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A BOLIVIAN REVOLUTION: THE MNR'S POPULIST VISION FOR A MODERN BOLIVIA

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ABSTRACT:

The twentieth century is a century riddled with “isms,” such as communism, capitalism, and imperialism. Most of these are usually discussed within the European context. However, Europe was not the only location susceptible to these “isms.” In 1952, Bolivia experienced a revolution similar to the size and scale of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. At the heart of the revolution was the MNR, known in English as the National Revolutionary Movement, a populist party that gained traction in Bolivia during the Chaco War which spanned from 1932 to 1935. The MNR was a coalition of middle-class mestizos, Indians who had not received equality under the law, and mine workers. On April 9, 1952, the populist party, headed by peasants and miners, initiated an armed takeover of the Bolivian government. Victor Paz Estenssoro, who took control in Bolivia, sought to establish a new government. The new government’s goals were, according to Paul Lewis, “universal suffrage, with votes for the previously excluded Indians; land reform, involving the elimination of the latifundio and the redistribution of land to peasant families; nationalization, of the three largest tin mining companies, with labor’s participation in new management; and the dissolution of the armed forces.”¹ This paper will analyze and elucidate the Bolivian Revolution from its infancy in the wake of the Chaco War to its demise when the MNR was overthrown by a military coup in 1964. Moreover, this work seeks to unpack the sweeping term “populism” and what the term looks like in action. Populism as a political philosophy proved to be a weak and unclear platform for the MNR to stand on, thus leaving the party susceptible to external forces that would alter and curb its agenda. Ultimately, the MNR lost power because the party was unable to pull together a sturdy political system, thus, turning the wheel of political instability in Bolivia and continuing the cyclical history of political revolution.

A NOTE ON FRAMEWORK

To accomplish this monumental task, this paper begins with an introduction of the terms populism and revolution. To fully understand and analyze the Bolivian Revolution, the MNR, and its populist agenda the author and reader need a clear understanding of the universal formula applied to populism. Of course, the MNR’s populism will not fit the universal mold perfectly, but there are several continuities between the sweeping definition of populism and the MNR’s political agenda. The introduction will interpret the term populism and relay its significance in the political arena, while also connecting the term to revolutionary tendencies.

The second section of this essay, “Revolution’s Perfect Storm,” will examine how the populist political philosophy and the prospect of revolution arrived at the Bolivian oligarchic state’s front door. This section will uncover James M. Malloy’s arguments surrounding the

conditions for revolutionary action in Bolivia, and the accelerators toward a revolution that took shape in the aftermath of the Chaco War, the Thesis of Pulacayo, and the 1945 National Indigenous Congress. These events were not only causes for the watershed moment of 1952 in Bolivia but were also demonstrations of cultural and national consciousness in a segment of the Bolivian population, particularly the suppressed Indigenous population. Moreover, this section will apply an approach similar to Jose Antonio Lucero's in *Struggles of Voice* by narrowing in on Indigenous politics and visibility during the pre-revolutionary years in Bolivia. Indigenous and Nationalist consciousness proved a key accelerator for the 1952 revolution. This section and the essay as a whole will use the names of a particular people when possible; however, due to lack of better alternatives, the essay will also fall back on the colonial constructed term Indigenous when speaking of various native peoples collectively.

The third section of this essay, "Success, Failure, and External Forces" gives an overview of the MNR's political establishment and policies focusing on the MNR's universal suffrage, agrarian reform, and the nationalization of the three major tin corporations in Bolivia. They will not be ordered chronologically in this essay. Universal suffrage and agrarian reform are linked; therefore, it was necessary to place them next to one another. The nationalization of the mining industry will be placed third because it is a perfect segway into the external forces that affected the MNR. These populist policies were put in place by the MNR at the height of its popularity; however, their popularity among Bolivians did not last. The MNR was unable to maintain political power in Bolivia not only because of its own shortcomings but also because of outside influence from the United States of America. By analyzing the United States' role in the revolution and influence on the MNR's rule in Bolivia the author can delve into independent factors that can clear up stalemates among documents on the MNR's political influence and power.

The last section of the essay will be the concluding chapter and will present an overview of the previous sections while connecting them to the cyclical history of revolutions in Bolivia. The MNR gained traction in Bolivia with the help of accelerators and revolutionary conditions, and as these conditions ripened, the moment became possible for the MNR's coalition of middle-class mestizos, Indigenous peasants, and miners to overthrow the old regime. Immediately after the revolution, the MNR was able to enact multiple reforms that solidified support from its broad coalition. However, Bolivian dependence on American aid caused the populist revolutionary progress to end and reverse. The American government began to moderate the MNR's political policy and platform in Bolivia, forcing the MNR to turn its back on the broad coalition that brought it to power. Thus, a party created for "the people" to attack the establishment became by external forces "the establishment" and turned its political back on the people.

