



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### The clamor for schools: Indigenous communities, the state, and the development in indigenous education in Bolivia, 1900-1952

Brienen, M.W.

**Publication date**  
2011

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Brienen, M. W. (2011). *The clamor for schools: Indigenous communities, the state, and the development in indigenous education in Bolivia, 1900-1952*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

#### **General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### **Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Conclusion

### The Dawn of the Revolution

The 1952 Bolivian National Revolution looms large in Bolivian history. So much so, that it has generally been viewed as the single most important event in the country's history, and that is certainly how many Bolivians still view it today. Indeed, until fairly recently, the Revolution all but dominated Bolivian historiography to the extent that even studies of earlier periods were framed within the context of the events of April 1952.<sup>1</sup> Of course, it truly was a watershed moment in Bolivian history, prompting a series of profound reforms and political changes that would definitively shape the country's development: the nationalization of the three great tin-mining corporations—Patiño Mines, Mauricio Hochschild SAMI, and the *Compagnie Aramayo de Mines en Bolivie*<sup>2</sup>—an agrarian reform second in scope only to its Mexican counterpart,<sup>3</sup> an end to the political exclusion of the indigenous majority, the establishment of the *Movimiento Nacionalista Boliviano* (MNR) as the dominant political party for many decades, and the rise to prominence of the labor movement.<sup>4</sup> The revolution also came with its own set of educational reforms, which are outside of the scope of this study. Like every other aspect of the revolution, they have been scrutinized far more extensively than any that came before them, and there is abundant material to look at for those who wish to know what became of the *núcleos* and *escuelas unitarias* that have been central to this work.<sup>5</sup>

As is typical of Bolivian history, even this moment has come under intense scrutiny, revealing that not everything was as it has been made out to be. The Bolivian

- 
1. For example, Klein, *Los orígenes*.
  2. Peñaloza, *Nueva historia*, pp. 229–329.
  3. For a comparison of the Mexican and Bolivian revolutions, see: Alan Knight, “The Domestic Dynamics of the Mexican and Bolivian Revolutions Compared.” In Merilee S. Grindle and Pilar Domingo (eds), *Proclaiming Revolution: Bolivia in Comparative Perspective*. London: Institute of Latin American Study, 2003, pp. 54–90.
  4. Klein, *Bolivia*, pp. 227–245.
  5. Contreras, “A Comparative Perspective,” pp. 260–268.

National Revolution has leant itself especially well to deconstruction and reinterpretation;<sup>6</sup> it was the spontaneous involvement of peasants and miners that transformed a failed palace coup into a popular revolution; the agrarian reform had neither been part of the MNR's political agenda, nor had it been foreseen that peasants in the valley of Cochabamba would start taking possession of *haciendas* and settling old scores with abusive *corregidores* and *hacendados* in a manner that belies the notion of a 'bloodless revolution';<sup>7</sup> the nationalization of the mines was ultimately a boon for party apparatchiks more than for the Bolivians who had demanded it.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, very little of what children in modern Bolivian schools are taught about the revolution is particularly factual. This, of course, has a lot to do with the fact that many of the best-known works about the Revolution—in Bolivia, in any case—were written by those directly involved in it: the common perception of what the revolution meant for Bolivian development remains a product of the interpretation of authors such as Porfirio Díaz Machicao, Luís Peñaloza, and Augusto Céspedes, none of whom were particularly uninterested observers.

This has been part and parcel of Bolivian historiographies: those individuals personally involved in historical events have actively shaped our understanding of them, and this has impacted how we view Bolivian development in very direct ways.<sup>9</sup> In that vein, it should be noted that our understanding of Warisata and its role in the development of the indigenous school has likewise been the product largely of Elizardo Pérez's autobiographical treatment of that institution, and indeed every work that has dealt with the school and its impact on Bolivian society leans so heavily on his interpretation that he still counts as the single most important source of information, which has inevitably led to a one-sided interpretation.<sup>10</sup> The difficulty in

---

6. Dunkerley, "The Origins of the Bolivian Revolution."

7. Klein, *Bolivia*, p. 234.

8. Klein, *Bolivia*, pp. 27–248.

9. In the same way, for example, that our understanding of the Federal War of 1898–1899 was shaped to a large extent by Bautista Saavedra's *El Ayllu*.

