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**Britain, meet Bolivia: what can social movements learn from each other?**

[Philippa de](#)

[Boissière](#)

Philippa de Boissière has been living in Cochabamba for the past four and a half years. She works with the Democracy Center on corporate power, extractivism and international solidarity.

[Dr. Huascar](#)

[Salazar](#)

Dr. Huascar Salazar is a Bolivian economist. He currently lives in Mexico where he is undertaking research into contemporary Bolivian political processes.

*The Plurinational State of Bolivia is as diverse as the name suggests. Its landlocked geography straddles the snow-capped Andes, stretching across both immense mineral-rich salt deserts and tropical rainforests. It boasts the highest political capital in the world, La Paz, at a breathtaking 3,650 metres above sea-level.*

The country also has a deep history of resistance. After over 500 years of colonisation, Bolivia continues to be home to the largest and most diverse indigenous population in the continent, with 36 different indigenous peoples officially recorded. At the turn of the millennium movements successfully took on both a multinational corporation and a President – paving the way for the election of the incumbent Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) and the country's first indigenous President in 2005.

I caught up with Bolivian academic and activist, Dr. Huascar Salazar, over Skype to explore what possible lessons burgeoning social movements in Britain may be able to take from a country who have experience in getting the “unelectable” elected...

**PHILIPPA:** Hi Huascar, thanks so much for joining us. Could you perhaps start by setting out the current context for Bolivian social movements and how they got there?

**HUASCAR:** Thanks Philippa. In terms of the Bolivian context – we could go really far back – but I'll start from the year 2000. That was the beginning of a wave of resistance to the privatisations, market liberalisation and other neoliberal policies that were being implemented at the time. One of the most emblematic struggles of that time was the [Water War](https://democracyctr.org/archive/the-water-revolt/) (<https://democracyctr.org/archive/the-water-revolt/>) which took place in Cochabamba. There, you had the government privatising the city's water system via a foreign multinational but that was stopped by a series of intense mobilisations.

Interestingly, these mobilisations were not organized around any political party or trade union, as is classically the case. People weren't looking to the government or asking their representative to resolve the issue. Instead, they were putting their own demands on the table and doing that from a position beyond the state. It was viscerally understood that in the state-society division so prevalent in capitalist societies, people lose their capacity for decision-making over common issues. Movements weren't willing to concede on that. And so it's that non-state position that really defined the anti-neoliberal struggles of that time.

When the 2005 elections came around, MAS' victory was accompanied by a series of stipulations from social movements. These commands basically sought to place limits on the state. Many organisations were proposing the creation of a Fourth 'Social' Power in the Constitution, for example. This would have been governed by grassroots organisations who were not tied to a formal, liberal political logic. They would have had the power of veto over any decision taken by the other [Executive, Legislative and Judicial] Powers. This was an incredibly interesting proposal because it implied a radical transformation of the state and the direct participation of social movements in national politics. Instead we're only invited participate in national politics every four or five years when we cast our vote in a Presidential election.

**PHILIPPA:** What happened?

**HUASCAR:** MAS started out with strong ties with the movements. It had a progressive, anti-imperialist discourse based on social transformation. Over time the focus shifted from meeting popular demands to winning elections. You see this default to realpolitik within political parties time and time again. Pragmatism rules and that generally implies renouncing a whole series of popular aspirations. That's something to keep in mind now there is the very real possibility of a progressive left wing candidate assuming the role of head of state in England.

**PHILIPPA:** What would you say is the takeaway from this for British movements?

**HUASCAR:** The first thing I would say is that the possibility for transformation resides in what those from below – the people, civil society to put it in common terms – can or can't do and not in what Corbyn will or won't do in his government... I'm not saying let's not engage with elections, it can be important to do so. The question is: how far are we prepared to go in delegating the capacity for struggle and decision-making over to the government?

Ultimately, it is about getting organised. If Corbyn decides to nationalise a series of companies and redistribute the income – that's great. Or let's say he delivers decent jobs – fantastic. But, if he embarks on an agenda of austerity or forms part of an alliance waging war somewhere, we – the people – need to have the capacity to take the streets and pressure the government. We can't leave these issues up to the disposition of leaders.



**PHILIPPA:** So there's a key there about the way that social movements fundamentally relate to government?

**HUASCAR:** There are different ways of understanding social struggle. There's one way that is rooted in a rather orthodox Marxism which proposes that a vanguard be responsible for defining the principles that the people are to live by. The focus here is very much on taking power and on transformation from the locus of the state. And it's all centred around an ideology – we all need to think the same, belong to the same organisation, develop cults around specific people.