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Defining Populism and Revolution

The world of politics is brimming with jargon and rhetoric that cause readers to become distracted or distraught because certain terms have lost their meaning, or the meaning has become too convoluted to grasp. Many terms fit into this category. One of these terms is "populism." Populism has been attached to political parties since the masses started entering the political arena. Moreover, the MNR was not the first or the last party to adopt populist principles. Many political parties have used the sweeping term as a crutch to capture the attention of the masses and utilize them as a movement toward power. John B. Judis places the term in a context that finds continuity with the MNR's populist platform. Judis argues in his work, *The Populist Explosion*, that there is

no scientific definition of populism. This author would agree with Judis's position, and for the rest of the essay to fit together, the reader will need clarity concerning the term populism. Judis posits that populism:

Is not an ideology, but a political logic -- a way of thinking about politics. In his book on American populism, *The Populist Persuasion*, historian Michael Kazin gets part of this logic. Populism, he writes, is a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class; view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.²

Thus, according to Judis, the term populism does not have a rigid definition. Rather, it is a sweeping term that can be considered as a way of thinking about politics.

The term is so broad that there was even a variety of populists within the MNR itself; factions of left, center, and right political leanings circulated among the party's members and leaders. However, despite the multitude of political leanings within the MNR, the basis for populists' political thinking is shown above through Kazin's words. Kazin formulates that it is the "ordinary people" who attack their "elite" opponents. Moreover, populist political logic is founded on the concept that "the people" must bring down the current "establishment." The political leanings behind the sweeping term "populism" differ in how they define "the people" and "the establishment." The people can vary from blue-collar workers or shopkeepers, to students riddled with college debt.³ Moreover, in the MNR's case, "the people" consisted of middle-class mestizos, Indians who had not received full equality under Bolivian law, and tin workers. Historians have recorded that "the people," according to the MNR, changed throughout its time in power, and it can be concluded that the inconsistency among the party contributed to its eventual takeover.⁴

What makes populism as a political tool so significant? Populism's mentality of "the people" against "the establishment" signals that there is a significant portion of the population that is upset with the status quo. In Bolivia's case, a majority of the population became upset with the conditions in the wake of the Chaco War. Again, Judis places this crisis in a context that finds continuity with the Bolivian revolution. The circumstances that place "the people" against "the elite" are "when people see the prevailing political norms -- put forward, preserved and defended by the leading segments in the country -- as being at odds with their own hopes, fears, and concerns."⁵ Once these circumstances are set in motion, there needs to be a political coalition or party that attempts to politicize these circumstances and fight for "the people's" hopes, fears, and concerns. Judis explains this by noting, "the populists express these neglected concerns and frame them in a politics that pits the people against the intransigent elite. By doing so, they become catalysts for political change."⁶ Therefore, what makes populism so politically significant is that it inspires another convoluted political term into action: revolution.

Merriam-Webster defines revolution as a fundamental change in political organization, especially, the overthrow or renunciation of one government or ruler and the substitution of another by the governed.⁷ Malloy in his work, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution*, establishes a much more thorough definition. He posits that a revolution is an internal war that results in the recirculation of the scope of political groups to influence a society's administrative government. Moreover, Malloy agrees with Merriam-Webster that revolutions involve a fundamental change in political organization. He continues by defining "revolution," writing, "the exclusion of groups with a previous high authoritative capacity from any future access to power."⁸ He again agrees with the dictionary definition that revolution involves the renunciation of a prior government.

Malloy, however, adds two pieces of criteria to the term revolution, “the redefinition of a society’s concepts and principles of authority, and a redefinition of goals which governmental authority usually pursues.”⁹ Therefore, Malloy formulates that revolution is not simply the overthrowing of one leader in exchange for another, but also redefining the principles and goals of the government.

Populism may not always lead to a revolution, but it can be concluded from Malloy’s definition that there is a sense of populism within revolutions. Populism, as a way of thinking politically, positions a segment of society against the status quo, not just against the current government but also the way the government has formed its key principles and goals. Populism is then realigning the political authority’s principles and goals to suit those who oppose the status quo. Ultimately, Malloy writes, “revolutionary situations develop when significant segments of a society begin to conclude that an existing social framework does not fulfill their desires or needs.”¹⁰ In the case of the 1952 revolution in Bolivia, the MNR led a coalition that consisted of middle-class mestizos, tin workers, and the minority Indigenous population against the established oligarchic state that maintained the political status quo.

PART TWO: REVOLUTION’S PERFECT STORM

Accelerators: The Chaco War (1932-1935)

The key components that created the perfect storm for revolution in Bolivia were advanced by what Malloy terms accelerators. He writes, “accelerators may stimulate a revolution. Major disconnecting social experiences such as a lost war, a major depression, or a natural catastrophe may galvanize the preconditions of revolution, causing the society to experience a crisis.”¹¹ The Chaco War fits into Malloy’s definition of an accelerator. It was a war that Bolivia lost, and from the ashes of the Chaco War, multiple leaders of the MNR would rise. The Chaco War was a land dispute fought between Bolivia and Paraguay over the Chaco Boreal. Bolivia and Paraguay believed that the Chaco Boreal was a doorway to development and wealth, and both hastened to maintain control of the vast area by claiming outposts across the region. Fighting among both groups was disorganized and inhumane, resulting in massive casualties; Bolivia sustained roughly 57,000 casualties and Paraguay about 36,000. By 1935, both sides were borderline bankrupt and agreed to a cease-fire. During peace negotiations, Paraguay was awarded much more land in the Chaco Boreal than Bolivia. In the wake of the war, instability crushed Paraguay and Bolivia when both democratic governments were overthrown, Bolivia’s government being overthrown in 1937.¹²