10. This is a fact that perpetually staggers me, given the nature of the book itself, which consists largely of two parts: the first part is a blatantly self-aggrandizing account of how, aided by his indigenous sidekick, he almost singlehandedly built Warisata and helped expand the resultant model across the republic, never too tired, weary, or sick and perpetually sacrificing himself for the greater good of his *iniecitos*. The second part of his book consists largely of an absolutely vicious exercise in character-assassination that is predicated on the notion that only Pérez himself could possibly know what was best for the indigenous population and that any resistance to him could be rooted only in a vile hatred of Indians. This book remains the most cited work when it comes to the history of Bolivian indigenous education, where whole

countering that one-sidedness has in part been the absence of decent alternative sources: the archives of the Ministry of Education, housed in the Archivo de La Paz (ALP) were still in jute sacks when I first went through them in 1997–1998. Worse still, they are terribly incomplete, with many of the records of that ministry having been sold off as scrap paper. There remains, however, enough material here and in other archives and accounts of the period to reconstruct the narrative of Warisata and indeed of the schools that came before it, as well as the developments that came after it, in a way that allows us to take a close look at the indigenous school without relying too heavily on any single source.<sup>11</sup>

Much in the same way that the political history of Bolivia has been dominated by the National Revolution and its spectacular nationalizations and agrarian reforms, so too has the history of indigenous education been dominated by the founding of Warisata and by Elizardo Pérez's account thereof. So completely has Warisata dominated the discourse on the development of indigenous education, that there remain whole swaths of history in this regard that have gone essentially without analysis, the exception being the Era of Liberal Party rule and its educational reforms, which comes in as a close second to Warisata in terms of scholarly attention. That leaves the nineteenth century, the period between Liberal Party rule and the founding of Warisata, and the period between Military Socialism and the National Revolution as virtual scholarly black holes.

As it turns out, those periods mattered, and not just a little. It is impossible to understand what Warisata was and how it shaped the course of things to come without understanding the context in which it first appeared. Likewise, we cannot look at the reforms of the Liberal Era as existing in some sort of vacuum. That has been the central purpose of this work: to create the historical context and to fill in some of the most significant gaps in the existing historiography, thereby allowing a more balanced understanding of the growth of Bolivian indigenous education and its importance in the broader context of Bolivian social and political development. What emerged from

---

passages are liberally and uncritically copied, and yet no-one seems ever to have noticed just how offensive it is.

11. The records of the United States missions, including the Bohan Commission, the Magruder Commission, the CEP, and SCIDE are, thankfully, quite complete, which has been helpful in reconstructing the second half of the 1940s, for which relatively little Bolivian archival material appears to have survived.

my investigation, however, went somewhat beyond an enhanced understanding of the indigenous schools, becoming an occasionally radical reinterpretation of some of the best-known institutions and moments in the development of indigenous education—especially, of course, the role and place of Warisata—to speak to broader themes regarding Bolivian society, especially regarding the dynamic of state-community interaction and exchange. What I have come to see in the development of the indigenous school are a number of general themes regarding the Bolivian state, the indigenous school, and the indigenous communities that have allowed me to reconsider how I view Bolivian society and its development.

### **The Weak State**

Throughout this work, one of the most important recurring themes has been the crippling weakness of the Bolivian state. I have argued, for example, that contrary to what has been the prevailing assumption about the lack of indigenous schooling at the end of the nineteenth century, this had not been the result of apathy or disinterest on the part of *criollo* elites driven to inaction by a shared disdain for the indigenous masses, but rather was the direct result of a simple, yet crushing, incapacity to act cogently and effectively on an otherwise very strong and consistent desire to use education as a means to transform Bolivian society. Likewise, the celebrated reforms of the era of Liberal Party rule accomplished virtually nothing for indigenous education, despite frequent claims that this was *where it all began*, and for precisely the same reasons. Beyond the creation of the nation's first surviving *escuela normal*, most of the efforts of the Liberals fell flat, especially when it came to the still urgent desire for a comprehensive system of indigenous education. Their efforts resulted in little more than a failed experiment with *escuelas ambulantes* and equally unsuccessful attempts to create *escuelas normales rurales*, which were necessary to produce the teachers' corps that all agreed would be essential to any project of national transformation. The state lacked the means to undertake these projects with any degree of success, and it lacked the ability to impose its will on rural elites who saw indigenous education for what it was: the beginning of the end for the rural status quo. Just as before, the absence of a state-sponsored indigenous educational system

was the result of the complete inability to create one and specifically was not the result of a lack of desire for one.

