The Techno-Fantasies of Evo Morales: The Consequences of Modernization

Contributed by Chellis Glendinning
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On 22 January 2006, newly inaugurated President Evo Morales made his exuberant procession through the streets of La Paz to join the throngs of supporters awaiting him in the Plaza de los Héroes. To the excited crowds, Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano announced that the historic event signaled "the end of fear." Vice-president Álvaro Garcia Linera shouted that, in the new government, poor Bolivianos would be given equality at last.

And President Morales proclaimed, "Our job is to finish the work of Che Guevara!"

It was a triumphant day -- for the most destitute country in South America had finally risen above the centuries of oligarchies and dictatorships to elect one of its own: the first indígena to lead the nation in 500 years.

But who, at that peak moment, was remembering that Che Guevara was not just the hero of courage and confrontation whose life's work lay unfinished due to assassination in Bolivia? He was also Cuba's great pusher of industry, development, and modernization.

And so, true to his words, Morales has pursued industry, development, and modernization.

From Flores to Progreso

Perhaps the tip-off to this lunge toward technological expansion arose when billboards leading into the tiny agricultural town of Tiquipaya were abruptly changed from "EL CAPITÁL DE FLORES" to "EL CAPITÁL DEL PROGRESO" -- and high-rise apartments and office buildings, suddenly and without local input, began to tower over tin-roofed shanties and women hawking papayas on the Reducto.

Or perhaps the tip-off came when President Morales proclaimed via his government T.V. station that the goal was to make Bolivia's economy like that of Brazil, which is currently viewed as the #1 (and, according to financial advisers in the U.S., only) country in Latin America to invest in.

Or perhaps it surfaced when he claimed access to wireless Banda Ancha/Universal Broadband as a "human right" -- despite that international scientists have proven that electromagnetic emissions can cause sleeplessness, anxiety disorders, depression, cancer, genetic breakage, heart disorders, immunological deterioration, and other health problems.

The discovery of lithium was the biggest boon to Morales' urge to emulate Brazil's rise to economic potency. The rarity of the "gold of the 21st century" -- with its importance to the up-and-coming electric-car battery industry, as well as to nuclear weaponry -- has put Bolivia in the running to build a Saudi-Arabia-size bank account, with battery sales between 2011 and 2014 slated to top $902 million and total sales possibly reaching $515 billion. At the same time, partnerships with the likes of Mitsubishi and South Korea have traditional communities nervous about any possibility of local input-- as does the inevitable contamination of air, water, and soil via leeching, leaks, spills, and emissions.

The Morales administration is likewise building multi-million-dollar hydro-electric dams whose construction is requiring the displacement of entire villages. The president is allowing Brazil to build two dams near the border that will outsize the Hoover Dam by 300 percent, just as Brazil is pitching in $1.5 billion toward Bolivia's hydrocarbon industry, with an emphasis on petrochemicals. Energía Argentina is erecting a 900-mile pipeline through Bolivia for importing natural gas to Argentina, while the administration has signed a contract with Jindal corporation of India to construct one of the largest iron mines in the world near Santa Cruz. In August 2010, Morales announced plans for an international state-of-the-tech airport in Oruro that will increase toxic contamination, while providing access to international corporations partnering in mining deals. And in September the administration verified that caches of uranium exist in the hills of Potosí and the country would partner with Iran to explore excavation. By October, after a quick trip to Iran, Morales announced his desire to build nuclear plants in Bolivia.

Then there's his pet mega-project.

The Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America aims to construct mega-high-tech-industrial-highway-telecommunications-corridor networks throughout the continent, and Bolivia's part has already been started: a 300-kilometer highway that will bust through a national eco-reserve, slashing the forest lands of at least 11 endangered animals and 60 indigenous communities, some of whom are the last to live according to their traditional hunter-gatherer ways. The Villa Tunari-San Ignacio de Moxos highway promises to create environmental havoc; foster development in the form of motels, gas stations, and entertainment centers -- all the while emanating a swath of electromagnetic radiation. And this is not to mention how industrial thoroughfares historically enhance prostitution and narco-trafficking, both of which already pose problems in the area.

Local communities are protesting these projects by demanding the autonomy and local decision-making that President Morales daily promises via his Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia. But just as political scientist Langdon Winner pointed out in Autonomous Technology: Technics as a Theme in Political Thought (1977),the pursuit of technology -- which always springs from political urges and always has political effects -- escapes the democratic process because it is viewed as an inevitable aspect of "progress."

Despite his Aymará origins, it seems, Evo Morales has been captured by said fantasy.

Borrachero del Poder

The truth about Bolivia's flurry of noveau-tech modernization is that, while such a pursuit may have appeared to be the means toward sustainability and defense for an island like Cuba, under attack by the world's most potent nation-state in the 1960s -- today's ecologists, environmentalists, social-movement activists, and traditional peoples assert that exploitation/expansion-based development can no longer be the way up and out.