The Chaco War incited two major feelings of consciousness in Bolivia. The first was a nationalist consciousness, and the second, cultural consciousness, which especially affected the minority Indigenous group by provoking their visibility and power in Bolivia. Malloy considers in his work that, “to meet the military needs to at least hold its own in the war, the government had to embark upon a course of maximum mobilization. The Chaco War was converted into a nationalist crusade. To drive the mobilization and sublimate the sacrifices occasioned by the war, jingoism and patriotic fervor became the order of the day. The war, in reality, was Bolivia’s first ‘national’ war and, indeed, its first real ‘national’ effort of any kind.”¹³ Thus, according to Malloy, the Chaco War became a catalyst for nationalism in Bolivia. The belief among political activists became, according to Malloy, “that only those who sweated in the Chaco War could legitimately offer solutions to Bolivia’s problems.”¹⁴ This belief was demonstrated by the MNR because its leadership was made up of veterans of the Chaco War.

Fernando Garcia Arganaras establishes continuity with Malloy in his article, “Bolivia’s Transformist Revolution.” He writes, “the bloody confrontation and the Bolivian defeat proved so

traumatic that it generated widespread questioning of the mining and landed interests and, hence, the form of state and society that had permitted it. In the aftermath of the war, new forces challenged the old order in the name of reform and a new definition of national interest”¹⁵ Arganaras relays that nationalist fervor was on the rise in Bolivia because the general population had become upset with the oligarchic state’s vision for Bolivia’s future. Therefore, they saw the oligarchic state as “anti-nation.” Moreover, the oligarchic state was aiding American and British imperialism by indulging their capitalist ventures into the tin and mining industries in Bolivia. Overall, the state’s role was to provide military unity and protect national territory; the defeat at the hands of Paraguay proved that the oligarchic state was incapable of accomplishing this objective. The war had brought together bourgeois intellectuals, workers, and the peasant Indigenous population; the unity among these three very different social groups proved essential to the establishment and formation of the MNR.

In Fred Bergsten’s article, “Social Mobility and Economic Development: The Vital Parameters of the Bolivian Revolution,” similar to Lucero’s work, *Struggles of Voice*, he narrows his discussion of the Chaco War to the minority Indigenous group. Moreover, he argues that the Chaco War served as a form of social mobility for the Indigenous minority group. During the war, the Bolivian leadership had become reliant on the Indigenous population to maintain and hold the front lines. Bergsten states that this position in the war placed the Indigenous population outside of its traditional role. Traditional military leaders would rouse their Indigenous soldiers by preaching concepts of equality to ensure that this portion of the population realized that it too had a stake in the outcome. As a result, the Indigenous population became more aware of its place in Bolivian society. Bergsten elaborates on the power that the Chaco War had in solidifying Indigenous nationalist consciousness. He writes that “the traditionalist Indians, of whom roughly 100,000 participated directly, saw activities outside their own village or plot of land which could concern them; and some segments of the politically- dominant white groups, having seen the ineffectiveness of the status quo starkly revealed, became increasingly interested in a new order for Bolivia.”¹⁶

These historians agree that the Chaco War heightened national and cultural consciousness amongst those who fought in the war. Ultimately, the Chaco War became a vacuum for the ideals of a populist party to gain a foothold. As discussed earlier, the concept of populism, according to Judis, is to pit “the people” vs. “the establishment;” and in the wake of the Chaco War “the people” surfaced as the middle-class bourgeois military, the peasant Indians, and the tin workers. These groups were marked as pawns in the oligarchic state’s game of chess with Standard Oil and Royal Dutch Shell, two major companies that used Bolivia and Paraguay to maximize profits through the land dispute over the Chaco Boreal. At the end of the conflict, it was clear to “the people” in Bolivia that the establishment had placed the needs and concerns of foreign imperialist countries over Bolivian’s needs and concerns; therefore, the establishment was unfit to rule.

Accelerators: The National Indigenous Congress (1945)

Another accelerator that involved the peasant Indigenous population in Bolivia was the 1945 National Indigenous Congress. James Kohl in his article, “Peasant and Revolution in Bolivia, April 9, 1952 - August 2, 1953,” declares, “Perhaps equal in consequence to the Chaco War in creating a militant peasant consciousness was the 1945 Indian Congress. The result of concerted planning, the congress was a testimony to the dedication of peasant organizers. ”¹⁷ Kohl posits that the announcement of the Congress stood as the pillar that emulated the hard work that Indigenous

peasant communities were exerting to have their voices heard in Bolivia. Similar to the political parties in Bolivia, historians have overlooked and avoided the voices of Indigenous people. Despite historical silences surrounding the Indigenous populations in Bolivia, Xavier Albo is a historian who has attempted to bring some of those voices to the surface. Indigenous tribes in Bolivia that decided not to take up arms against Paraguay or Bolivia were considered enemies to both. Therefore, they were attacked by Bolivian and Paraguayan militaries. Albo notes, “During the Chaco War, the Guarani Chiriguano was considered traitorous by both sides and were often forcibly removed from their lands. The traditional leader of this group, the mburuvicha, was shot by Bolivian troops, and the Guarani Chiriguano had their lands expropriated by the expanding cattle ranching of the region.”¹⁸ Moreover, as mentioned previously, there were Indians who fought for Bolivia and gained national consciousness through their participation in the war among other Indigenous tribes to whom Albo refers. They became more politically active because they were massacred by the Bolivian military forces during the Chaco War. These events made the case for Indigenous rights in Bolivia much more poignant.