While significant progress was made in the development of an actual educational system from 1931 to 1952, thanks in large part to the activities of the DGEIC, the CNE, and the CEP and of course as a result of the invention of the *núcleo escolar campesino*,<sup>12</sup> the fundamental weakness of the state remained the most important obstacle to further progress. Thus, even by the early 1950s, the state remained incapable of providing the level of support that the educational system—and the *núcleos* in particular—required, and education remained the province of *maestros interinos*, many of whom had never finished elementary school. Even what little had been created to remedy the dire shortcomings was insufficient: teacher training programs admitted children—from fifteen years of age—with no more than five elementary grades completed, and hurried them through a three year curriculum in institutions that lacked a qualified faculty and suffered from the same shortages of materials, books, and supervision that plagued the system as a whole. These shortcomings were not, just as before, attributable to a lack of interest or desire, but were the unmistakable consequence of inadequate funding even at the elevated levels of the 1940s. The functionaries of the CEP understood this, as had the members of the CNE, both proclaiming that the fundamental issues facing education could not be resolved.<sup>13</sup> There was a general understanding that such shortcomings would necessarily remain in place and that the best they had to offer was to mitigate them as much as possible. This, of course, was precisely what had attracted attention to the nuclear model: it allowed for the expansion of a true system of education using an absolute minimum of resources, which could be cleverly doled out from the *escuela matriz* to the *escuelas seccionales*.

This weakness did not only affect the ability of the state to provision schools, but it inhibited their ability to build them at all, resulting in a reliance on indigenous communities both to create *escuelas unitarias* and to physically undertake the

---

12. Which, as I showed in chapter IV, was attributable more to the Ministry of Education itself than to Pérez, who nonetheless happily claims credit.

13. NACP RG229 OIAA RDIED, Field Operations, Bolivia, F2 Special Reports, 19 August 1946, Ernest Maes to Willfred Mauck: “The cooperative educational program’s contribution to normal education,” f. 16. ALP/ME vol. 527 “Correspondencia y varios, 1941,” 3 January 1941, Arturo Pinto Escalier: “Inauguración del año escolar.”

construction of the multiple *pabellones*,<sup>14</sup> of which Warisata and the other *núcleos* consisted.<sup>15</sup> Nor was the state able to peer particularly deeply into society; the capacity for the production of even remotely credible statistics was absent throughout the nineteenth century and the entire first half of the twentieth century. At no time during the period discussed in this work was the Ministry of Education able to state with any level of certainty or credibility just how many schools actually existed or where they were located. Even after the massive effort to implant the nuclear system on the *escuelas unitarias* of the highlands and valleys during the latter half of the 1940s, it remained impossible to determine how many more *escuelas unitarias* existed that had not yet been incorporated into the nuclear system. Nor indeed could the state, as an institution tasked with governance of Bolivian society, produce a consistent or dependable estimate of the total population of the country, much less of the proportion of the population that was literate or had access to schooling.

What this means is that even at the dawn of the National Revolution, the state was unable to determine just how great a problem existed in education. It was unable to determine whether its efforts over the preceding two decades had had any significant effect on society, on literacy rates, or on access to schooling. If it could not effectively establish the extent of the problem at hand, then how could it hope to resolve it? Part of the tragedy for historians now attempting to reconstruct the impact of schooling on Bolivian society, especially in the context of rural volatility prior to the National Revolution,<sup>16</sup> is the lack of credible statistics about the population from that period, which hampers our ability to take our analysis to the next level and to

- 
14. The infamous *Pabellón México* at Warisata being the most salient example. Construction started in the mid-1930s, but the school building was not finished until 1953 and only then with the financial aid of the SCIDE. Members of the CEP and SCIDE had nothing positive to say about the building, describing it as a monstrosity that exemplified waste and mismanagement: Willfred Mauck described it as “[...] ostentatious and dictatorial, designed to regiment the surrounding population through control of large land areas [...]” NACP RG229 OIAA RDIED, Field Operations, Bolivia, F2 Special Reports, 28 February 1949, Willfred Mauck: “Minutes of the Quito conference on rural education.” Porter Claxton described it as “[...] one of the bleakest, barest, coldest, most uncomfortable excuses for a school that I had ever seen.” NACP RG229 OIAA RDIED, Field Operations, Bolivia, F2 Special Reports, 23 August 1948, Porter Claxton to Willfred Mauck, “Disloyal Campaign.”
  15. Even throughout the 1940s, as I have shown in Chapter VI, the creation of new schools remained the province of indigenous communities.
  16. Gotkowitz offers the best and most complete analysis of rural unrest leading up to the National Revolution in her *A Revolution for Our Rights*. Also see Gotkowitz, “Revisiting the Rural Roots”

create a more accurate picture of the significance of the indigenous school and, above all, its effectiveness.

