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JUST LIKE BOLIVIA

Structural Change and Political Disintegration in the West¹

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As their roots in civil society shrivel, the political parties of the West will disintegrate from the bottom up.

Abstract

The rise of outsider, populist, and nativist politicians across the West is no coincidence, nor a “sign of the times”. It is symptomatic of political party systems disintegrating from the bottom up, as structural changes in the economy and society unmoor them from the major social cleavages that defined political contestation throughout the twentieth century. Predicting how the process will unfold is difficult. But we can open an analytical window into the future by examining the experience of Bolivia, where politics was much less institutionalized than the West, allowing disintegration and realignment to happen much earlier and faster. A first lesson is that left/worker vs. right/capital politics is probably doomed in societies where industrial workers as a self-conscious group have dwindled to a small fraction of the workforce. What will replace it? The current front-runner is the politics of identity, anchored in social cleavages of ethnicity, religion, language, and place. This is a danger not just for affected societies, but for democracy as an ideal, as identity politics revolves much more than class politics around exclusionary categories and zero-sum games. In the UK and Europe, realignment would likely be triggered by Brexit, and the (partial) collapse of the Eurozone. Lastly, while Evo Morales is an experienced politician with deep roots in the social organizations that now define Bolivian politics, Donald Trump is a self-created, top-down, ultimately directionless triumph of social media. Morales transformed Bolivia. Trump will likely destroy much but build little.

Keywords: Political parties, Party system collapse, Social cleavages, Identity politics, Political realignment, Bolivia, the West

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Political Disintegration

The decline of mainstream political parties, and the resurgence of populism, have been evident across Europe, the UK and US for some time now. As the phenomenon grows, it has become clear that it is not limited to certain charismatic leaders, like Geert Wilders in Holland, or particular policy issues, like immigration. As Hooghe and Marks (forthcoming) demonstrate, something far bigger and deeper is at work. Witness the collapse of Britain's Labour party, a highly institutionalized, century-old organization that governed the nation during the 1920s, 1940s, 1960s, 1970s, and, finally, between 1997-2010. The rapid decline of France's center-right and Socialist parties (Chrisafis 2017, Perrineau 2017) is another example. The current upheaval on both sides of American politics is a third (Jones 2017, Seitz-Wald 2017).

Throughout the West, not just particular parties but entire party systems, defined to varying degrees by left-right, worker-capitalist ideological and partisan divisions, are losing their relevance. Having dominated the 20th century, presiding over enormous social and economic change, these systems are suddenly beginning to disintegrate. Interestingly, in many countries the process seems most intense at the grass-roots level. Well-prepared, experienced leaders are unable to mobilize traditional coalitions of voters. This allows established parties – even entire countries – to fall into the hands of charismatics and extremists. What's causing the collapse? Is it somehow tied to deeper changes going on in society? What's likely to come next?

For a process this new and complex, it's difficult to predict where things will go. But we can open an analytical window into the future by examining the experience of Bolivia. *Bolivia?* I can hear readers think. Yes, Bolivia. Precisely because it's one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, Bolivia's politics were never as institutionalized, nor its parties as strong,

as those of richer, more developed countries (Mainwaring and Scully 1995). But it has suffered many of the same economic shocks, technological disruptions, and social and environmental changes as far more developed countries. Which is why the disintegration of its political system began earlier, and proceeded faster, than elsewhere. Adjusting heavily for context, Bolivia offers interesting insights into how political disintegration works, and clues about where it may be going.

Party-System Collapse in Bolivia³

During the second half of the 20th century, Bolivia's political party system was a surprisingly robust component of a famously fragile democracy. Why, early in the 21st century, did it suddenly collapse, its strongest parties vanishing into a void, to be replaced by the gigantic figure of Evo Morales and his comparatively loose *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS)? To understand political collapse and the birth of a new system, we must first understand how the old system worked at its peak.

