

Searching for Status: New Elites in the New Bolivia

Ton Salman

Abstract: This essay argues that those strategies enabling the recognition and distinction of the elite in Bolivia have collapsed since Evo Morales assumed the country's presidency in early 2006. Not only have new political elites taken power, the established and inherited societal stratifications have also been affected. Reviewing three emergent groups potentially occupying new elite positions – the progressive *blanco-mestizos*, the wealthy urban indigenous sectors, and the social movement leaders with their politicized cadres – it is argued that in today's Bolivia, the political dimensions of anti-elitism have raided the traditional material and cultural-symbolic domains of elite distinction. The political dimensions of anti-elitism might have altered or even largely disqualified the indicators traditionally considered valid in material and cultural-symbolic domains. *Keywords:* elites, Bolivia, status, politics, distinction.

In the new Bolivia represented by indigenous president Evo Morales, presidential symbolism has undergone a radical twist. On many of the photos published by newspapers and press agencies of the president or 'Evo', as he is usually referred to by friend and foe, he appears covered in confetti and adorned with a floral wreath. The pictures are seldom taken in his presidential palace or in or around parliament – not much formal magniloquence has been spent on him. They are taken at the places where the president usually delivers his speeches – villages, trade-union-meetings, social and political manifestations – and where his messages to Bolivia and the world are voiced. Evo Morales is a tireless traveller of his country. In the many indigenous settings he goes to, he is usually showered with flowers and confetti by a high authority; the president has not yet been caught in a tie and jacket.

At stake is more than just attire. At stake is the upheaval of established codes about belonging to the elite and their behaviour in Bolivia; where today a prototypical headman of the non-elite has become the political elite. His image is about more than just dress; it is about an attempt to counter the traditional ways of doing politics. Appearing in an informal and 'accessible' manner, and acting colloquial is also a political statement. Avoiding ceremony and stateliness is more than just a 'style'; it is a political manoeuvre. In most Latin American countries, a marked gap has traditionally existed among different social groups. The continent is characterized by 'imbalanced interest group systems in which the elites are well organized and represented' (Wiarda 2001, 337; see also Lievesley 1999). The accompanying characteristic was, and still is, dramatic socio-economic inequality. 'High inequalities bias the political rules of the game and mould politics in favour of the wealthy and the privileged, and they do so (to different degrees) whether regimes are authoritarian or democratic' (Karl 2003, 136).

Due to the absence of solid institutional backing for citizens' equality, most countries on the continent have been marked by the virtual non-existence of the societal codes of individual sovereignty, equality *vis-à-vis* the law, respectful

treatment irrespective of family-name, appearance and prestige, effective access to public positions, individual liberties, and the like. Elites have had privileged positions going beyond the common advantages of higher spending patterns, or distinguished access to resources such as first class education and healthcare; they have had the 'right' to bypass the law. Elites would often illegally enrich themselves through plug money and the evasion of taxes, they would keep their sons out of military service, they would not queue to get their bureaucratic chores done, and their children would not have to pay their traffic fines. 'The reality is that, with few exceptions, rule is still based more on power than on law. Judicial systems are less about justice than about providing protection for those who can pay for it and punishing those who cannot' (Payne 1998, cited in Wiarda 2001, 339). The elite would, moreover, often look upon their inferiors with disregard, and, for example, underpay and exploit their nannies and gardeners. Most often, the subaltern would accept – albeit reluctantly – such treatment. There appears to be a lack of assertiveness in their awareness of their individual rights and their dignity *vis-à-vis* 'any other citizen'. The symbolic power of the elites was, for a long time, strong enough to make 'people recogniz(e) the legitimacy of those who utter them' (Gledhill 2000, 144; see also Higley and Gunther 1995). People *learn* their – be it equal or immensely unequal – 'rights' in the course of their lifetime interactions with the state institutions and the 'significant other classes'.

However, the 'significant other classes' have been disrupted in Bolivia today. Traditional elite theories will, I believe, have trouble in accounting for the emergence of new elite postures in Bolivia, because they have tended to focus on the material and symbolic-cultural domains of elite distinction, connecting them 'logically' to political stratification. Precisely *that* will not work in Evo's Bolivia. The frame in which new distinctions are taking shape seems to be caused by the emergence of a 'counter-politics'. Where politics are the motivation, the meanings attached to and the appreciation of material or symbolic-cultural features of elite distinction are often altered, and sometimes even reversed (Daloz 2007, 70).