Of course, certain problems were clear and well-documented. Even in those schools that had been brought under government control through the *núcleos* could not offer a coherent educational experience, and they continued to depend on *interinos* because the *escuelas normales rurales* failed to produce a sufficient number of trained teachers (whose qualifications were dubious at best), and those who did graduate did not wish to work in rural areas. The Ministry of Education simply could not offer the level of compensation that would entice those with appropriate training to live a harsh life of perpetual sacrifice in the rural areas, where wages remained absurdly low and where virtually none of the comforts of modern life to which the school had taught them to aspire were available.

Moreover, what characterized the state's response to persistent issues resulting from terrible underfunding and statistical incapacity was a powerful tendency to engage in continuous reform as a means of remedying what ailed the educational system. One administration after another observed the failings of the educational system, recognized the importance of that system for the future of the nation-state, and heedlessly placed the blame for failure on whichever administration had come before, leading to an unnecessary and quite counterproductive reformatorrhoea,<sup>17</sup> which disallowed the constancy of administration that might have produced the desired results over time. Indeed, even when an institution such as the CNE recognized that the fundamental obstacle to educational development lay in the critically low level of funding and acted both accordingly and responsibly, it soon came under vicious attack for its supposed neglect and lack of visionary ambition, and its officials were smeared as enemies of the indigenous communities and their names have been venomously slandered in almost every publication even remotely related to indigenous education that has seen the light of day since.

One of the most interesting aspects of this tendency towards incessant reform when it comes to the indigenous school is that in spite of these constant bureaucratic and administrative changes, the underlying fundamentals of indigenous educational policy remained remarkably constant, undergoing a certain slow evolution in the goals

---

17. This has been the subject of a broader analysis in Brienens, "Interminable Revolution."



that politicians and intellectuals imagined for the indigenous school, regardless of the ability to implement such policies. From one administration to the next, however ideologically removed, the basic function of the indigenous school and indeed the critical importance attributed to it remained intact. Thus, while the Military Socialists get the credit for the initial expansion of the nuclear model, it was Daniel Salamanca's regime that had initially fostered and supported Warisata's creation; similarly, it was Tejada Sorzano's administration that invented the *núcleo escolar campesino* and began the work of replicating the original model in new locations.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it was the CNE that broadened the *núcleo's* social action and its ability to provide legal protection and healthcare to the communities served by these sprawling institutions.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, it was the CEP that continued the work begun by Alfredo Peñaranda and transformed the *núcleo* from an experiment into the basis of an actual system of indigenous education. From one administration to the next, there was no radical ideological reorientation of the schools and their purpose, only anger and frustration at the fact that these schools had not yet delivered on the promise of a 'New Indian,' resulting in the subsequent purging of those held responsible for this apparent obstruction of the national good.

The reality of the state's weakness, exacerbated by subsequent and ceaseless reformism, is tremendously important in determining how we view the development of the indigenous school and its role in Bolivian society. There has been a strong tendency among scholars to focus very narrowly on the narratives of aspiring educational reformers and on the discourse surrounding the need for indigenous education throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Common interpretations of what the indigenous school meant have been firmly rooted in the resulting narrative of an intellectual and political elite that regarded the school as the means to bring about the societal metamorphosis they regarded as essential to the emergence of a modern nation-state on the Bolivian Altiplano. Virtually all of what has been written about the stated goals of education is accurate, in that the intent of Bolivian statesmen was consistently something along the lines of assimilation or integration based on the preconceptions that western culture was not only better than indigenous culture, but that integration was absolutely necessary lest the indigenous be trampled underfoot

---

18. See Chapter IV.

19. See Chapter VI.

unprepared and thus risk obliteration in the face of the inexorable march of progress. The attitudes of Bolivian elites were indeed marked by vile racial and cultural prejudice and their conceptualization of indigenous education did indeed revolve around the notion that the school would provide the platform for a cultural makeover of the *indígena*, creating from this creature a modern citizen who could produce and consume and would participate in national society under the terms dictated by western cultural precepts.

What I have argued throughout this work, however, is that these ideals were never more than that, and that the capacity of the state to act on such prejudicial notions and to construct the kind of educational system that would bring about such transformative change was eternally, painfully, and irremediably absent. The state could not construct a system of education to implement societal transformation or obliterate indigenous culture and tradition; it was unable to effect much change in those areas at all. It was not capable of modernization and westernization, no matter how much *criollo* elites may have desired it.