Although Bolivia suffered 190+ coups⁴ in its first 190 years of independence (Dunkerley 1984, Klein 1992), from 1953 onwards its politics was characterized by a party system arrayed roughly along a left-right, labor/peasant-vs.-capital axis typical of the twentieth century, which was remarkably stable (Centellas 2009, Sabatini 2003). So dominant was this system that the same parties – indeed the same individuals – survived coups, civil disturbances, guerrilla

³ A fuller analysis of the collapse of Bolivia's political party system is provided in Faguet, J.P. 2016. "[Revolution from Below: The Rise of Local Politics and the Fall of Bolivia's Party System.](#)" LSE ID Working Paper no. 17-180.

⁴ At various points in its history, during periods of chronic instability, Bolivia suffered multiple palace coups in a single day. Many of these "governments" were so ephemeral that counting them is difficult. Experts disagree on the total number.

insurgency, hyperinflation and economic meltdown, and striking social change – returning again and again to take up the reins of power. Why did it suddenly, unexpectedly collapse in 2003?

Bolivia's 1952-53 revolution overturned an oligarchic political system, extended full citizenship rights and education to the indigenous majority, quintupled the size of the electorate, broke up the *haciendas*, distributed land to the highland peasantry, and nationalized mines and other "commanding heights" of the economy. Following this vast social and economic upheaval, national politics coalesced around the MNR (*Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario*) – a multiclass coalition party that straddled the center, representing peasant and labor unions, small and medium businessmen, and the professional intelligentsia; the ADN (*Acción Democrática Nacionalista*) on the right, representing landowners, professionals and large businesses; and the MIR (*Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria*) and MBL (*Movimiento Bolivia Libre*) on the left, advocating for worker and peasant interests (Bonifaz 2016, Dunkerley 1984, Klein 1992, Levitsky 2001). Together, they reliably captured 60-75% of the national vote during the 1980s and 1990s.

The extent of political dominance by a few actors is hard to overstate. Consider table 1. The leader of the 1952 revolution, and of the MNR, was Victor Paz Estenssoro. The 1956 election brought his close ally, Hernán Siles Zuazo, to power, who in 1960 returned the presidency to Paz Estenssoro. Paz Estenssoro was re-elected in 1964, but soon overthrown by a military coup. Omitting de facto regimes, the electoral sequence is:

Table 1: Elected Presidents of Bolivia

Year	Party*	President
1952	MNR	Victor Paz Estenssoro
1956	MNR	Hernán Siles Zuazo
1960	MNR	Victor Paz Estenssoro
1964	MNR	Victor Paz Estenssoro
⋮	(A succession of military regimes)	
1982	MNRI-MIR§	Hernán Siles Zuazo
1985	MNR	Victor Paz Estenssoro
1989	MIR	Jaime Paz Zamora
1993	MNR	Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada
1997	ADN-MIR	Hugo Banzer
2002	MNR	Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada

*Governing party, or lead party(s) of a governing coalition.

§The MNRI was a leftist offshoot of the main MNR.

Data source: Nohlen 2005

The military regimes that ruled Bolivia between 1964-1982 tried on several occasions to remake its politics by outlawing established parties and sponsoring new movements. Their abject failure is evident in the lower half of the table, which shows the same parties – indeed the same individuals – returning to power once democracy is restored.

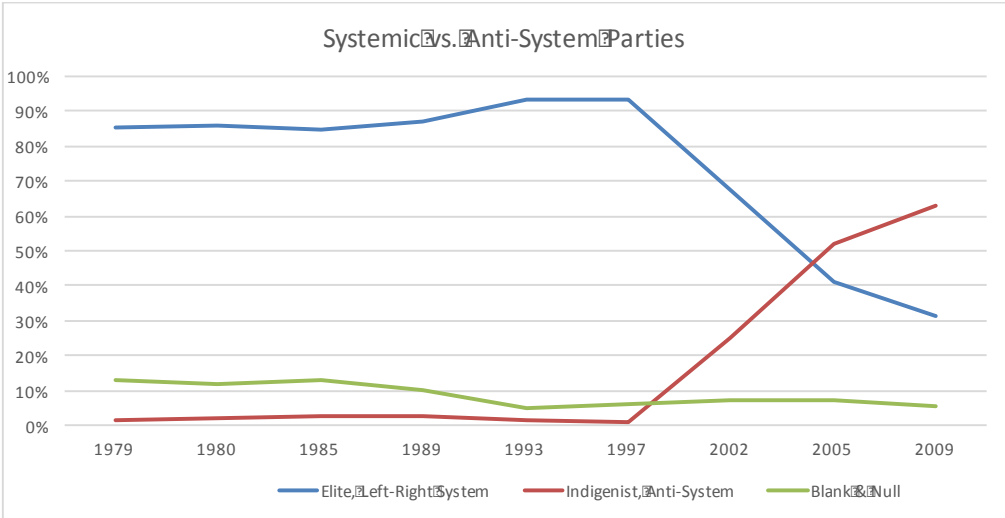
Even this list understates the elite’s hold on power. For example, Paz Zamora served as Siles’ vice-president before becoming president; likewise, Sánchez de Lozada had been Paz Estenssoro’s minister of planning; and Banzer – dictator during the 1970s – headed the coalition that sustained Paz Zamora in power. All were educated, “white” Bolivians from the wealthy neighborhoods of four cities.