Albo’s work brings to the forefront voices that historically have been silenced by those in power. In Bolivia’s case, they were silenced by the powerful oligarchic state. Lucero’s monograph *Struggles of Voice: The Politics of Indigenous Representation in the Andes*, is another powerful work that describes how Indigenous tribes in Bolivia overcame political barriers. One of these barriers was representation. Lucero describes a political tool employed across Latin America, the “representative ventriloquist.” Representative ventriloquism was the notion that whites would speak for “their” Indians. This left the Indigenous without a voice because their voice was given to a white person who would relay their needs, sometimes inaccurately. Lucero described a representative ventriloquist as someone who “knows the circuits of power in the bureaucracy, and manipulates the game-meaning of the political field... He does not translate or transcribe. The ventriloquist presents a trans-scriptural act: he pursues a strategy of representation.”¹⁹ Overall, Lucero posits that, “in both centuries and both countries, indigenous people had to rely on neo-colonial architectures to make themselves heard and visible.”²⁰ Thus, indigenous voices were only heard through their ventriloquists. However, the National Indigenous Congress in 1945 proved to be an opportunity to come face to face with their “ventriloquist,” or Bolivia’s leader, Gualberto Villaroel.

Villaroel considered this as an opportunity to enrich his “ventriloquist” position and gain more traction amongst the rural peasantry. Lucero concludes that “the Indigenous Congress, held in 1945 after a series of setbacks, was a remarkable event as indigenous delegates were invited from every canton in the republic.”²¹ Rural peasants were visible and voiced their concerns in the heart of La Paz, a location from which Indigenous peasants had been excluded. Their voices were being heard by the status quo, and they were promised change by Villaroel’s government. The National Indigenous Congress was considered a successful example of representative government for voices that are historically marginalized. Lucero notes, “they voiced their complaints openly in an unprecedented and previously unimaginable public sphere. Perhaps most surprising in a country where universal suffrage was still years away, the government promised solutions to the problems of the rural majorities. Decrees came from La Paz declaring the end of servitude on the haciendas and signaling the legal beginning of social rights for Bolivians.”²² After such a promising display of possibility for Indigenous people, the Villaroel government crumbled, and the new government moved swiftly to reverse any possible progress toward social rights for rural Indigenous tribes in Bolivia. As a result, Lucero posits that the Indigenous protestors transitioned

away from protesting and discussions toward revolutionary action. The Indigenous voice and fight for social mobility, rights, and visibility were essential to the MNR populist party's movement towards revolution and power.

Accelerators: The Thesis of Pulacayo (1946)

The last accelerator toward revolution that this paper will present is the Thesis of Pulacayo. As the Villaroel government was crumbling, the new government that assumed its place presented a potential threat to labor across Bolivia. The thesis presents the radical goals of the massive labor union, the Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia, or the FSTMB. This large labor union had its very first major gathering at the mining center of Pulacayo in 1946. The creation of the thesis was a response to the political turmoil in 1946 but also a framework for the labor union's future agenda. The thesis received political support from the left-leaning Trotskyist party, as well as to a certain extent, the MNR. While the thesis required the miners to reject any political backing, its populist and Trotskyist rhetoric aided the MNR because of the union's willingness to proceed with revolutionary action. While the thesis does not align with the MNR's nationalist political leaning, it dictates that the revolution required unity among all the oppressed social groups in Bolivia. Section 2.2 of the thesis states that "the proletarian revolution in Bolivia does not imply the exclusion of the other exploited layers of the nation; on the contrary, it means the revolutionary alliance of the proletariat with the peasants, the artisans and other sectors of the urban petit bourgeoisie."²³ The MNR was fully aware that its political stance did not align with the FSTMB's radical political goals, but it was necessary for them to ally to become a major driving force toward overthrowing the government in 1952.

However, the MNR leadership and the union workers did align when it came to understanding that the "establishment" was their enemy. The MNR leadership had all fought in the Chaco War and were aware that the oligarchic state had used them as pawns in a fight for American and British imperialism. The FSTMB also believed that the imperialists were their enemies. They dedicated the fourth section of the thesis to the struggle against imperialism. The MNR and the FSTMB concluded that they needed each other, but they would not operate in the same group. Malloy writes, "even after striking an alliance of sorts, the MNR central leadership and the FSTMB leadership operated independently of one another."²⁴ However, after operating independently in the post-Villaroel era, the MNR and FSTMB allied more closely than before. Malloy again offers insight, "when the MNR finally re-established contact, it did so with a movement that was increasingly more powerful and organizationally independent, having its own leadership and a definite, independent political orientation. The MNR again succeeded in becoming the political expression of labor, but the alliance was fraught with mutual distrust."²⁵ Ultimately, the MNR understood that its connection to the workers in Bolivia was an essential aspect of its populist political base and would be vital in creating the social coalition among the middle-class mestizos, Indigenous peasants, and lastly, the miners.