Thus while urban elites may have dreamt of happy, literate masses of peasants speaking Spanish and gladly laying down their lives for the fatherland while toiling on productive commercial farms that generated significant export capacity, the reality even in the best of cases—namely where some schooling was available—was a type of education that could not conceivably, even in the very best case scenario, transform an Aymara-speaking child of a *colono* or *comunero* into the type of ‘New Indian’ that such elites desired. Indeed, even at the end of the period explored in this work, at the very apex of the development of the nuclear system and with the financial assistance of the CEP, two to four years of primary school at the hands of a barely literate teacher with no training was not enough to supplant Quechua or Aymara, to unlearn traditional methods of farming, change dress and behavior, or instill a broad sense of patriotic fervor. The very design of the system absolutely prevented a cultural transformation of the communities in which these schools operated.

## Indigenous Communities

Perhaps the most surprising and unexpected result of my analysis of the origins and development of the indigenous school has been the realization that the rise of the schools themselves, all the way to the National Revolution itself, could be attributed to the indigenous communities, including those on the *haciendas*, and that these communities were able to accomplish what the state could not. The evidence I have presented indicates quite clearly that the state did not actively engage in the construction of schools for the indigenous majority, due to fiscal constraints and the inability to penetrate the rural areas in the face of stiff opposition by rural elites. As a result, a collection of *escuelas unitarias* spread slowly but surely through the highlands and valleys, adding to an already anarchical educational system over which the Ministry of Education exerted no effective control. Having established by law that these schools would gain official recognition and that the state would provision them and include them in officially sanctioned inspections and visitations, added yet another layer of complexity that was far beyond the ability of the state to absorb or implement.

The infrastructure to provide inspection and supervision was absent, and indeed the state could not produce an accurate tally of these schools, even though they officially counted as state-run operations.<sup>20</sup> Even in the 1940s, Max Bairon's *brigadas culturales* and the CEP's *servicio cultural rural* reported back on schools that were thought to have existed but did not, as well as on schools that existed but had been hitherto unknown to the Ministry. The problem, of course, was that the authorizations granted to these *escuelas unitarias* were never properly tallied, and no attempt was made in the 1910s, 1920s, or 1930s to keep track of them. Indeed, the very status of these schools remained murky until they were finally nuclearized in the 1930s and 1940s: even on the eve of the founding of Warisata, there was no unified terminology to refer to them—*escuelas unitarias*, *escuelas indigenales*, *escuelas particulares*, *escuelas fiscales*, *escuelas rurales*: any of these terms could be applied. They continued to exist in a netherworld where they were both official and unofficial, where they were government institutions even though the state exercised no control over them, and where they belonged within the Ministry's bureaucratic machinery but

---

20. In theory only, of course. See Chapter III.

were not assigned to any of the *directoratos* until the late 1920s, meaning that no one in particular was actually responsible for them.

As many of the records of the Ministry of Education dating from this period have been lost, it is in fact impossible that we will ever be able to tally the number of schools founded by indigenous communities with official authorization. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that all indigenous *escuelas unitarias* would have requested such authorization, knowing as many of them must have done that the promised materials and supervision would never materialize. Until the founding of Warisata and the creation of the nuclear system, there would have been relatively little benefit to official authorization, since it came with obligations but no tangible rewards. Salaries were left unpaid, methodologies never were specified, inspectors did not visit, and the *almacenes escolares* ignored them, since they lacked books, desks, and chairs, even for the urban schools.

Regardless of their shadowy status and the abysmal conditions in which they operated, they do illustrate one critically important fact: the indigenous communities were clamoring for schools. Communities around the republic embraced education with an uncontested vigor, taking the Ministry of Education by surprise, and within a few decades, these schools far outnumbered any others within the educational system. We can say this with certainty even without knowing exactly how many there were at any one point, given that we know that the *escuelas seccionales* of the nuclear system were all converted *escuelas unitarias* and that by 1950 there were over a thousand of them. The official statistics for 1948 show 898 *escuelas seccionales* in the country out of a total of 1,960 schools, including secondary and higher education.<sup>21</sup> Just to drive the point home: by the mid-1940s, roughly half of all schools in Bolivia had been built by the blood, sweat, and tears of the indigenous population itself, and until the arrival of the *núcleos* they had existed and operated without support of any quantifiable kind. So important had the construction of schools been, and so bereft were they of tangible official support, that two of the first indigenous activist organizations were created precisely for this goal: the *Sociedad República del Collasuyo* and the *Centro Educativo de Aborígenes 'Bartolomé de las Casas.'* It was a truly remarkable accomplishment, and the most striking thing about this very fact is

---

21. Of course, there were only 29 secondary schools in all in the republic in that year. ALP/ME vol. 539 "Correspondencia y varios, 1947," 23 June 47: "Sección estadística informa."

that this massive indigenous enterprise has barely been mentioned in the existing literature.