In this context, the speed and scale of the system’s collapse were extraordinary. In 2005 the ADN, MBL, and MIR were unable to field candidates for the general election, and the MNR won only six percent of the vote; by 2009 it too had disappeared. In the 2010 local elections,

the MNR polled zero votes in 323 of 337 municipalities, the ADN did worse. The MIR and MBL had already ceased to exist.

Where did their votes go? In their heyday, established parties were surrounded by a number of tiny anti-system parties, by which I mean groups advocating positions perpendicular to the dominant axis of competition. They denounced capitalism, urban elites, and the “foreign, capitalist ideologies” of both left and right, promoting instead indigenous culture, indigenous forms of social organization, and indigenous rights (Choque 2014, Van Cott 2005 & 2009). They never reaped more than 3% of the national vote, and in practical terms represented no more than a colorful appendage to a system that appeared dominant and stable. Figure 2 illustrates this, grouping Bolivia’s parties as Established, left-right parties vs. Anti-system, indigenist parties. We see the dominance of parties arrayed along a left-right axis in Bolivia through the 1990s, followed by its collapse around 2002.

Figure 2: Elite, Left-Right System vs. Indigenist, Anti-System Parties, Bolivia: 1979-2009



Data source: Organo Electoral Plurinacional-Tribunal Supremo Electoral

Why did the system suddenly collapse? The proximate cause was a proposed pipeline to Chile, the old enemy, which sparked large protests in 2003. These were violently put down by security forces, leading to the resignation and flight of President Sánchez de Lozada. Without doubt, the massacre of protestors by the state caused a severe political crisis. But in a country where social mobilization is high and protests common, it is simply not credible that a dispute over a gas pipeline killed off not just a presidency and his government – both understandable – but Bolivia’s political parties, party system, and the dominant axis of political competition. All of these had survived far worse. Most foreign observers blame fiscal shocks and poor economic performance (Sachs 2003). But those are not credible culprits either. Although the fiscal deficit spiked upward in 2002, this was due to a sharp fall in revenues, not expenditures, which actually rose. Poor economic performance is even less believable. The economy had grown continuously since 1986. A system that survived hyperinflation two decades earlier was not toppled by 2.7 percent growth.⁵

Cleavage Theory

Explaining political change of this magnitude requires a cause that is consequential, as distinct from a current event. A far better candidate connects the characteristics of political competition and the party system to deep factors that define a society. This is “cleavage theory”, one of the most important contributions of comparative politics. It originates in a seminal work by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), who seek to understand how parties position and re-position themselves in response to changing voter sentiment. They reject the fluid,

⁵ Yearly GDP growth data available at:
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=BO>

continuous adjustments assumed by the Downsian (1957) market-like mechanism, proposing instead that parties and party systems emerge in response to underlying socio-political cleavages in society. There is ideological and organizational “stickiness” in the process, and political cleavages can become “frozen” even as underlying social characteristics change. Hence adjustment, when it happens, is potentially more dramatic than in a Downsian world (Hooghe and Marks, forthcoming).