You could say that this tendency is evident in Bolivia with Evo Morales. The best you can hope for under these circumstances is that, when those leading the vanguard come to power, they change things in a way that you largely agree with. This sums up the modern capitalist political ambition in which the state is separate from society and the latter is

granted the “democratic right” of suffrage during elections every few years. That, or a revolution puts another set of people in charge. Either way it is not ordinary people deciding, on a continuous basis, on the issues that are important to them.

**PHILIPPA:** What’s the alternative? What, in Bolivia, has permitted more direct participation in decision-making?

**HUASCAR:** Bolivia has a big indigenous population. It has to be said that we have learnt a lot from indigenous struggle. Leading up to the Water War, people formed local cooperatives and were collectively managing systems that they had built with their own hands. The cooperatives guaranteed a working water system on a permanent basis – that no-one in the neighbourhood would go without water. The event of a water shortage becomes a problem for the entire collective. What we’re talking about here is a long-term organisational relationship that goes much deeper than ideology. At its core, it is a model that is rooted in guaranteeing the basic resources required for life.

In Bolivia there is a lot of this kind of organising. Ten years ago it was a much more the case, but even today there exist places where the state is absent and ordinary people are left the task of ensuring basic conditions for survival. It’s very different to England. I know people who, within three or four weeks – using a pick and a shovel – can carve 40 metres into the earth and find water. These are people who have the capacity to create and sustain the basic conditions for life. The same can be said for communities who live from the food they produce themselves. Whether the state is involved or not doesn’t really matter, just as long as it doesn’t get in the way. The point here is that, the moment this kind of organisation sees its means of subsistence threatened – in the moment that Bechtel [a corporation] arrives and says “this water cooperative that you are running is now going to be under private management and, furthermore, we’ll be hiking up water prices by 300%” – it is able to react immediately. And we’re not talking about one person protesting on Facebook but a collective that is going out into the streets, that is organised and that has the capacity to win. Concretely, this is what I mean by putting limits on a state power.

In modern capitalist societies, particularly in the first world, this form of organising around basic resources has all but disappeared. Movements tend to organise along ideological lines. This presents dangers. Discourse can be appropriated by vested interests and decision-making is delegated, leaving you without any real form of generating pressure.



**PHILIPPA:** Given some of the complexity you've alluded to, what potential do you see for a country like England to organise along these lines? Local renewable energy comes to mind. There's also a lot of discussion for example around the revolutionary potential of open source software. How do you think these concepts could be made applicable in a British context?

**HUASCAR:** Small-scale, locally owned clean energy cooperatives – communities erecting their own turbines or installing solar panels – could certainly be an option. It's more complicated thinking about how to manage, say, food production in an urban context. That doesn't mean it shouldn't be explored. And it's valuable to recognise what

technology offers us in terms of how we relate to each other and the sheer quantity of information at our disposal. But I'm more of the idea that we organise around the things we need to live. Life is reproduced materially and that is what we must always keep in mind. With energy we are broadening that concept, but it works.

**PHILIPPA:** Clearly, we can't begin to do justice to the socio-economic, political differences between Britain and Bolivia here. That said, do you have other suggestions that British movements could keep in mind over the upcoming months and years?

**HUASCAR:** I think it's fair to say we're talking about two contexts that are diametrically opposed. Marx referred to England as the 'model capitalist society'. Furthermore, it's a constitutional monarchy, so we're talking about a country with a very strong institutional framework. That institutionality guarantees certain rights that are fundamental to a functioning bourgeois democracy. Those guarantees don't exist in, say, Mexico, where the government can literally get away with murder. Nor in Bolivia where the President can choose to disregard the Constitution, just because. The strong institutionality does make the task of organising much more complicated [in England] though.

I'd say there is value for pushing for what you can within that institutional framework while remaining clear-eyed on the limitations inherent in it. What are the drawbacks of having the kind of society that currently exists there and where are the opportunities for rupturing systemic relationships that are mediated by capital?

**PHILIPPA:** Do you have any final thoughts?

**HUASCAR:** I suppose the important thing here isn't what Corbyn will or won't do, but rather what what we, those from below, will permit. I think it's fundamental to look at it from that perspective. The priority is that we organise – not around Corbyn, but rather around what we want to bring about in this world.

7th February 2018

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