One lesson to be learnt from this is that we know how the indigenous communities felt on the whole about education:

Fuerza es hacer resaltar el febril entusiasmo que anima a la clase indígena en esas comunidades, haciéndonos ver que tienen una alta comprensión de los beneficios que pueden recibirse en las escuelas, por hoy sostenidas por toda ella, sin que haya un solo individuo que se risista [sic] a contribuir con su óbolo, por insignificante que sea, al fomento de la educación de esos seres inocentes, para lo que no escatiman esfuerzos y sacrificios.<sup>22</sup>

They clamored for it, as I have shown, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and when progress proved not to be forthcoming, they took action on their own behalf. The extent of that action was tremendous, although its effects are difficult to ascertain due to a lack of credible statistics. The arrival of the *núcleos* was greeted with a similar enthusiasm, as is readily apparent from the descriptions entered into the public record by directors of the *núcleos* and the occasional inspector.

We should not be surprised at this enthusiasm, given what the *núcleos* represented. For decades, the communities had complained about the absence of schools and about the abuse they suffered at the hands of landlords who threatened and beat teachers and parents alike: “queremos la instrucción de los niños aborígenes para que no sufran lo que nosotros sufrimos.”<sup>23</sup> As driven as they were by a desire for access to education, the prospect of the improved teaching methods, improved access to teaching and learning materials, and the added benefits of healthcare and legal protection brought precisely those services to the communities that they had demanded for so long. The quality of these services may have been far below any standard we would find acceptable, but it certainly constituted an improvement over the *escuelas unitarias*, which were consistently depicted as lacking literally everything.

---

22. “It is difficult to overstate the enthusiasm that moves the indigenous class in these communities, showing us the full understanding they have of the benefits to be obtained in the schools, which today are all supported by them, without a single individual who refuses to donate his contribution, however small, for which they spare neither effort nor sacrifice.” ALP/ME “CNE, Vocalía de Educación Indígena y Rural, Procesos, 1941,” #20/41, 8 February 1941, Visitador de la provincial de Omasuyos to Vocal de educación indígena y rural: “Visitas realizadas.”

23. “We want education for our children so that they will not suffer as we suffer.” As quoted in Soria, “Los caciques-apoderados,” p. 59.

## Cultural Conflict

There are several lessons to be drawn from this reinterpretation of the development of indigenous education in Bolivia. The first and, in my mind, most important one is that the prevailing theme in the existing scholarship that the indigenous school was a locus of inter-ethnic cultural conflict is clearly false. Many scholars have assumed the existence of such a struggle based on both the racially charged discourse of education prevalent in debates surrounding the fate of the nation-state as they took place between intellectuals, politicians, and educational reformers, and the rhetoric of resistance to exploitation and abuse prevalent in the communities seeking schools for themselves. Given the diametric opposition between these positions, it is not difficult to understand how the image of a conflict between *escuelas oficiales* and pro-indigenous schools, as Warisata is generally characterized, has taken hold of the popular imagination.

At issue here is, as I have shown in perhaps excruciating detail, that the *escuela oficial* was a mythical creature, one that never existed. At least, that is, until the founding of Warisata itself. The state simply had neither the manpower nor the resources to translate its vision of a transformational educational experience into practical reality. In effect, it lacked the resources to build schools in indigenous communities at all. The schools that did exist and would make up the burgeoning nuclear system from 1931 onwards were the product of indigenous enterprise. Manned by community members, bereft of support, and far enough removed from the state that the latter did not necessarily know that they even existed, it is difficult indeed to imagine these institutions as wicked tools to further some goal of cultural liquidation. These schools were not capable of wreaking the kind of havoc of which they are accused each and every time Warisata is described as the answer to a supposed evil plot for cultural domination, and in effect such accusations sting all the more given the sacrifices made and obstacles overcome by the community members who shed actual blood to create them. To dismiss these schools as tools of the state in a bid to assimilate the indigenous population is to heap insult upon injury, and is based on a complete misunderstanding of where these schools came from, who built

them, and who supported them. The indigenous schools could not by any stretch of the imagination have served such a nefarious purpose.

