The Life of Félix Muruchi: Resistance and Indigenous Recuperation in Bolivia

By JASON TOCKMAN

In From the Mines to the Streets, Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing bring to the English language the powerful life story of Félix Muruchi Poma, a Bolivian activist, intellectual, and former miner of Aymará, Quechua, and possibly Uru ancestry. The book serves as a narrative counterpart to Kohl and Farthing’s Impasse in Bolivia (2006), one of the most important contemporary English-language books written on Bolivia under neoliberalism, which was first implemented there in 1985. The new book is a collaborative translation of Muruchi’s autobiography, Minero con poder de dinamita (2009), augmented by 25,000 words of social and historical context for readers who are relatively unfamiliar with Bolivia. Although the book is an engaging and constantly surprising story of one man’s life, it is equally a historical account of the social, economic, and political developments in Bolivia over the course of six decades. From the Mines to the Streets provides the reader with compelling insights into class struggle, power relations, ethnic identity, and gender norms, both in Bolivia and beyond.

The story of Muruchi’s life begins in the rural village of Wila Apacheta, in the western department of Oruro, where his father served for a time as the jilakata, the highest political authority of the ayllu, the kinship and territorial-based organizational structure of indigenous Andean peoples. Readers then follow a young Félix from his memories of pasturing sheep at age six or seven through hazardous work at 16 as a juk’u, a miner who illegally taps exhausted veins, and later working legally in the Twentieth Century mine, Siglo XX, which was frequently the epicenter of revolutionary organizing. The story continues to his political life—from his militant resistance to Bolivia’s dictatorships, which led to Muruchi being wounded by an army grenade in the September Massacre of 1965, which left at least 30 people dead; to his leading a successful assault on the police barracks in Uncía in 1970 to secure a cache of weapons; to his working as a labor leader and making a clandestine trip into Chile to make contact with labor leaders there; to his coordinating the purchase of arms for miners to fight the dictatorship. All of this led to his imprisonment, torture, and two periods of exile in Chile and Holland. Later in life, we accompany Muruchi through the coordination of an NGO that provided food and technical training in several Bolivian cities; his involvement in the 2003 mobilizations against President Gonzalo “Goni” Sánchez de Lozada’s plan to export gas to the United States through Bolivia’s historic rival, Chile (a struggle known as the Gas War), which brought down that government; and, finally, his advocacy for the establishment of the autonomous, public university of El Alto, where he recently completed a degree in law.

The book sometimes reads like a spy novel, as we learn of Muruchi’s narrow escapes, secret rendezvous, concealment under train seats, and evasion of border crossings. In fact, by the last chapter, it seems a miracle that Muruchi has survived to tell his story. Among
the most memorable moments is his perilous escape in 1976 from "internal exile" in Chile under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet; Muruchi shares with the reader the terror he experienced passing through police checkpoints and his relief and elation when he hears the Dutch ambassador tell him that not only has he been granted refugee status, but that the Dutch are interested in helping other Bolivians escape from Chile.

Throughout the book, death appears always a step away, whether in the form of a mine ceiling collapse or military persecution. "I thought they had killed you," comments one compañero as Muruchi flees the Plaza Murillo in the crossfire of 2003's Black February, in which more than 20 people died in a shoot-out between the police and the military. Some readers may question the veracity of the more extraordinary moments he narrates, although Bolivia's small and tightly knit population (somewhere between 10 million and 11 million people) and Muruchi's standard practice of identifying his compañeros by name act as checks against exaggeration or fabrication.

Through the retelling of Muruchi's tale, a history of Bolivia unfolds. "When I was born [in 1946]," Muruchi explains, "'Democracy' was limited to an oligarchic minority. . . . the system of ponqueaje—a kind of slavery—dominated on the haciendas, the large estates controlled by criollo families of Spanish descent. . . . indigenous people were not allowed to walk freely in the plazas of the cities nor contract for at least half a year." After the 1952 Revolution, indigenous people secured basic citizenship rights, such as universal suffrage, freedom of movement, and education. Later, Muruchi recounts how in 1964, during his period of obligatory military service, he stood sentry outside a meeting of commanders as they hatched the coup d'état that initiated 18 years of military dictatorship. A few years later, Muruchi joined the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (PCML), which resisted most of the dictatorships, including that of General Hugo Banzer—who was financed by the United States and trained at the U.S. School of the Americas. Along with 500 others, Muruchi's name appeared on the list issued by another dictator, Luis García Meza, instructing the military whom they were to assassinate; those who were fortunate, Muruchi included, fled the country. In 1982, Bolivia returned to electoral democracy, and five years later, Muruchi returned to Bolivia, settling in El Alto. In 1993 he ran for and won the position of congressional deputy with the Free Bolivia Movement (MBL), although he withdrew before assuming office after the party formed an alliance with the right-wing National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), led by Goni.