Writing in mid-20th century, U.S. philosopher Lewis Mumford and French sociologist Jacques Ellul were among the earliest to apply a systemic analysis to technological society, noting that the Machine itself had become its template, infiltrating every thought, act, agency, architecture, and institution. Their breakthrough insights were followed in late century by such intellects as political scientist Langdon Winner, physicist Vandana Shiva, historian Kirkpatrick Sale, farmer-poet Wendell Berry, community activist Gustavo Esteva, etc. -- all of whom agree on the essential dysfunction of industrial technologies and the mega-machine-scale society they foster. And their work has been substantiated by a cavalcade of witnesses to the impossibility of continued technological development a la late-stage-mass society -- to name just a few: Peak-Oil expert Richard Heinberg, ecologist Stephanie Mills, journalist Danny Schechter, biologist E.O. Wilson, and oil-analyst-turned-eco-activist Jan Lundberg.

For all his attention to international consultants, President Morales has made zero use of the perspectives drawn by such

voices -- who curiously share with him a fundamental critique of capitalism and the dominant civilization, as well as respect for the traditional wisdoms of indigenous cultures. Not to mention the myriad intellectuals, social-movement comrades, and indígena thinkers within Bolivia, many of whom have become cynical about that glorious hope surging through the Plaza de los Héroes in 2006. One of those is the president of the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu, Rafael Quispe, who is demanding a moratorium on extractive projects. Another is theologist/ government-insider Rafael Puente, who describes 2010 as the start of the "Borrachero del Poder"/"Drunk with Power" phase of the administration. Cochabamba's Water War leader Oscar Olivera holds to the notion that true power resides "in the plaza, not in the palace," while his sister, water activist Marcela Olivera, claims she is witness to two different Evo Morales': the one who makes international eco-proclamations and the one, at home, who is pushing dams, uranium excavation, cell towers, and mega-highways.

Grabbed by such contradictions, in August 2010, Morales' own Minister of the Environment, Juan Pablo Ramos, resigned his post -- "out of conscience."

Contradictions and Ironies

The irony is that President Morales is championed by activists the world over as something of a modern-day Che Guevara.

His screw-you-Copenhagen Cumbre Mundial de los Pueblos Sobre el Cambio Climático held in Cochabamba in April 2010 was a rare opportunity for global climate-change activists to gather their energies toward real progress on addressing the environmental problems foisted by techno-capitalist excesses.

But little was it known -- amidst all the excitement, sunrise ceremonies, Aztec dancers, and marches by local indigenous groups -- that Morales's government had actually tarped over the all-pervasive carcasses of fresh-cut ancient trees in wood lots around Cochabamba. Little was it noticed that they had installed a flashy, multi-storied, conference-ready, Wi-Fied-to-the-Max, luxury hotel -- for the occasion -- in the rock-dusted-nowhere-shanty town of Tiquipaya where most people live in adobe-tin huts. Or that the government had unilaterally thrown up a barrage of cell towers for global activists' Blackberries, for which local residents would have little use, but from which they would bear the health brunt for years to come.

Plus, Morales made hay with the global spotlight right before the conference, announcing his intent to launch Bolivia's very own telecommunications satellite whose purpose is to splay electromagnetic radiation over the unwitting countryside -- and, ironically, whose name will be Tupak Katari, after the great Andean freedom fighter. When local activists tried to enter the meeting hall with banners in protest, the military threw them out.

Now President Morales has inspired activists around the world again, in Cancún, with his gritos of "¡Planeta o Muerte!" and "¡Venceremos!" brilliantly bringing to mind earlier, perhaps more-empowering times.

Surely today's world -- perched as it is on the edge of ecological/ social/economic/cultural collapse -- presents a wild ride through ironies and contradictions. Speaking on "Democracy Now," the president quipped, "What is Bolivia going to live off? Let's be realistic."

The sad lesson of the slashed hopes of the decolonization movements that took the planet by storm after World War II was that the set-up of power relations resulting from centuries of empires is a predicament that fosters contradiction: how to recover local dignity and equality in a world demanding full-tilt participation in global power politics. One can reflect on the sabiduria/wisdom of the writer Andrew Schmookler in his 1984 The Parable of the Tribes, in which he points out that

as long as one bully is playing the field, all other players must in some way -- whether by submission, co-optation, or bullying-up -- play too.

For all his sincerity, good intentions, and love of charango music, Morales appears to be allowing himself – and his country -- to become victims of situation by traveling a superhighway paved in what some might call a state-of-the-past fantasy.

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www.counterpunch.org in their 24-26 December 2010 edition. It appears here with the author's permission.

Further reading and photos:

The Road to Overpopulation is Roads, from Auto-Free Times magazine, issue #10 (later called Culture Change magazine by issue #19), Winter 1996,
by Virginia Abernethy and Jan Lundberg

Essay by Jan Lundberg and photos of Bolivia by Bronwyn Lundberg on the occasion of the April 2010 People's World Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, in Cochabamba:

Bolivia in Contrast: Feeding the Petroleum Industry amidst Local Resilience

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