What this means is that these schools cannot have been the sources of inter-cultural conflict that they have been made out to be. Prior to Warisata, there was no *escuela oficial* in indigenous education and no state presence in education for the indigenous communities to resist. No means had been developed for the state to impose its anti-cultural agenda, and thus there was no such cultural imposition to withstand. If anything, what the schools created was a place where dialogue between communities and the state became possible, due to the fact that the teacher of the school had the standing to intervene on behalf of the community with the Ministry of Education. In its ability to act as a conduit for an exchange between the state and the communities, the *escuelas unitarias* created by the communities became an opportunity for both sides to engage in a more direct conversation, whereas such interaction had prior to then always been filtered through local authorities, whose interests were not perfectly aligned with either the state or the communities and whom we know were less than fully cooperative in this regard.<sup>24</sup> The *núcleos* expanded on this critical function of the school by going far beyond the educational mission of the *núcleo* and introducing a set of services that had never before been available in the rural areas, while also insulating the teachers of the *escuelas seccionales* from the kinds of abuse still common in *escuelas unitarias* that lacked the protection of a large state institution in their midst. While we may question the quality of education offered by these institutions, there can be no such doubt about the immediate and far-reaching benefit of the vaccination campaigns undertaken by them; tens of thousands were vaccinated against mankind's most deadly plague—smallpox—which had been fundamentally responsible for the demographic collapse following the arrival of Europeans in the New World.<sup>25</sup>

This should give us pause to reconsider the many assumptions about the roles played by the peasants and the elites in the context of Bolivian history, which has

---

24. See Chapters IV and V.

25. B.H. Schlicher van Bath, *Indianen en Spanjaarden: Een ontmoeting tussen twee werelden, Latijns Amerika 1500–1800*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1989, pp. 87–110.

been marked disproportionately by narratives of heroes and villains.<sup>26</sup> Rather than victims of a nefarious plot of ‘education for extinction,’<sup>27</sup> it had been the indigenous communities themselves who had taken on the challenge of bringing education into their midst. Not only does this directly contradict the dominant interpretation of the ultimate goal of education itself, but it also reverses the roles assigned to the players in this drama: the indigenous communities were not the victims, but the agents. Their embrace of the schools cannot, therefore, be characterized as *resistance*, since that term implies a reaction to an action taken by a second party—in this case, the state—and since this development was the result of the inaction of that party, this process must be described as *agency* on the part of the communities, a principle very clearly borne out by the supporting role of the CEABC and the SRC in spreading the *escuelas unitarias* throughout the valleys and highlands.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, I would argue that the insistence on looking at the indigenous response to education as rooted in ‘resistance’ is too closely related to outmoded models of indigenous society that presuppose a tendency to resist change of any kind, and therefore depict indigenous communities as both reactionary and passive. What the development of the indigenous school in Bolivia very clearly shows is that the communities were anything but that; they engaged in a very proactive pursuit of a modern resource (education) for very clear and well-articulated reasons that, as Marta Irurozqui has pointed out, are indicative more of a desire to participate in modern society than to remain isolated from it.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, if we choose to take the language employed by indigenous leaders at face value—rather than assuming that they cleverly disguised their true meaning behind words chosen to appease the *criollo* upper classes<sup>30</sup>—then it becomes clear that what they hoped to achieve was participation, not separation. This indicates a sophistication far beyond that of mere resistance: a refusal, perhaps, to submit to the conditions imposed by *criollo* and *mestizo* elites while still seeking to become part of and participate in the construction

---

26. For example, the hero Pérez against the villain Donoso; the hero Busch against the villain Peñaranda; the heroic MNR against the villainous mining companies; the heroic indigenous communities against a villainous state; and so on and so forth.

27. As in the United States. See: Wallace, *Education for Extinction* and Hoxie, *A Final Promise*.

28. Though especially in the Department of La Paz. ALP/ME vol. 539 “Correspondencia y varios, 1947,” 23 June 47: “Sección estadística informa.”

29. Irurozqui, “The sound of the Patutos,” p. 100.

30. Which has been the position taken by Roberto Choque and Tristan Platt.



of the nation-state.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it would appear that indigenous leaders and communities had a deep respect for the notion of the state and the promise it held for social justice, seeking at every turn to use legitimate means to become included.