Although the book confronts difficult issues of repression, poverty, and inequality, it also contains moments verging on tragicomedy, since the reality Muruchi conveys may appear inconceivable to readers less familiar with Bolivia. In describing the 13-by-10-foot home his family secured when they moved to the mines, Muruchi explains: "As part of the rent, the owner required [us] to keep twenty guinea pigs in the house. We never got to eat a single one, even though we lived with them for at least half a year." Later, Muruchi reports plainly that he voted twice for Victor Paz Estenssoro for president in the 1964 elections—even though he preferred another candidate. And while living in exile in Holland, he writes of his neighbor: "The woman told me that her dog was in training school, but had failed the beginner's course and had to retake it. . . . I was struck by how Dutch dogs were treated better than many children in my country."

From the Mines to the Streets is very accessible and can be digested by those with no background on Latin America. The introduction serves as a useful orientation to those new to Bolivia, and Kohl and Farthing's sidebars that run throughout the book provide necessary contextualization on such themes as Andean indigenous history, coca, life in exile, social movements, and oppositional politics, all of which supplement Muruchi's story. These additions are based on extensive research, and the inclusion of bibliographic references and a useful glossary of Andean terms significantly strengthen the book's academic merit. The text, punctuated by photographs of Muruchi's life, is suitable for a general reader, but is also appropriate for university courses on Latin American labor movements, indigenous rights and identity, authoritarianism and democratic transitions, and even political economy. The authors' careful translation flows smoothly, without the awkwardness frequent in more literal translations. And although the subject matter is often difficult—for example, Muruchi's advice on how to withstand torture—the narrative is one of continuous and determined struggle rather than of defeat.

The major challenges of the book are readily foregrounded by Kohl and Farthing in their introduction. One is that the text reads more like a hagiography of a personal friend of theirs—and, for the sake of full disclosure, a friend of mine as well—than a biography capable of exposing Muruchi's weaknesses alongside his strengths. Thus, the authors confess that Muruchi's character is
largely “airbrushed” of blemishes. Second, Muruchi’s original narrative was considerably revised through clarifications and probing for deeper and more emotional reflections, so as to appeal to an English-language audience that privileges the individual actor over the collective—hence Kohl and Farthing’s characterization of the book as “a Western narrative grafted onto testimonial roots.” Moreover, through the editing process, they note that they took “increasing liberties” to introduce into the story components of Muruchi’s life that he had spoken of but did not end up in the Spanish version. Although Muruchi consented to these additions and is content with the outcome, one is left to wonder whether a bit of Bolivia was lost in the cultural adaptation.

The book makes numerous interesting contributions to social and political theory, which arise directly from Muruchi’s observations about his life and country, as well as the comparisons he draws between his native land and the countries to which he travels. Interestingly, and possibly accidentally, a theoretical progression of Muruchi’s narrative is reflected in the book’s title, From the Mines to the Streets, in which socio-political explanations evolve from more structural positions (class consciousness in the mines) to those of constructivist orientations (identity mobilization in the streets). The treatment of these questions is further interrogated, and indeed enhanced, by Kohl and Farthing’s sidebars.

The most significant theoretical questions relate to Muruchi’s changing conceptions of his own identity. Early on, Muruchi describes his struggle with his ethnic background during his youth, the “intense culture shock” of not speaking Spanish when attending a new school following his family’s migration from the countryside to the mines. By the time he worked in the mines, and later in university, Muruchi, like many Bolivians, sought to mask his indigenous origins. He shares the story of when he declined the flirtations of his landlady, partly because she wore a pollera, the traditional skirt worn by Andean women: “I would have been ashamed if my middle-class university friends had known that my girlfriend wore a pollera, even though my mother wore one... I mostly just wanted to hide my indigenous roots—everywhere there was enormous discrimination against rural people.” Later, when in Europe, Muruchi is shocked when he is considered and addressed not as a miner but as an indigenous person. “It was there,” he comments, “I realized I would be indigenous all my life.”

Muruchi’s constructivist articulation recalls W.E.B. Du Bois’s “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” or Frantz Fanon’s subsequent declaration that “the black soul is a construction by white folk.” Moreover, Muruchi’s expanding indigenous consciousness was shared by many Bolivians who shifted from a class- to a territorial-based political locus, (re)embracing indigenous identities and seeking to recuperate Andean practices, forms of organization, and “cosmovisions”—a group’s particular understanding of the world, including its view of space and time. This shifting self-identification took place amid increased urbanization and concentration of people of indigenous ancestry in places like El Alto, as well as the rise of the indigenous katarista movement of the 1970s and 1980s. The movement mobilized indigenous people and campesinos along both ethnic and class lines, promoting indigenous nationalism, challenging the system of state-controlled campesino unions, and playing a central role in the founding of the Confederation of Campesino Workers’ Unions of Bolivia in 1979.