What are these cleavages? In Western Europe, according to Lipset and Rokkan, two overarching historical processes produced four key cleavages. The national revolution produced cleavages between: (i) centralizing nation-builders vs. distinct communities (ethnically/religiously/linguistically) in the periphery, and (ii) between the central state vs. the supranational Roman Catholic Church. And the industrial revolution produced: (iii) an urban/industrial vs. rural/landholder cleavage, and later (iv) a workers vs. owners cleavage. Any society will contain additional cleavages of varying depth and importance. But in Western Europe, these are the key conflicts that define political competition.

Most of Europe’s political parties were formed around these cleavages. At the core of these parties were self-conscious groups that express the enduring identities of their members, as distinct from their transient opinions or occupations. These collective identities gave rise to grass-roots movements and hierarchical organizations that prosecuted conflicts between peripheral communities and the nation-state, between secularists and the Church, and eventually between workers and capitalists. Conflicts were enduring and often acrimonious because the social cleavages in which they were anchored were deep, and also because the

groups doing combat were strong, bound by a solidarity born of lived experience (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

Collapse and Rebirth

Viewed in this light, the collapse of Bolivia's politics in 2003 was not caused by a president's unpopularity or even a civil uprising, but rather by something far deeper and longer in the making. It was a political earthquake, a tectonic shift that replaced the primary axis of political competition – which described a society Bolivia patently was not – with a new axis better matched to its real, major social cleavage. Political competition over workers vs. capitalists never made sense in an underdeveloped country that lacked both. Competing over ethnicity and cultural identity made much more sense in a society riven by both.

The revolutionaries of 1952-53 had bequeathed the country with a political ideology and discourse that mimicked the more developed countries of the West. This was perhaps aspirational, and certainly easy to defend at the time. But it was the wrong politics for a poor, agrarian society. Revolutionaries' new electoral institutions established high barriers to entry around Bolivia's new politics, effectively "freezing" this wrong cleavage in place for decades. What catalyzed change? Increasing urbanization from the 1970s onwards activated the dormant cultural cleavage, as more and more Bolivians felt the primacy of identity over class. But it was another institutional change – Bolivia's radical decentralization in 1994 – that provided the trigger, not the cause, by which a cultural cleavage could become political.

Before 1994, Bolivia was a highly centralized country where politics was legally and financially restricted to the national level. By creating hundreds of new municipalities, decentralization generated hundreds of spaces of local politics that had not previously existed

(Faguet 2012, Faguet and Pöschl 2015). In these new spaces, Bolivia's indigenous and mestizo majority could at last become political actors in their own right. Over time, new politicians generated their own proposals, found their own political lexicon, and exercised local power successfully. The irrelevance of the dominant system revealed itself to them not analytically, but in the practical sense of what was required to respond to constituents' demands and win elections. Over the course of a decade, these new actors abandoned first the ideological discourse of the elite party system, and then the parties themselves.

The dam broke in 2002, with a surge of new parties emerging all over the country. A handful of parties tightly controlled from the top by privileged, urban elites gave way to hundreds of tiny parties with ultra-local concerns, constituted and run by unprivileged, ordinary Bolivians: carpenters, truck drivers, shopkeepers, and many, many farmers. Politics didn't so much fracture as disintegrate from the bottom up. For a short time there was unbridled party multiplication. But then order began to emerge as many micro-parties federated, and others were absorbed, into the umbrella-like structure of the MAS.

The genesis and structure of the MAS are as important as its ideology. In sharp opposition to Bolivia's traditional, elite parties, the MAS is a bottom-up phenomenon, formed initially in the rural Chapare region by militant coca growers and displaced miners. Its origins – described with analytical insight by Van Cott (2009), Anria (2013), and Anria and Cyr (2016), and a huge wealth of empirical detail by Zuazo (2009) – lie in rural, highly local social movements of self-government, and agricultural producer groups. From these beginnings, the MAS grew rapidly and achieved stunning electoral success by agglomerating hundreds of independent local organizations under its political umbrella. Adopting a “leading by following” approach

inspired by the *indigenista* movement, the MAS incorporated new members in blocs, in their natural, grass-roots organizations, privileging indigenous people as actors and agents in their own right. Its internal characteristics were organized around self-representation and the attainment of local and national power by the indigenous and mestizo majority (Van Cott 2009). This is very different from the top-down organization and clientelistic appeals of traditional parties (Zuazo 2009), whose *modus operandi* was to capture indigenous votes in order to propel elite politicians into office.