The story that the history of indigenous education tells is that rather than being perpetually victimized and helpless, the communities tired of waiting for the state to provide what it could not deliver and built for themselves the schools they desired for their children. They did this, even on the *haciendas*, where landlords rightly feared that education, even mere literacy, would alter the status quo and thus responded with exceptional violence. Of course, not all the wheels of this machinery of oppression cooperated, and there are certainly some *prefectos* (departmental governor) and *corregidores* who actively supported education and the schools built by the communities. It is too easy to look at the long-established villain as a monolith of greed, prejudice, and selfishness. What this tells us, of course, is that even in these remote areas where outside assistance was not forthcoming and the consequences could be dire, indigenous communities insisted on their right to education and pushed back in still impressive numbers: exact figures will never be established, but we know such schools were built under adverse conditions and they were built in the hundreds. The thirst for schooling was greater than the fear of landlords.

By the same token, what are we to make of the involvement of the Americans in the second half of the 1940s? Was it, as Larson has objected, a “[...] vehicle through which the USA could impose a program of rural development and cultural control [...]”<sup>32</sup> as part of some disreputable imperialist project? If anything, the limitations that made it impossible for the Bolivian state to use the indigenous schools as a vehicle for cultural transformation applied in equal measure to the Americans who came and went between 1944 and 1956. They could not remedy the fundamental shortcomings of the Bolivian educational system, and in that sense their project of cultural domination was doomed from the start. They did, however, manage to turn the beginnings of an educational system into an actual one, in the process providing much needed services in healthcare that would save many lives. In effect, it is perhaps too easy to poke fun at the quirkiness of the *Guía didáctica* they developed, without

---

31. That has been the focus of Marta Irurozqui’s analyses in Irurozqui, “The Sound of the Patutos” and Irurozqui, “La ciudadanía clandestina.”

32. Larson, “Capturing Indian Bodies,” p. 202.

acknowledging that they at least developed one where no one else had. Likewise, it is easy to look at their obsession with hygiene and cleanliness as indicative of racially motivated disdain for their indigenous charges without acknowledging that the greatest advances in average life expectancy have come from increased attention to hygiene, safe drinking water, and an education that addresses some of the most common causes for disease and infection.

It's a rather dismissive stance that little considers the reasons people like Ernest Maes and Arthur Harris involved themselves in the lives of indigenous children, teachers, and parents in Bolivia. Are we really to assume that these people meant to bring harm? That is certainly not obvious from the tenor of the writings they left behind, describing their daily encounters with dire poverty, malnutrition, and disease. The members of the Magruder Commission were so shocked by what they found in the very mines that would help bring about victory over Nazism, that they were able to make an apparently convincing argument, at a time of a disastrous and expensive war, regarding the need to financially support the improvement of working conditions and living conditions for indigenous people in far-off and largely unknown Bolivia, including access to education and healthcare. These men and women from the United States may have been misguided in their cultural and racial prejudices, but they at least attempted to improve the lives of some of the poorest and most oppressed people in the Americas. It is misanthropic not to recognize compassion when it is so blatant.

Ultimately, did these hundreds of schools, ostensibly aimed at the deculturation of the indigenous majority, serve the best interests of that majority? The indigenous communities themselves certainly thought so. *Comunarios* and *colonos* alike offered their blood, sweat, and tears and often faced violent repression in order to allow their children to go to school. They understood full-well the role that isolation and ignorance of the law played in their continuing suffering, and it was for this reason that they so enthusiastically built schools: to break away from isolation, to gain access to the law, to obtain the tools for the defense of property and self against powerful elites who exploited them for personal gain.

What does this tell us about our understanding of the indigenous communities? Very clearly, they were not quite as powerless as they are often understood to be. They are still depicted as the perpetual victims of western expansion, defenseless in the face of historical and cultural forces that would come to obliterate them. Even today, the indigenous peoples of the Andean region are described as ‘endangered peoples,’ in a judgment eerily reminiscent of that of the census-takers who had predicted the imminent disappearance of the Indian from the Bolivian landscape as a result of natural processes around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> Fears of a necessarily destructive westernization are as strong today as they have ever been. Yet, when we visit the once white city of La Paz, we now encounter an indigenous metropolis the likes of which the world has not seen since the arrival of Cortés and Pizarro. The city has been subsumed by indigenous cultural reconquest, just as southern sections of the United States are slowly being taken back by individuals of largely indigenous extraction hailing from neighboring Mexico. We overestimate the power of western culture to overtake anything and everything it encounters. We similarly underestimate the ability of indigenous culture not only to resist, but to adapt.

---

33. Martinez, “La peur blanche,” p. 272.