
Book Review

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Kohl, Benjamin and Linda Farthing. 2006. **Impasse in Bolivia: Neoliberal Hegemony & Popular Resistance**. New York: Zed.
Kohl, Benjamin and Linda Farthing. 2007 **Bumerán boliviano: Hegemonía Neoliberal and Resistencia Social**, La Paz: Plural Editores.

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As the currency of neoliberalism weakens, while legacies of policies continue to undermine the social fabric, popular resistance throughout the globe has remained muted. One of the earliest and most successful national coalitions against neoliberal policies has been in Bolivia. The few examples of successful resistance to neoliberalism are now taking on exceptional value to the development of new theory in political economy.

Three years ago, Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing published *Impasse in Bolivia: Neoliberal Hegemony & Popular Resistance* as a study most relevant to the marginal regions of Latin America where “Bolivia’s experience of neoliberalism demonstrates the difficulties of creating hegemonies in countries with highly unequal power relationships, histories of extreme political instability, confrontational political styles and economic dependency” (192). Today, the relevance of *Impasse in Bolivia* has expanded and can also be read to fathom the dimming prospects for the *hegemony* of neoliberal policies as the global financial crisis intensifies.

Impasse in Bolivia is first a book about the limits of globalized capital in attempting to use and transform a distressed nation-state, a country which has lost half of its territory since its inception, and which in the period since publication of this book has been threatened with even more secessionist disintegration. *Impasse in Bolivia* avoids today’s typical preoccupation with Evo Morales as Latin America’s first indigenous head of state. While Kohl and Farthing are some of the most knowledgeable scholars for a political biography on Morales, *Impasse in Bolivia* stays focused on the social movements pitted against the almost intrinsic weaknesses in the Bolivian state which have been exacerbated by decades of particularly aggressive neoliberal policies.

Neoliberalism was predicated on its supposed inevitability, which was often conflated with and labelled as globalization and global liberalization of regulation of the market. Today, the decline of neoliberalism is better seen as the difficulties of imposing often trite market-oriented solutions combined with often visceral hostility to state regulation. It might still be easy to dismiss the examples of popular resistance chronicled in *Impasse in Bolivia* as irrelevant to the wealthier parts of the world. The kinds of grassroots organizing chronicled in *Impasse in Bolivia* could even signal a new form of globalization, in defence of civil institution and in resistance to corporate capitalism.

Impasse in Bolivia chronicles a particularly volatile historical period for Bolivia between June 10, 2005, the beginning of the caretaker presidency of Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé the former president of the Supreme Court of Justice, and the landslide election of Evo Morales on December 18, 2005. Kohl and Farthing encapsulated the opportunities and dilemmas of those heady months as, “Even a president of good-will cannot fix twenty years of neoliberal policies

overlaid on 500 years of social exclusion in the forty-five days the social movements have given him to prove his mettle.” *Impasse in Bolivia* deftly describes how popular resistance was impressively organized well before Morales was elected president of Bolivia.

Paradoxically, Bolivia has the kind of fragile state that once seemed ripe for neoliberalism’s picking. Today we know that assumption to be false if only because neoliberalism led the Bolivian state to become so ineffectual as to be unable to implement those policies, on one hand, and also impoverished that government to the point where it could not provide the indirect subsidies, through infrastructure, typically necessary for multinationals to do business. In 2006, Kohl and Farthing were painstakingly careful to not generalize, to provide an exceptional case study, and to never suggest a sort of “Bolivians r us” approach to understanding these early movements of national resistance to neoliberalism. Much of the focus of *Impasse in Bolivia* can be encapsulated from the introduction: “For twenty years, like countries all over the global South, Bolivia has been subject to the constraints of global neoliberalism, a system that privileges the market, reduces the ability of the state to provide social services, and simultaneously concentrates wealth among an elite minority while it reinforces poverty among the majority” (2).