The practice of politics at the local level rapidly evolved into something very different from the pursuit of power in La Paz. New actors competed for votes and exercised authority in terms of the major problems and demands that actually affected voters' lives. In a country like Bolivia, these are born of poverty and inequality, discrimination, social and economic exclusion, exploitation, corruption, and oppression – phenomena natural to the deep ethnic and cultural divides that characterize society. The MAS' structure facilitated its ability to sense these issues and identify responses at the grass roots. It also permitted grass-roots groups to enforce continuing accountability on their local governments, the MAS, and even on Evo Morales (Anria 2013). Responding to grass-roots demands, as new actors did, de-aligned politics from the left-right chimaera, and re-aligned it with an axis that mirrors most Bolivians' experience.

A decade after decentralization, Bolivia's national party system resembled a brittle edifice without foundations. No more than a shove was required to prompt its collapse. Protests against a pipeline to Chile kicked the establishment in the knees, and the edifice tumbled down.

Lessons for the West

What lessons does the Bolivian experience hold for Europe, the UK and the US?

Although reasoning by analogy is ultimately speculative, it offers us the significant advantage of a clear model of causality within a national framework that is consistent and contains all the relevant parts.

A first lesson is that political party systems, even those that appear successful and stable, can and do fall apart once they lose their moorings in the key issues and conflicts voters care about most. Stories of political collapse tend to be told in terms of dramatic events – wars, economic crises. These are not irrelevant, but they are also not essential. Politics can and do collapse in peacetime, and when the economy is boring. What is essential is the link between parties and social cleavage. Where it is missing, parties are doomed.

A second lesson concerns the nature of these cleavages. The old worker-capitalist divide on which politics in the West has been based for a century or more appears increasingly obsolete. As manufacturing and heavy industry decline, they take with them a class of workers who strongly identify with each other, against a common adversary. The changing nature of work, from a full-time, long-term commitment between employers and workers, to flexible, short-term “gigs” with few benefits or guarantees, plus increasing levels of informality across rich and poor countries, is further undermining this traditional opposition. We see the effects most clearly in the UK, with the demise of Labour. A party founded by unions to represent industrial workers cannot hope to win elections, or even retain a purpose, when “workers-as-workers” shrink to a small fraction of the economy. This is why the current turmoil in Labour is not circumstantial, but existential. Much the same is true of France’s Socialists (Perrineau

2017). Less dramatically, the German Social Democratic, Dutch Labor, and other European pro-worker parties (Árnason 2017) face similarly bleak long-term prospects.

American politics was historically different. The politics of a country born of very different circumstances, and with a federal structure that added new states over two centuries, was traditionally less disciplined than Europe's, and fudged ideological boundaries far more. Only in recent years have US parties aligned programmatically, with Republicans clearly to the economic right and Democrats clearly to the left. It is ironic that their previously more diffuse ideological stance would have left them in a stronger position vis-à-vis the cleavage shift from below they now face.

The flip side of this lesson is that the worker-capitalist divide was far less solidly grounded in Bolivia, of course, than in most Western countries, and politics far less institutionalized. Hence Western party systems are unlikely to collapse as suddenly as Bolivia's did, although individual parties could.

Thirdly, Bolivia illustrates how hard parties find it to change their core values and positions, because they have invested so much in building reputations based on them. For different but complementary reasons, both politicians and activists oppose large shifts. Hence as society changes – even as a result of policies they implemented – parties tend to get left behind. Political-system change tends to take the form of replacement: new parties and movements arise and push aside established, traditional parties that are no longer relevant.

When established parties fail, what is likely to replace them? In which underlying social cleavage will a new kind of politics anchor itself? This is difficult to predict for societies where the transition is less advanced. Perhaps a new economic divide, based not on workers vs.

capitalists, but some other opposition that has importance and meaning to large numbers of voters? Such a cleavage would need to be not only relevant, but competitively compelling to a large segment of the population. ‘Competitively compelling’ means attractive to voters, as political entrepreneurs create new movements and compete for adherents. Their “story”, which privileges one particular cleavage over others, must be more compelling than the stories other parties base on alternative cleavages (Schattschneider 1960). And today the most compelling stories in the West, as in Bolivia, revolve around race, ethnicity, and place.

