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Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

Luis Pérez Gomez is a small, unpretentious man, quiet and scholarly behind the spectacles that belie his occupation as a Professor of Architecture at the University Mayor de San Andres in La Paz. He spends most of his day evaluating the architectural models and designs of his students, but in his spare time he is busy fixing up the broken-down house in which I live on the Calle Andres Muñoz in the aging neighborhood of Sopacachi Bajo. Sopacachi is a confused jumble of Art Deco and Functionalist houses crowded side by side with the more traditional hacienda-style dwellings that remain from the La Paz of the 19th Century. A number of houses are even roofed with corrugated tin panels, reminders of the era when tin was king in Bolivia. The roads are paved with granite bricks and the streets are narrow, giving Sopacachi a European feel.

According to Luis, this is just what his father, Roberto Pérez Paton was looking for when he built a country retreat here in the 1920's. Best known as the founder of Bolivia's modern social security system, Señor Pérez needed to relax when he was not occupied as Minister of Work and Social Security in the presidential administration of Mamerto Urriolagatta, 1949-51. Luis remembers his father leaving the family's central residence off the Plaza Murillo and Palacio Quemado in the center of La Paz to spend the weekend with friends in Sopacachi, barbecuing lamb, discussing politics, and playing cards under the watchful eye of Mt. Illimani, which at 6,464 meters above sea level dominates the vista surrounding the city. When Minister Pérez tired of Sopacachi, he would often set off on a three-day ride by horseback to visit his estates on the Altiplano to the north or in the lower-lying mountain jungle of the Yungas to the east. There was also the spare moment to engage in academic research. The elder Pérez taught social law at San Andres and wrote books and articles on a wide variety of subjects, including the nature of work in the ancient Aymara civilization centered in Tiuhuanacu, the great Pre-Columbian city of the Bolivian Altiplano believed to be older than the Incas' citadel of Machu Picchu in Peru. In short, the life of Roberto Pérez was the life of gentlemanly service and leisure that typified the Bolivian elite, or Rosca, before the Bolivian National Revolution of 1952.

Mention the Revolution and suddenly Luis becomes animated. Ah, the Revolution. How could he forget? Though he was only five years old, the

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night of 9 April 1952 is emblazoned in his memory. That evening he was alone in the Sopacachi house with his mother and their Aymara maid. Señor Pérez was in Mexico City, delivering an address on the legal implications of social security in Bolivia. Unbeknownst to the statesman, dissident officers of the Bolivian Army had armed Aymara farmers, thereafter named "militantes," from the state arsenal at Orkujahuira. Earlier in the day, Radio Illimani had announced that Bolivia was being liberated and the state of near serfdom, "pongeauje," would be abolished. The "militantes" allied themselves with the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR) led by Victor Paz Estenssoro, and began the fight to overthrow the Rosca.

"Militantes" surrounded the Pérez home in Sopacachi and broke down the front door. Expecting to find Señor Pérez and a cache of arms, they were disappointed to find only Luis, his mother, and the Aymara maid. Undaunted, the sacked the house, stealing paintings and valuables as they went; an entire silver service set presented especially to Señor Pérez by the miners of Potosí went out the door that night. As Luis remembers, he was terrified that the "militantes" would find the one shotgun and two revolvers hidden in the ceiling of the maid's bathroom. While the "militantes" searched every room, Luis recalls, "We all shuddered. We knew that if they found the guns they would kill us." Luckily, the "militantes" were content to take out their anger by raking the furniture and walls of the house with machine-gun bursts before leaving the house destroyed. For Luis and the family Pérez, life would never be quite the same again. The Revolution had been born.

From the poorer neighborhood of La Victoria, another young boy watched the Revolution unfold. Juan de Dios Yapita, an Aymara Indian from the Altiplano, was barely ten years old when the shooting started that April. An economist and linguist, Yapita is now head of the Institute of Aymara Language and Culture in La Paz. Yapita will soon be teaching Aymara at St. Andrews University in Scotland. But in those early days of the Revolution, Scotland might as well have been Mars. Yapita smiles when he thinks back to the Revolution. He heard of the Revolution on Radio Illimani, but as he puts it, there had been uprisings before. Curious, he and a friend descended the hills from La Victoria to see the action. Suddenly they found themselves in a crossfire, loyal Bolivian soldiers and "militantes" shooting at one another from opposite sides of the valley in which La Paz sits. Paralyzed with fear, Yapita and his cohort were moved into action when an Aymara streetfighter rushed up to them, broke a rifle cartridge in half, and told the boys to swallow the gunpowder. "We did it willingly," he says, "because we knew that the gunpowder would shield us from death. After that we were invincible."