“Félix’s story reveals his shift from an almost exclusively class-oriented understanding of the world to one more shaped by a growing recognition of the importance of his ethnic identity,” write Kohl and Farthing.

On the subject of class and class struggle, Muruchi’s ideas about political economy and forms of resistance also evolved significantly over the course of his life. Early on, he speaks of his encounter with the revolutionary socialist discourse and armed-struggle orientation of the PCML: “This position clarified history for me and reflected the reality I knew and lived. . . . In my country, power had more often been seized through armed conflict of one kind or another than through the ballot box.”

The revolutionary perspective is sustained throughout Muruchi’s narrative, although sometime after the return of democracy in 1982 he comes to also embrace non-militant means of struggle. Though he still believed that socialism would be important for Bolivia, his visits to East Germany and Cuba left him disillusioned, pondering whether socialism could fulfill workers’ liberation and provide more than just people’s basic needs: “I had the impression that the working class was isolated from its historic aspirations and dominated by a bureaucracy that controlled [East Germany]. . . . I became increasingly disenchanted with the socialist paradise I had so fervently believed was possible.” He expresses an appreciation for capacity of the Dutch social democracy to “guarantee citizens’ social rights.
so that they could lead a dignified life,” even as he laments Europe’s rampant consumerism and death of close human relations. His political affiliations reflect these observations, and after the PCML formed an alliance with the increasingly right-wing MNR in 1979, Muruchi left the party, later to run for Congress with the Free Bolivia Movement, whose membership was composed of NGOs and middle-class intellectuals. Reflecting the importance he now assigns to ethnicity, Muruchi’s political emphasis these days is more focused on the restitution of the ayllu than on class struggle.

As with ethnicity, the book illustrates how nationalism was inculcated by the Bolivian state, especially after the 1952 Revolution, and the central role of compulsory military service in this process. Muruchi explains that social pressure to enlist in military service was sufficiently strong to overcome peasants’ and miners’ historical hatred of the army, which had repeatedly massacred their people, and that his service gave him “a better sense of what it means to be Bolivian.” Upon his completion of military service, he tells us: “Both in my own eyes and those of the community, I was now an adult.”

Although not a major theme, a discussion of gender norms weaves throughout the book. Kohl and Farthing emphasize how exiles’ conceptions of gender and sexuality often undergo a transformation. This can certainly be seen in Muruchi’s story. In one passage, Muruchi talks of his exile in Chile, regarding as a “silly superstition” that the locals of Chiloé Island believe that women should not fish—that is, until he questions his own country’s belief that women cannot work in the mines because it is believed to bring bad luck.

Finally, the psychology of group resistance is a recurrent theme. As Kohl and Farthing point out, drawing on the work of Sinclair Thompson, the course of Bolivia’s social upheaval in recent decades draws heavily on an orally transmitted narrative of resistance that, “replete with martyrs and heroes, victories and defeats, links current struggles to previous ones, instilling people with a sense of continuity, the inevitability of resistance, and the legitimacy of struggle.” Muruchi’s story also points to one condition that appears to make armed struggle more likely. He repeatedly emphasizes that miners in particular are likely to take such militant action because they “lived under an indeterminate death sentence.”

“So we confronted the police fueled by rage and without fear,” he writes, “I could die at any moment whether in the mines or in the streets. I thought it would be better to die fighting for a cause than as a victim in a mining accident.” We also observe a young Muruchi note the capacity of movement leaders to betray the rank and file; at age 18, he witnessed a labor leader “handing over a whole mass of people to General Barrientos,” which taught Muruchi the importance of “social control from below.”

One might wonder, as did I, how a person who has lived at the forefront of so many political events views the present government of Evo Morales. Toward that end, I met up with Muruchi, who I have known since Kohl and Farthing introduced us in 2005, in his El Alto home. After serving coca tea, Muruchi expressed his profound disenchantment with Morales and his party, the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), and said Morales’s political and ideological project has disillusioned many who originally supported him. Muruchi proceeded to lay out a series of objections. First, he explained that Morales’s agreements with transnational companies—for example, the so-called nationalization of oil and gas—are deceptive and inconsistent with the public ownership and control that social movements demanded as they kicked out his more ardently neoliberal predecessors. Second, he posits that many within the administration lack an understanding of indigenous ideas and concepts, and more broadly are deficient in the necessary political and ideological background to advance a transformative project; and, moreover, some have links to former neoliberal regimes. Third, on the subject of the government’s violent repression against the VIII Indigenous March—mobilized to halt plans for a highway through the Isiboro-Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS), for which the president has denied responsibility—Muruchi exclaimed, “This is not a ‘process of change.’ It’s the same as any other neoliberal government.”

He concluded on the subject of the TIPNIS and the government’s renewed plans to push for the road: “They are not aware of the negative political impact this is going to have for the government. I have the impression that they want to fall, that they are looking to commit suicide.”

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