Based on two decades of field work, *Impasse in Bolivia* describes a set of shifting neoliberal policies that undermined a nation state, along with attempts by multinationals to take control of infrastructure that the Bolivian state had barely been able to construct. It would also be easy to over-attribute the exceptional grassroots resistance, especially that leading up to the Cochabamba Water War (162 – 167), to the marginality and extreme poverty of Bolivia’s indigenous majority. But few indigenous majorities, even without such crippling policies, have ever been able to organize as effectively as have Bolivia’s. Early on in *Impasse in Bolivia*, Kohl and Farthing revisit Gramsci’s notion of hegemony to understand how the IMF-imposed, neoliberal programs purported to operate like a totalizing system (22 – 25). The chronicling of the loss of Bolivian territory over the last century and a half (43) foreshadows much of the central message of *Impasse in Bolivia*, that neoliberalism needs viable states in order to “work” but paradoxically allows capital to parasitize weak states as to render them so dysfunctional that neoliberal policies cannot be enforced.

Kohl and Farthing describe the process of neoliberal policies effectively undermining identifications of “citizenship” and the loss of indirect social “rights” to resources, notably water (88-100). Similarly the authors describe the unintended consequences of the decentralization of the Bolivian state in the 1990s with increasing political power to the municipalities and social movements (125 – 145). As well as the conflicts over water were those over taxes and natural gas (149 – 178). Both powerful indigenous organizations (154-156) and rising social movements within cities (159-152) converged and laid the groundwork for resistance to neoliberalism.

Impasse in Bolivia puts the celebrated Cochabamba Water War, that culminated in April 2000, in a localized and nuanced framework while recognizing its symbolic significance as a popular uprising against globalization, and in particular the foreign corporate takeover of water infrastructure. Kohl and Farthing argued more critically than most that “The Cochabamba water war not only paved the road for more contentious politics in Bolivia, but anti-globalization activists elsewhere incorporated it into their critiques of privatization and neoliberalism.... The dominant narrative as a ‘David versus Goliath’ struggle of a poor population against the evils of globalization story – one which offers a better base for shaping future actions. In Cochabamba, the water company – public once again—still does not provide adequate access to clean water” (187).

Not content to rely on a simplistic model of the loss of hegemony through grassroots organizing, the authors of *Impasse in Bolivia* described more intrinsic aspects of failing neoliberal projects. Kohl and Farthing explore why in Bolivia these policies failed to deliver even though the country was once a poster-child of the IMF’s brand of structural adjustment (179 – 192). *Impasse in Bolivia* describes the burgeoning indigenous activism (184), regional pressures within

Latin America (184-186), and shifting and unreliable notions of nationalism (186 – 187). While entire studies and books are being quickly penned on these topics, the powerful contribution of *Impasse in Bolivia* is its sketch of the movements in the year leading up to the Morales presidency along with the authors' pessimism about the limited alternatives to "hegemony" that can be generated by grassroots movements of highly marginalized social groups on resource frontiers such as Bolivia.

The most powerful paragraph of the final assessment by Kohl and Farthing, one grounded in reflections on the early months of the Morales presidency, has broader implications for prospects for the state and social infrastructure as the political influence of global capital begins to slip. "Neoliberalism has shrunk the centralized Bolivian state, but rather than bringing about sustained growth through a miracle of the market, it has weakened the government's capacity to address the population's needs. Somewhat paradoxically, devolving state functions to municipalities has in fact increased the reach of the government into rural areas and strengthened its presence at the local level. The expanded government presence has awakened a new interest among the rural indigenous population in participating in democratic processes even as faith in democracy declines in the nation's cities. Democracy in rural municipalities, however, is largely direct and highly participatory, a model that is poorly equipped to fill a national stage" (193). So today, popular organizations in Bolivia are increasing in size and influence, and even with Morales and his new constitution the influence of the nation-state remains limited, especially at constructing and maintaining critical infrastructure for basic social needs.

The Spanish version of *Impasse in Bolivia* was published a year after the English language version and contains an epilogue sketching the challenges facing the Morales government. The question of what specific aspects of neoliberalism's *Impasse in Bolivia* might have prefigured today's more general economic collapse, especially on resource frontiers with indigenous majorities, warrants a second, more theoretical book by Kohl and Farthing.

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