young notes, "was the party's loose but powerful vision of resource nationalism and its capacity to absorb diverse ideas and interests..."

The ideology of resource nationalism—the idea that Bolivian resources should be used for the benefit of Bolivians, rather than foreign capital—was not necessarily a radical idea; there were even some right-wing groups that agreed with the MNR.

Once in power, the reforms the MNR undertook were more focused on economic development and diversification than the redistribution of wealth and power. However, popular pressure, including land occupations and worker mobilizations, forced the MNR to the left. Because of that pressure, it instituted a limited land reform and nationalized major mines.

Offsetting this situation came pressures from the U.S. government. Because the Eisenhower administration knew that there was no credible grouping to the right that could govern Bolivia, it didn't try to overthrow the government, as it did in Guatemala and Iran in the 1950s. The U.S. understood that the MNR was under strong pressure from the more radical miners' and factory workers' unions and that keeping the party in control of the government was preferable to a more thoroughgoing revolution.

Rather, the U.S. attempted to split the MNR and co-opt its program with loans and agreements to limit the purview of state-run companies. It also reached out to the military, a connection that undoubtedly contributed to the coup that eventually forced the MNR out of power in 1962.

The history of the MNR in Bolivia indicates the limits both of resource nationalism and representative democracy in the global South when the world is dominated by major capitalist powers. In some ways, the current government faces many of the same dilemmas.

Addressing poverty—Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere—is difficult and requires that some of the country's wealth be invested in infrastructure and machinery. Some economists believe

that the necessary finances should be obtained primarily by extracting and exporting resources, but this leaves the country dependent on the unequal terms of world trade. It also causes environmental destruction and encroaches on indigenous rights and lives.

In the last few decades, Bolivia has been a bright spot of resistance to global capitalism and particularly neo-liberalism. Mass movements have successfully resisted water and natural gas privatization and played a major role in the election of the country's first indigenous president, Evo Morales. That election resulted in the adoption of a constitution that recognized the rights of nature.

Blood of the Earth has a short chapter about current developments, but a reader needs to know Bolivian history before and after Young's main timeframe to really understand the significance of what he is writing about. The book is well-documented, but narrowly focused on the working-class movement in La Paz, the capital, which limits its value in understanding some of the major currents of modern Bolivian politics, particularly the strength of the indigenous movement, and the ways in which it both forms coalitions with and gets into conflict with other working-class strands.

The Bolivian political situation stands out for the degree to which the mass movements from the time of the MNR to today have continued to hold the government accountable and to question its policies in the streets. These movements, which are based in a long tradition of radical struggle and an understanding of the world situation that would be the envy of many organizers in the North, have made a difference in the degree of exploitation the country is subject to.

Even when a leftist government took power, they continued to get out in the streets and hold elected representatives accountable for their policies. Bolivia's popular radicalism is uniquely its own, based in its own particular history and people.

It's worth looking at the roots, strengths, and weaknesses of the combination of Bolivian movements that have persistently and sometimes successfully resisted global capitalism. *Blood of the Earth* can be a useful resource for understanding this history.

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