Revolutionary Conditions

Several conditions pushed Bolivia toward revolution; Malloy posits that conditions become revolutionary when a socio-political unit experiences multiple political dysfunctions, and an incumbent elite or elites are unwilling or incapable of carrying out an effective course of adaptive action.²⁶ The broad coalition that the MNR formed consisted of the middle class, urban workers, and peasants a coalition they viewed as "the nation." Again, as populist political philosophy dictates, a group must be pitted against the establishment. The MNR's "nation" coalition was pitted

against the “anti-nation” that consisted of the oligarchy in Bolivia and its imperialist allies like the United States. The MNR’s objective was to eliminate the anti-national oligarchy.²⁷

Eduardo Gamarra and Malloy compare Bolivia’s revolution to other Latin American countries, specifically Peru, whose American Popular Revolutionary Alliance was similar to the MNR. However, they differed in the fact that military forces in Peru were able to end any revolutionary action attempted by the APRA. As revolutionary conditions became even more visible in Bolivia, the current oligarchic state was unable to alter its economic dependence, and it was not willing to use force to remain in power as Peru had done to end other revolutionary tensions. The height of revolutionary tensions in Bolivia came when the 1951 election result placed the MNR in charge, but they were thwarted by leadership. With tensions boiling, the MNR decided to act on April 9, 1952. The MNR’s broad coalition of “the people” fought in a bloody exchange over the course of three days, leading to roughly 500 dead and 800 wounded. The victory was due, in large part, to the leftist and Marxist factory workers who fought in the battle of La Paz, and the indigenous communities in the highlands and valleys. Thus, victory was won by the MNR not just in La Paz but across other major cities in Bolivia with the help of its vast and diverse coalition. The fact that victory was owed to leftist, Marxist, and Indigenous peasant communities meant that the MNR’s leadership moving forward would need to appeal to these broad social groups.²⁸

PART THREE: SUCCESS, FAILURE, AND EXTERNAL FORCES

Malloy and Gamarra place the cyclical nature of Bolivian politics in context and position the MNR’s role in Bolivia’s cycle of political instability in their book chapter, *Bolivia: Revolution and Reaction*. The authors write,

On April 9-11, 1952, Victor Paz Estenssoro and the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) led Bolivian workers, peasants, and displaced middle sectors in one of the most profound social revolutions of twentieth-century Latin America. In a short time, the new revolutionary regime had nationalized 80 percent of the nation's mining industry, declared universal suffrage, downgraded the armed forces, and approved a broad agrarian reform program that ended a system of Indian semi-servitude. Although the MNR destroyed the old order, it was incapable of establishing a new order; thus, the revolution remained incomplete.²⁹

Malloy and Gamarra highlight vital aspects of populism and revolution. The goal of populism is to pit the people against the status quo; revolution, as Malloy points out, is the overthrowing of one ruler for another who will enact sweeping changes that alter the government’s principles and goals. The MNR’s broad coalition of “the people” made the task of implementing a clear and stable system of principles and goals challenging. To demonstrate the MNR’s success in reaching its coalition this section will analyze three MNR reforms: universal suffrage, agrarian reform, and the nationalization of the mining industry. While there were five major reforms passed by the MNR, these three are mentioned in this essay because they affected the MNR’s coalition the most. While the other two reforms were socially effective, they impacted the country less than these three. However, it will also examine its failures within these policies, and the external forces that dragged the MNR to its demise in 1964.

Universal Suffrage

Before the revolution, Bolivia was a prime example of limited democracy. It allowed the population to vote; however, multiple regulations defined who could and could not vote. Bolivia

attached literacy and property requirements to voting; thus, the massive Indigenous population and a vast majority of the working-class population could not vote. Therefore, political participation was limited to the upper class and a small portion of the urban upper middle classes. Immediately after overthrowing the old order in Bolivia, the MNR sought to establish universal suffrage. On July 21, 1952, the party passed the Electoral Reform Law that eradicated the literacy and property requirements, extending the electorate from 200,000 to 1,600,000.³⁰ The law granted all citizens twenty-one years of age and older full participation in civil life; Bolivian citizens who were eighteen years of age and married could also vote. Active participation in civic life grew the greatest in the majority Indigenous population, thus, drastically expanding not only the electorate's size but also its racial diversity. However, Malloy argues that without necessary agrarian reform a hacienda-controlled peasant vote was still possible without drastic agrarian reform. Therefore, the policy by itself was not as successful or as revolutionary as previously conceived. Malloy writes, "the MNR was still, in the political dimension at least, very much part and parcel of the liberal world view."³¹ Ultimately, if the Electoral Reform Law had to stand alone it would have been considered insignificant and not radical, considering voting laws other Latin American countries had passed. However, in tandem with the agrarian reforms, the possibility to vote would reach peasant Indigenous populations.

Agrarian Reform

The MNR passed Agrarian Reform on August 2, 1953. The goal was to modernize the Bolivian agricultural system by eliminating haciendas and Indigenous ayllus. However, this was a more reactionary reform put in place by the MNR because peasants across the countryside had started taking matters into their own hands. Timo Schaefer posits in his article, "Engaging Modernity: The Political Making of Indigenous Movements in Bolivia and Ecuador," that,

Following the overthrow of the old regime, indigenous peasants took charge of their destiny by invading the land and driving away, in some cases, killing hacienda owners and overseers. The new regime endorsed the land take-over, organized the communities into a national peasant syndicate, and made the provision of health and education facilities in the communities a national priority. Indians were thus, for the first time, fully integrated into the Bolivian nation.³²