The new politics will play out differently in different countries depending on their histories and social compositions, and on how the identitarian cleavage interacts with a distinct geographic cleavage (as per Lipset and Rokkan). In countries where no group is dominant, party systems may gel around identity *per se*, with parties representing particular groups, perhaps with larger groups at either end and smaller coalition-makers in-between. But where one group is a majority, a new axis of competition may emerge linking this group’s party at one end with a cosmopolitan party that denies, or seeks to minimize, identity differences at the other. We see this in Europe and the US, where cosmopolitan, non- or multi-identity parties are strongest in large cities and their suburbs, while nativist, populist politicians fare best in rural areas, towns and small cities. Suitably adapted, we see it also in Bolivia, where indigenous politics is strongest in the western highlands, the seat of Bolivia’s ancient civilizations, while an opposition far less invested in race or ethnicity is strongest in the migrant-rich Eastern lowlands.

In historical terms, this is an extraordinary reversal. The Western Enlightenment believed in the equality of mankind. Liberalism sought to overcome identity-based cleavages. In

countries like the US and France, liberals built not just politics, but national identities based on shared ideals, and not skin color or cultural traditions. Parties arrayed on a left-vs-right axis were accessible to everyone, regardless of identity. The danger now for the West is that a new politics is forged around identitarian cleavages of race, religion, ethnicity, and language. This would vindicate Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis (1996), and possibly mark the failure of the Liberal project.

Any new politics of identity is bound to be far more exclusive, built on categories that only some can access. This would represent a danger not just for affected societies, but for democracy as an ideal. The reason is that the sorts of compromises amongst competing factions that are necessary to make democracy work are far easier to find in economic space, where the main factions define themselves and their principal interests in economic terms. This is because technological and organizational change have a habit of increasing the size of the economic pie, facilitating positive-sum policy options that are mutually beneficial. For example, the acute revolutionary pressures faced by many Western countries in the 19th century were allayed in large part by education, health, and welfare reforms. These hugely improved workers' lives, but at the same time made them, and hence firms, more productive. Workers benefited, and capitalists did too.

Mutually beneficial compromises are harder to find in issue-spaces defined by identity. Divisions are more rigid, and rewards more often positional, measured in terms of status. As a result, such contests tend to be zero-sum. And the definition of zero-sum games is that winners win at the expense of losers. Consider, for example, special preferences for government jobs in India and Malaysia. If Dalits and ethnic Malays are preferred, they must, by definition, be

preferred over other groups; some must be disadvantaged for others to be advantaged. Parties that advocate for their rights cannot simultaneously favor others too. The margin of positive-sum games is smaller in this sort of politics, as are the spaces in which democratic compromises can be forged.

What are likely triggers of political re-alignment in the West? In Bolivia, the trigger was a deep institutional change: radical decentralization. This significantly changed the country's administrative arrangements, created a large new category of politicians, and transformed political incentives throughout the system (Faguet 2016). In the UK, Brexit is likely to cause even greater political, economic, and administrative upheaval. Uncertainty will reign, first about what the new rules will be, and then about their likely effects, for years. The incentives of economic and political actors will change significantly; many will lose and some will win. In EU countries (and their neighbors), the collapse of the euro, or worse of the EU itself, would surely have similar effects. Such environments are treacherous for established politicians and parties. They present a wealth of opportunities for political entrepreneurs to exploit voters' fears to disrupt the establishment, and launch new discourses and parties in new dimensions of political contestation. Other triggers may yet assert themselves in Europe. But for the moment, these are the two to watch.

How will new parties emerge? In Bolivia, as we have seen, the process was bottom-up, emerging first in rural villages and towns. This is less likely in Europe and the US, where far richer societies organize themselves differently, and social relations follow different patterns. As many researchers have noted, "social capital" increases in Bolivia as one descends the social pyramid towards the poorest and least educated (Albó et al. 1990, Faguet 2012, Faguet and Ali

2009, Healey 1987). This is very much unlike the West, where the poorest in society tend to be atomized – beggars in the street – and social organization and trust rise with income and education.