Yes, the Revolution. What images it still conjures up in the minds of the citizens of La Paz, or Paceños, as they call themselves. To bring up the subject here is like debating the Constitution in the U.S. Everyone knows what the Revolution was, but no one is always quite sure what it means. And like the American Constitution, the Revolution is the pillar of Bolivian society -- to repudiate, to covet, to dispute. Campesinos who expected overnight gains are convinced they have lost; members of the Rosca, or their contemporary equivalents, have managed to survive. In the first week of September, members of the MNR will convene their national convention to define the course of the Revolution once again as they look forward to the presidential elections of 1989. Victor Paz Estenssoro returned to the Palacio Quemado in 1985, after two previous terms as

President (1952-56 & 1960-64), Paz Estenssoro will step down as his party's leader in April 1989 when elections are held. Competing for the party's seal of approval and presidential candidacy are two key Ministers of the present Cabinet: Foreign Minister Guillermo Bedregal and Planning Minister Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada. Both have supported Paz Estenssoro in his restructuring of the Bolivian economy over the last three years, but as the MNR Convention nears, each one is expressing his own view of the "evolutionary" course that the Revolution has taken since 1952.

"So you say all the visitors have come to Bolivia wanting to see the economic miracle..."

"Yeah, the miracle of the people under the weight of all the politicking and demagoguery."

Cartoon appearing in the daily El Diario, 5 August 1988

Guillermo Bedregal has been vocal in his opposition of the structural readjustment in the Bolivian economy that has been accomplished at the price of laying off 25-30,000 miners and 35,000 factory workers. While inflation has been pared down to an annual rate of 15% compared to the astronomical rates of more than 7,000% that registered in the last year of the Hernán Siles Zuazo government in 1984-85, Bedregal questions whether the social dislocation borne by the poorer sectors of the populace will not affect negatively the chances of the MNR in 1989 if the government cannot promise growth as well. There are those who agree with Bedregal. One aspect of the restructuring of the Bolivian economy has been the neo-liberalization of imports, creating a real dilemna for Bolivian industry. One industrialist who owns an automotive parts factory told me, "With so many imports, Bolivian manufactures simply cannot compete. Last year we tried to introduce a new air filter into the La Paz market; it was a flop. So we decided to change the brand name to an English one, and the filters began to sell." The Bolivian agricultural sector is in trouble as well. Indeed, the presence of imported foodstuffs in the local markets is staggering; if I did not prefer eggs for breakfast I could buy any number of North American brand cereals (made under license in neighboring Brazil), ranging from Cocoa-Puffs to Sugar-Frosted Flakes. According to Father Julio Tumiri Javier, President of the Permanent Assembly of Human Rights in Bolivia, stability in the economy has been achieved on the backs of the campesinos. He notes that even "potatoes, the traditional Bolivian staple," are being imported because prices in the informal markets do not compensate the campesino for his production costs. In US $ dollar terms (fob), the value of exports from Bolivia to the rest of the world has fallen from a 1982 high of nearly $800 million to a 1987 level of just $450 million. In the same period, imports from the rest of the world to Bolivia increased steadily from a 1982 level of $400 million to around $650 million in 1987.

Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada has ardently defended the MNR's policies as overdue and necessary for the survival of the country. He emphasizes that Bolivia experienced a 2% increase in gross domestic product (GDP) in 1987 after years of steady decline. To reverse the course of readjustment now, he asserts, would risk a return to the days of hyperinflation suffered during the days of the Siles Zuazo government. Instead he emphasizes that the fruit of the present MNR policy has been a relatively stable Boliviano against the dollar, which in turn has allowed people to make plans about investment instead of rushing to the banks to continually change Bolivian currency into US $ dollars. He promises to continue external debt service, control inflation, and increase growth gradually with his "New Economic Plan. (NEP)" Though he has yet to detail exactly what this NEP means, most observers think it will signify further privatization of state-run enterprises and the negotiation of debt-equity swaps or tax concessions to attract foreign investment to Bolivia.

The choice of an MNR candidate in September may be a moot point. Many youth and university students with whom I have spoken feel no affinity whatsoever for the MNR and the past ideals of the 1952 Revolution. One such student is an Aymara Indian from the Altiplano community of Viacha that I will call Lorenzo. Lorenzo is 28 and has never held a steady job other than the one year of obligatory military service in which he was posted as a guard outside the Foreign Ministry in La Paz. Lorenzo and I first met at San Andres, where we study Aymara together. Lorenzo approached me and asked me if I was studying Aymara as part of my work with

a foreign company here. I explained that no, I was studying in order to conduct interviews with Aymaras on the Altiplano. Lorenzo immediately offered to be my special tutor and manservant. I diplomatically declined his offer, telling him that my studies were already arranged and that I could wash my own clothes. I thought the matter settled until two days later, after walking in vain to San Andres to find out that there were no classes because of a student-led strike, I returned to my apartment to see Lorenzo waiting outside. He told me he had been sitting there for the last hour to warn me of the strike. I invited Lorenzo in for lunch and he began to tell me his story. Lorenzo already possesses a degree in auditing and accounting from San Andres. He lamented that he has been looking for a job for the last year and no one will give him a chance. So, in my opinion, he is enrolled once again at San Andres (it only costs 8 Bs, or US $3.20 for a semester), because he has nothing else to do, and it gives his life a modicum of meaning. As long as he is enrolled, there is the chance that he can be a professional. Lorenzo is convinced that if he were not an Aymara, the story would be different. When we met up again a few days later, he recounted:

> Earlier in the week, I ran into an old professor, who asked me how I was. He works for [a parastatal accounting office], so I explained my plight and he told me to come around the next day at 8 a.m. sharp and he would see what he could do. I arrived at exactly 8 a.m., and there was my old professor, seated alone and unoccupied in his office. Still, the secretary told me I would have to wait. So I waited and waited, while others -- who were dressed in coat and tie -- came in after me and were ushered into my professor's office. I sat there all morning long, but the secretary never let me go in. I finally asked her if it was my face, the fact that I cannot afford a suit and tie. That did not please her, but I did not care. She told me to come back the next day and surely [her boss] would see me. So I went back but it was the same. I arrived on time and everyone else went ahead of me. I called my old professor yesterday to ask him why he made me wait for nothing without bothering to see me. He was evasive and said that his office was not hiring; worse yet, they are letting people go."

I would not repeat Lorenzo's story, but I have heard similar ones. Aymaras commonly talk of the continual "come back tomorrow" attitude they encounter when presenting documents or petitions to public offices.

Lorenzo is equally critical of the lack of government services and agricultural credit for small farmers on the Altiplano. He wonders why his father was a "militante" in 1952 when his father never received anything for his effort. He does not limit his criticism to just the MNR, but singles out other political parties as well. He recently looked into a job with the main opposition party, the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR), which stands a good chance of winning the next presidential election. He rejected the job when he was told it was voluntary. Though he expresses great faith in the MIR presidential candidate, Jaime Paz Zamora, he does not confide in the party structure. "They tell me if I work now I will have a job when Paz Zamora wins. But they have "engañado" me before. The jobs will go to party favorites; they won't go to Indians."

As poor and downcast as Roberto is, I have met other young Bolivians with both the means and enthusiasm to work for positive change here. One such youth is Enrique Herrerra. Only 21, Enrique could not be more different than Lorenzo. He studies at the Ecole de Comerce in Paris, and is the grandson of a Frenchwoman who married a Bolivian shortly after World War I and then came to Bolivia to buy up five huge estates on the Altiplano. Though his grandmother is on her deathbed, Enrique says she will never forgive Paz Estenssoro for the Revolution of 1952. All of the family's holdings were nationalized in the Agrarian Reform. But with such intimate family ties to the Revolution, Enrique feels a special obligation to serve Bolivian society. He is currently in La Paz on summer break with five other French-Bolivians; together they are working in a remote village south of here to assist in the construction of greenhouses. The Aymaras provide the labor, while Enrique and his friends provide the interim credit and technical advice. Ideally the project will allow the Aymaras to become self-sufficient in vegetable production while enjoying a three-year grace period on the repayment of the US $250 loan required to build the simplest of the greenhouses. Enrique does not claim that his work alone will change the face of Bolivia, but he does argue that it is a start.

Enrique envisions a Bolivia in which racism will disappear. He rejects those who speak of the "lost `cholo´," like Lorenzo, who are neither integrated mestizos nor Indians anymore. They have left their Altiplano communities to discover new realities in the city, but Enrique does not see that as all bad. Rather, Enrique speaks of a "bicultural `cholo´," who feels equally at home in both worlds. Such a cultural middleman will be necessary to continue the process of revolution begun in 1952. "The problem," he asserts, "is how to establish a dialogue between two completely distinct cultures."

Nonetheless, Enrique worries that the 1952 Revolution might be an irrelevant ideal unless something is done about the role of coca and cocaine in Bolivian society. The capture in July of Roberto Suárez Gómez, the drug kingpin who once offered to pay Bolivia's external debt in exchange for the legalization of the coca trade, has focused anew the attention of Bolivians on the existence of a powerful, and marginalized, group of men who control vast sums of money from the drug trade. Without the influx of "coca-dollars," many are convinced that Bolivia's fragile recovery since the 1984-85 days of hyperinflation would collapse. But in the long run, Enrique does not believe that this huge, and illegal, sub-economy bodes well for his country. "Right now," Enrique argues, "we could legalize the production of coca and cocaine on our terms. As long as the U.S. and Europe continue to consume cocaine, the racketeers will continue to grow more powerful, but on their terms -- with machine guns, laundered money, and corruption." Enrique's rationale is that with taxation and education, the Bolivian government could instruct its populace in the occasional and responsable use of the drug. Elsewhere, foreign governments would have the same responsibility. And, given the fact that many drug-traffickers have plowed some $900 million back into the Bolivian economy (illicitly or otherwise), there are many poor Bolivians who would agree. Drug-traffickers have taken to providing electricity and potable water in jungle villages that not even the Bolivian government can reach. But Enrique concedes, "We could not embark on such a path [legalization] alone. It would be suicide."

In the months to come, the 1952 Revolution and its evolution will be the subject of increasing public discussion in Bolivia. What remains to be seen is how that debate will be settled. Economic growth, racial concern, and the drug trade will certainly appear on the agenda. For Bolivians like Lorenzo, the answer will not come a moment too soon.

As ever,

WL Helvin

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