Therefore, the MNR simply followed suit with the peasantry by introducing the official reform in 1953. Essentially, this land reform was a redistribution of land to peasants. Large haciendas were broken up and dispersed among the Indigenous peasants who worked the land. The MNR compensated hacienda owners with bonds. The decree not only broke up these large haciendas but also abolished debt servitude. By 1962, ten million acres of land would be redistributed to over 126,000 families.³³

This reform was a step toward modernizing Bolivia's backward *latifundia* system. The *latifundia* system was a large piece of land that was owned by an individual and multiple workers worked the land for this individual. The goal was to break up these large pieces of land and distribute ownership of the land to the workers who previously worked them. The reform was monumental and revolutionary, and it drastically altered the structures of class and race relations in Bolivia; however, it was passed by the MNR to solidify rural Indigenous support. Lucero demonstrates the flip side of the MNR's agrarian reform by placing a culturalist lens on the historical situation. He argues that the MNR wanted to usher the Indigenous population into citizenship on its terms as workers, "If the Indian would enter this state, and be transformed into a

citizen, he would do so through the identities and idioms of miner, peasant, or worker.”³⁴ Lucero is not saying that these reforms did not offer political standing for Indigenous citizenship, but rather, he is formulating that by entering the state the way the MNR wanted, Indigenous culture was reduced to their relationship to the state. Ultimately, Schaefer and Lucero find common ground in their work. Schaefer writes, “the structure of their integration, however, was a class-based one, their access to the state went via their occupation as peasants, not their indigenous heritage, culture, and language.”³⁵

Nationalization of the Mining Industry

To combat the foreign imperialist leeches that had been sucking the wealth and prosperity from the Bolivian mining industry, the MNR passed reforms that would nationalize the three largest mines in Bolivia: Patino, Hochschild, and Aramayo mining enterprises. On October 31, 1952, Bolivia passed the Act of Economic Independence. Many Bolivians had believed that the nationalization of the mining industry would place the wealth and riches of the industry in the hands of the Bolivian population. This belief resonated with the right-leaning advocates in the MNR who wanted state control for profits and power. Conversely, the left-leaning MNR leaders pursued the decree because it would distribute economic, social, and political power. The nationalization of the mining industry left the MNR susceptible to external forces, especially because it was a massive attack against the imperialism of the United States. Cornelius Zondag explains just how revolutionary and populist this reform was in Bolivia, “the Nationalist Revolutionary Government was committed to a policy of drastic social change that was bound to shake the economic foundation of the nation. As a matter of fact, the nationalization of the mines and a most drastic land reform alone was sufficient to result in complete destruction of the existing order and, as such, to be extremely costly.”³⁶ The reform’s populist agenda destroyed the old order of oligarchic capitalism; however, as Zondag specifies, the nationalization of the mines would have drastic financial consequences.

The financial consequences were clear from the beginning. Despite urges from the left bloc of the MNR to nationalize the mining industry by confiscation and not compensation, the moderates behind Estenssoro believed that to avoid being labeled communist, they needed to provide compensation to the former mine owners. As Stephen Zunes mentions in his article, “The United States and Bolivia: The Taming of a Revolution, 1952-1957,” compensation was necessary because, “tin exports accounted for 70 percent of Bolivia’s foreign exchange earnings and 90 percent of the government’s revenue; the United States was the recipient of over half of Bolivia’s tin exports.”³⁷ Thus, to avoid a massive economic blunder, the MNR decided to provide compensation to the former owners of the mines. Confiscation of the mines would not only have resulted in the MNR being labeled a communist party but could have cut off connection to the United States who receives half of Bolivia’s tin exports. To the left-leaning bloc of the MNR this aspect of nationalization was a failure. They believed compensation resembled the old order’s acceptance of foreign imperialism. The workers believed that former owners who took advantage of their labor were not entitled to any form of payment. The MNR intended the nationalization of the mining industry to appease the left bloc backed by Lechin. However, because of economic incentives, the MNR decided to compensate former mine owners, going against what the mine workers in Bolivia saw as a just end to foreign imperialism.³⁸

These are only three of the five major reforms that composed the MNR’s populist platform; the other two reforms were the dissolution of the military that was to be replaced by a militia of

miners, peasants, and workers and the granting of workers' right to participate in the management of national enterprises. Moreover, the three reforms discussed above elucidate the MNR's populist agenda, and for the most part, these reforms were popular amongst "the people." These policies reflected the MNR's accomplishment of replacing the old establishment and initiating a new society founded for "the people." They also demonstrate the MNR's attempt to appease the broad coalition of social groups that supported the party in its formation and during the revolution. Universal suffrage, the nationalization of the mining industry, and agrarian reform were all successful populist policies passed by the MNR. However, these policies would also have consequences. The nationalization of the mining industry proved to be a financial burden and increased tensions with the United States.

External Forces: The United States

The MNR's populist and revolutionary vision was demonstrated in its passing of major reforms, particularly universal suffrage, agrarian reform, and the nationalization of the mining industry. These three populist reforms were an attempt to establish new principles and goals within the MNR government while shedding the previous regime's cloak of imperialist sympathies. However, the MNR's populist and idealist reforms would come to a halt when they faced external pressures from the United States. The nationalization of the mining industries would have far-reaching consequences that would shape and alter the MNR's policies. In Kevin Young's article, "Purging the Forces of Darkness: The United States, Monetary Stabilization, and the Containment of the Bolivian Revolution," he makes the claim, "From 1900 onward, the main concern of U.S. policymakers vis-a-vis Bolivia was ensuring access to the country's tin."³⁹ The MNR's nationalization of the mining industry directly impacted access, which deeply concerned United States policymakers.

