

Sources for Latin American Research

Visualizing Social Movements in Bolivia (1992-2010)

Rossana Barragán

Latin American Desk at the International Institute of Social History

Approaches in social history and the social sciences in general which aim at including the perspective ‘from below’, the ‘voice’ of the subalterns or the history of work and workers face many methodological challenges. The scarcity or lack of documents and, frequently, the elitism and literacy bias embodied in the documents makes this a complex venture. There is also the challenge to deduce subaltern viewpoints from the available sources as well. Work in this field has certainly stimulated debates about the relationship between the production of texts, power relations and the constitution of archives and the writing of history.

Photo 1. Plaza Murillo in La Paz, 2000



Source: ALP CMS MC UH AF 439, courtesy of the Archivo de La Paz and the IISH.

The re-examination of old sources has led to new and alternative methodologies in order to 'read' traditional sources in new ways. At the same time, the urgency to 'find' new kinds of sources has characterized the new perspectives in history and social sciences in the last decades. These 'unconventional sources' help to transcend the limits of the written sources in order to gain new insights into multiple topics like family, popular culture, gender or political activities. The preservation and dissemination of alternative historical sources has been fostered by the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS) since its establishment in 1994 through the Social Memory: History and Social Movements programme. The use of photographs and oral material as primary sources acquired a particular relevance. In these perspectives photographs are not just 'illustrations', but proper historical sources.

The Collection 'Social Movements of Bolivia' (1992-2010) is the result of one of the projects initiated by SEPHIS that is preserved today in the Archives of the International Institute for Social History (IISH). The aim of the collection was to create a digital and visual collection of social movements, which have emerged since 1992. In this year Spain and several other countries 'commemorated' the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492. In countries such as Bolivia, the celebration of this event triggered a political discussion about this commemoration, the colonial encounter and its legacies.

The digital collection consists of 5,520 photographs from the daily newspaper *Ultima hora*, 6,780 articles from this journal, 4,500 audio recordings from Radio ERBOL – one of the most important radio stations in investigative journalism in Bolivia, 1,434 documents from the feminist anarchist movement 'Mujeres Creando' (Women Creating), and 1,353 documents from the transgender group 'Familia Galán'.

The audio collection is in itself unique because most radio stations in various countries of Latin America do not store their emissions. The new sources in this digital collection available for researchers today include programmes such as interviews related to breaking news, the Constituent Assembly, neoliberal or nationalist policies, and discussions about democracy.

The collection of documents from Feminists, Lesbians and Gays gives important insights into the promotion of women's equality, non-discrimination, emancipation and gender rights. 'Mujeres Creando' is also a key social actor in politics and everyday life. Overnight, in beautiful handwriting, words appear on the walls of cities' main buildings, particularly in

Photo 2. Miners in Bolivia, 1976



Source: ALP CMS MC UH AF 8912, courtesy of the Archivo de La Paz and the IISH.

La Paz. Their graffiti are critical but spiced with humour: ‘Ni Dios, ni amo, ni marido, ni partido’ (‘Neither God, nor master, nor husband, nor party’) or ‘No hay nada más parecido a un machista de derecha que un machista de izquierda’ (‘The male chauvinist of the right is the same as the male chauvinist of the left’).

Photo 3. Vigil for women’s rights, La Paz 1997



Source: ALP CMS UH AF 10477, courtesy of the Archivo de La Paz and the IISH.

In this digital collection, the photographs are central although they are not aesthetic or art images. The collection of photographs functions as an

Photo 4. Roadblock near Achica Grande-La Paz, 2000



Source: ALP CMS UH AF 90243, courtesy of the Archivo de La Paz and the IISH.

‘eyewitness’ of the activities of various sectors and segments of society, such as peasants, indigenous people, workers, feminists, coca producers and small traders that are frequently involved with economic concerns as well as natural resources and the opposition to privatization policy (‘The Water War’, the ‘Gas War’), or those linked to political claims of the Constituent Assembly and Presidential elections.

Some examples of the collection show the power of images. People exist if they are in our memories and as such, they can become history (Photograph 1). It is possible to ‘read’ the changes of the working class. Until the

Photo 5. Roadblock, 2000



Source: ALP CMS UH AF 90209, courtesy of the Archivo de La Paz and the IISH.

Photo 6. Graffiti of 'Mujeres Creando', ca. 2000



Source: ALP CMS MC AF 439, courtesy of 'Mujeres Creando', Archivo de La Paz and IISH

90s the miners' proletariat dominated the scene (Photograph 2). Since the last decade of the twentieth century the peasants and indigenous movements have come to the forefront. Better than any written document could do, photographs show the social demands coming from people according to age and gender: the children, the elderly people, the women (Photograph 3). These images defy our definitions of citizenship as only based on individual rights and make us think about the force of a collective in bargaining with the state. Through the images one can see that demonstrations and marches are an important part of the political life of a country in which different tactics and strategies are used in order to pressure governments (Photographs 4 and 5). Another visible part of urban political life is the graffiti of the feminist collective 'Mujeres Creando' with their sharp criticism of the predominant machismo (Photograph 6).

* * *

More about the cooperation between CEDLA and IISH can be found at: <http://socialhistory.org/en/region-desks/latin-america-and-caribbean-desk>.

An overview of the Latin American Collections of the International Institute of Social History can be found at: <http://socialhistory.org/en/collections/latin-america-collection-guide>.