In the West, by contrast, modern technologies of communication and social media have penetrated society to a much greater extent. Here, bottom-up emergence could take the form not of village association, but digital intermediation. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and the rest have already shown powerful effects organizing demonstrations, affecting electoral outcomes, and even overturning governments. In the West, nativist-populist politicians have proven especially adept at using such tools to identify and mobilize supporters by spreading atavistic ideas about identity, race, and the dark threat of the unknown. We see this clearly in the rise of figures like Le Pen, Trump, and Wilders. Such beliefs are easier to sustain in the cyber-vacuum of the internet, where wild-eyed accusers never quite face their accused. The dangers to the West if this type of connectivity supplants the traditional, face-to-face sort are manifest.

Why is political realignment around identity good for Bolivia, but likely bad for Europe and the US? The first answer is that we cannot yet tell if it will be good for Bolivia. The events following realignment have so far been positive because Bolivia entered the process in a deep, deep hole. It was a poor, highly unequal society, in which a coherent, historically dispossessed majority continued to be politically excluded and economically disadvantaged by a small minority. Overturning that required a kind of politics suited to the society's principal cleavage – race, ethnicity, and language – which underlay and sustained the problem. The new politics produced a regime that proved surprisingly prudent on the macroeconomic front, and was stunningly lucky internationally, coinciding for most of its life with a natural-resource boom that

swiftly lifted its boat. But tough times reveal the true character of any government. In Bolivia, this test has already begun.

The deeper answer is that the implications for the West are as different as these societies and their challenges are from Bolivia's. The likelihood is not that the "wrong politics" is replaced with one that reflects the society better, as in Bolivia, but rather that a cleavage is created where currently only differences exist. The risk is that the politics of identity will take one of the many ways in which citizens in the West differ from one another and, through sharp, polarizing, and eventually racist language, create a new, hard social cleavage that divides us. Remember that not so long ago, both Catholics and Jews were American Others – foreign, poor, untrustworthy – as unfit to join business associations and country clubs as to occupy the White House. Now both are mainstream liberals, conservatives, establishment stalwarts, and Americans. The mantle of otherness has moved on. That it could is a tribute to a 20th century politics that did not ossify such differences, did not make them essential. The demise of this politics, and the rise of identity clashes, threatens to alienate us from each other even as it removes the means for finding agreement. It is a sad and dangerous turn for the West that may forever change who we are.

Evo vs Trump

Lastly, what do the sweeping changes that have transformed Bolivia teach us about Trump? Here we see two strongmen, and a study in opposites. Evo Morales is, for better or for worse, an experienced politician who rose from peasant leader, through local government and Congress, to become president of Bolivia. His rise was swift, unusual, and shocked the political system. But he was no political neophyte. He had deep roots in the social organizations that

have come to define his country's politics. Donald Trump, by contrast, is a self-created, top-down political phenomenon with no roots in social organizations and no experience of politics or government.

Trumpism is a triumph of marketing and social media, but ultimately directionless. Unlike Morales and the MAS, who together transformed Bolivia's politics, economy and society, Trump will likely be a convulsion that destroys much but leaves little behind that is new. His triumph is nonetheless a powerful sign of the advanced rot in the Republican and Democratic parties, and in the type of politics on which their continued existence depends. The resentments and frustrations that Trump so skillfully tapped appear strongly rooted in nascent cleavages in American society, themselves products of globalization and automation. And these look like sharpening as the informatics revolution runs its natural course.

Like local politicians in Bolivia, Trump did not discover this analytically, but rather by trial and error, tweeting, stumbling and groping his way to victory. The dark carnival of his presidency should not blind us to the fact that the deep forces he rode to power are real. They will likely undermine the parties that dominated the 20th century, and shape the politics of the 21st. Even as the Trump phenomenon burns itself out, these forces will persist. Two broad options seem likely: Either responsible politicians articulate coherent platforms around these new cleavages, or a new, possibly – dangerously – more capable strongman rides them to power. Where are these responsible politicians? And who might the next horseman be?

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