However, as Young argues, the United States did not immediately crush the radical left-leaning MNR as it had with other revolutionary Latin American movements. The United States did the opposite; it supplied Bolivia with substantial economic aid. Young concludes that by 1956 the United States had supported the Bolivian government with more than sixty million dollars in aid, the highest per capita average in the world. United States action was guided by the belief that the MNR was a divided party. After the populist policy was passed by the MNR to appease the left faction that consisted of the miners and Indigenous peasantry, the middle-class mestizos sought to moderate the party by implementing new goals for the revolution. The United States was aware that Victor Paz Estensorro, the current leader of the MNR, was much more moderate than Juna Lechin who was the main voice behind the nationalization of the mining industry. Young states, "by 1953 U.S. officials understood the MNR's potential value as a counterweight to radicalism, and the need to prevent the MNR government's collapse was a major impetus behind the aid package begun that year."⁴⁰

The economic aid that the United States provided to Bolivia was not a message for further action toward social reform; rather, it was part of a scheme to place the MNR and its policies into the United States pocket. Bolivia had no choice but to accept aid. It was fiscally destroyed while the United States needed the MNR because other political parties in Bolivia tended to lean further left than the MNR. Stephen Zunes sheds light on America's attempt at taming the revolution in Bolivia. He discovered that U.S. involvement, "on closer examination, however, it seems to have been interventionism by other means, profoundly influencing the policies of the ruling party in Bolivia, manipulating the republic's balance of forces, and taking advantage of the economic

relationship between the two countries to achieve U.S. foreign-policy goals short of a direct overthrow of the government.”⁴¹ Thus, U.S. support and economic aid to Bolivia was a direct attempt to influence policy.

By 1953, it was evident that American aid was moderating the MNR. The forces that had placed the MNR in power were beginning to fade because of their dependency on that aid. Zunes solidifies this point in his article with a comment from Bedell Smith, an American ambassador to Bolivia. Smith states, “we believe that our aid is helping to rid the Bolivian Government of the pro-Communist influences now present.”⁴² Economic aid began to transition to tangible power as the United States sought to take more and more from the Bolivian government. As the Bolivian government became more dependent on American aid, the American government saw fit to adjust its entire economic system. Zunes reports that the US government sent an ambassador “at the behest of the International Monetary Fund to acquire direct administrative control of the economy. This gave the U.S. government unprecedented power to control the course of the Bolivian revolution.”⁴³ According to the ambassador this economic program, “meant the repudiation, at least tacitly, of virtually everything that the Revolutionary Government had done over the previous four years.”⁴⁴ Therefore, Bolivia’s dependence on American monetary aid proved the undoing of the MNR’s initial populist and reformist agenda. As American intervention grew, the MNR began to lose the left faction of its party. This bloc was a vital addition to the pre-revolution stage of the MNR but now had become seen as irrelevant and dangerous in the process of modernizing Bolivia’s economy.

In 1956, it was becoming clear that the MNR was losing the support of those who led it into the revolution. Lechin and the powerful left faction of the party were starting to lose trust in the MNR’s policy and direction. Malloy places Lechin’s anger in context while adding pieces directly from his diary; “he attacked the MNR leaders around Guevara as nothing more than middle-class thieves, seeking to enrich themselves from the revolution. At the same time, he reaffirmed his attachment to the Tesis de Pulacayo and called for a ‘permanent revolution.’ Finally, he warned the MNR that ‘the workers will be loyal to the party only so long as it remains the vanguard of them.’”⁴⁵ Labor eventually turned against the MNR’s Americanized sympathetic capitalist policies and its allegiance to the Kennedy Administration’s *US Alliance For Progress* in 1960. The MNR attempted to restructure labor and wages in the tin industry. As Victor Paz Estensorro sought reelection in 1964, it was evident that he had lost the support that had given him power in the Bolivian Revolution.⁴⁶

Estensorro ran for reelection in 1964, while he rigged the MNR vote for who would be their leader; he eventually won reelection because there was not a formidable party at the time to win an election against the MNR. However, Vice President Rene Barrientos Ortuno, with support from the military, led a coup against Estensorro. Young posits that it was Estensorro’s failure to align with his party’s left faction and his reliance on American influence that resulted in his and the MNR’s failure:

As the government laid off thousands of miners under a U.S.-backed plan to “rehabilitate” the nationalized mines, mobilized armed peasants to help repress protesting miners and students, and further empowered the Army. But Paz was ultimately unable to compensate for the loss of support from workers, students, and the left that his policies had engendered, and furthermore confronted intense factionalism and multiple defections within the MNR

leadership in the early sixties. His 1964 ouster by the Army elicited little immediate opposition.⁴⁷

Moreover, Estonsorro and the MNR were unable to implement a stable government that reflected the principles that their party was founded on. As a result, the MNR was overthrown in a military coup that saw the MNR disappear from power with little resistance or opposition. However, Estonsorro and the MNR would eventually seek reelection in 1985 and take power again in Bolivia.

PART FOUR: CONCLUSION

Judis's definition of populism is not rigid or definitive; rather, it is a broad and sweeping term that can be considered a way of thinking about politics. This allows populists some room to adjust the term to their needs and concerns. However, at the heart of the term is the concept of "the people" against "the establishment." Similarly, the term revolution is defined as overthrowing the status quo in exchange for new principles and goals. While populism does not always lead to revolutionary action, in this case, the populist rhetoric combined with the revolutionary accelerators and conditions in Bolivia set the stage for a populist revolution. Bolivia's revolutionary journey began in the wake of the Chaco War with a broad social coalition and ended with a military coup supported by the same coalition that the MNR advocated to support. How did the MNR's populist vision become a victim of the cyclical nature of revolution? It failed to build its political agenda for those who placed it in power. The party failed to reach the coalition that formed it, and with external forces, those failures were heightened.

By applying the historical tool, reductionism, which John Lewis Gaddis refers to as "the belief that you can best understand reality by breaking it up into its various parts,"⁴⁸ the author was able to break the paper into multiple sections to demonstrate how the MNR formed its broad coalition and populist agenda and, more importantly, where it failed to reach its populist vision for Bolivia. After defining the terms populism and revolution, it becomes clear that the party's first goal was to prove that the status quo under the Bolivian oligarchic state was defective. The three accelerators, the Chaco War, 1945 National Indigenous Congress, and the Thesis of Pulacayo sped up this process. The Chaco War led the middle class and Indigenous peasantry to realize that they had been pawns in a war meant to advance foreign imperialism. The Indigenous peasantry also came to realize how powerful they could become politically. The National Indigenous Congress was the first time that Indigenous tribes would be able to voice their concerns to the Bolivian government. While the National Congress was considered successful for the Indigenous tribes, Villaroel, the Bolivian leader was murdered by his enemies shortly after, and the Indigenous requests were quickly undone. The Thesis of Pulacayo was Trotskyist in ideology, but it also spelled out the populist concept of "the people" against "the establishment." The thesis unified the miners against the oligarchic state and their imperialist sympathies. These three accelerators revealed the broad coalition that would shape the MNR's populist agenda. From the Chaco War came the middle-class mestizos that the MNR leadership mostly consisted of, the Indigenous Congress gave the Indigenous peasantry a voice for the first time and a belief that they could use politics to help themselves, and the Thesis of Pulacayo gave the miners solidarity against the current government.

Behind miners, workers, and the Indigenous peasantry, the MNR party began the revolution and overthrew the oligarchic state. Immediately, the MNR enacted multiple reforms that represented the voices of their broad coalition. Universal suffrage awarded voting rights to

nearly eighty percent of the population, including the Indigenous peasantry. Agrarian reform destroyed the *latifundia* system and drastically altered race and class relations across Bolivia. However, Lucero revealed in his work the cultural consequences that Bolivia Indigenous people faced as a consequence of the reforms. The nationalization of the mining industry was the most significant reform because it signaled a complete turn from the old oligarchic order in Bolivia. However, mass amounts of debt and monetary needs led to a deepening dependence on American economic aid. As a result, the American government intervened against the MNR's populist agenda by financially supporting the government. As Bolivia's dependence deepened, the United States attempted to directly influence the MNR's policies and unhinge the left-faction of the MNR.

The party's populist agenda began to blur, and the MNR began to resemble the old order that it had overthrown in 1952. Thus, the MNR's broad coalition and support system began to falter, and its leaders chose to rely upon the American government instead of the Bolivian people who had put them in power. Overall, the MNR was a party created for "the people" to attack "the establishment"; however, over time the MNR became, by its own failures and external forces, "the establishment" and eventually turned its populist reforms into a moderate platform that aided from imperialism and resembled the old order.

NOTES

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4. Lewis, *Authoritarian Regimes in Latin America: Dictators, Despots, and Tyrants*, 123.
5. Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 17.
6. Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 17.
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9. Malloy, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution*, 4.
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13. Malloy, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution*, 73.
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17. James Kohl, "Peasant and Revolution in Bolivia, April 9, 1952 - August 2, 1953," *The Hispanic Historical Review* 58, no. 2 (1978): 240.
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19. Jose Antonio Lucero, *Struggles of Voice*, 59.
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21. Lucero, *Struggles of Voice*, 61.
22. Lucero, *Struggles of Voice*, 62.
23. "Thesis of Pulacayo," Section 2.2. [Theses of Pulacayo Link](#).
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25. Malloy, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution*, 285,286.
26. Malloy, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution*, 6.
27. Malloy, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution*, 4.
28. Eduardo Gamarra and James Malloy, "Bolivia: Revolution and Reaction," in Harvey Kline and Howard Wiarda eds., *Latin American Politics and Development* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 366.
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31. Malloy, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution*, 169.
32. Timo Schaefer, "Engaging Modernity: The Political Making of Indigenous Movements in Bolivia and Ecuador," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2009): 405,406.
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34. Lucero, *Struggles of Voice*, 64.
35. Schaefer, "Engaging Modernity," 406.
36. Cornelius Zondag, *The Bolivian Economy 1952-1965: The Revolution and Its Aftermath* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 56.
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43. Zunes, "The United States and Bolivia," 45.
44. Zunes, "The United States and Bolivia," 45.
45. Malloy, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution*, 375.
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