Bolivia's new political configuration is accompanied by an increase in self-esteem and assertiveness by those who often, in the past, lived experiences of subalternity. Although it is denied in official discourse and considered politically incorrect, something like a feeling of a reversal of position is undeniably present. For Evo and his immediate entourage, and for the privileged supporting him, this unprecedented situation puts them all in a quandary: their image of a fairer Bolivian society includes a more horizontal, less top-down polity. They oppose elites as a social category. They believe they should relate to and interact with their constituency and with 'the people' in general in a new mode. They are, in a way, an anti-elite elite; not only because of the political rejection of what the old elite stood for, but also because of a different vision of what the relation between those who govern and those who are governed should be. This new relation, still very much in the process of being formed, is guiding the new leaders' own presentations, impact-strategies and interactions. Nevertheless, to be able to bring this ideal closer, they had to become real *leaders*, the vanguard, the protagonists struggling to get their supporters' backing, in other words: into elites. They have to be convincing as leaders. This presumes a subjectivity which comes close to a contradiction in terms.

The new 'anti-elites' that support Evo are facing an enormous challenge. Their new challenge is the main subject of this, admittedly somewhat impressionistic, essay. There are, more or less, three such sectors, each with their own background, symbolism and composition. Each of them is wrestling out a new subjectivity in a world they fought to create – but have never known before. Their 'proper' attitude needs to be invented, and it is questionable whether the old theories of elite behaviour and distinction will fit. Simmel's (1957) and Veblen's (1994) trickle-down and emulation schemes will hardly do. Goffman's ideas (1951) sound too dramaturgical to fit the politicized reality of today's Bolivia. The 'Big Men'-model obviously will not do either: we are not facing an entourage hoping for the rich man's munificence here. We are witnessing the emergence of relatively privileged sectors of society whose core distinction does not primarily seem to lie in performance vis-à-vis the rank-and-file, but in their political affinity to an anti-elite administration. What sort of attitude comes out of this? Without too much theoretical pretension, I intend to sketch three such sectors, and will argue that their specific background, internal cohesion and self-perception, and especially their position in a situation in which two logics vie for the power to decide on what *makes* an elite, will determine their attitudes to a far greater degree than any encompassing theory on elites can account for.

First, there are the intellectual and bohemian *blanco-mestizos*. They are the leftist newspaper journalists and columnists, the progressive university professors, the NGO staff members, the professionals in the arts, education, social work, and the like. They often have a disdain for upper class ostentation and middle class 'keeping up appearances'. Next there are the 'wealthy Indians', most often Aymara and Quechua, who have in the past decades migrated to the cities and done well. Most of them work in trade and in smuggling. They like to display their wealth during festivities such as *Gran Poder*.¹ Finally, there are the leaders of social movements and intellectuals of, most often, indigenous origin. They have been 'upgraded' to elite status following Evo Morales's victory. Today, they are in government ministries, parliament, think-tanks and policy-making committees, or they still continue to manage their organizations. They loath displays of power that are reminiscent of the previous powers-that-were.² All three sectors apply specific emblems to distinguish themselves. And all three have their own, somewhat ambiguous, relation to the new administration and to the old politico-economic elites they either half-heartedly relate to, or deeply loath. Based on interviews from 2007 to 2009 and Bolivian newspaper clippings, I will attempt to sketch their situations and orientations.

The intellectual and bohemian *blanco-mestizos* are the ones most familiar with a privileged position. Although they most often are not really wealthy, they are the ones that for generations have had access to higher education in a country in which illiteracy rates were, until very recently, the highest in the continent. They were also the ones that grew up in families in which the – indigenous – *empleada* (maid or nanny) was taken for granted. Their resistance to injustice, conservatism, narrow-mindedness, and racism distinguished them from the *blanco-mestizo* majorities. But they were still marked by a similar socialization, their access to resources and their cosmopolitanism – which separated them from the subaltern majorities they sympathised with. They would probably boast about their close ties with in-

digenous fellow-citizens and treat them well, but they would – with the exception of some indigenist intellectuals – be more interested in modern arts museums, in the latest Western music, literature and fashions, in information technology and in travelling than in indigenous worldviews or traditions. They would have the ambivalent position of the ‘decent’ Latin American middle classes: proud of the indigenous colourfulness of their country and the tourism it attracted, but hesitant in being identified with that ‘underdeveloped’ world because it sat uneasy with their self-identification as belonging to the Western, modern cultural universe. In a country dominated by Spanish-spoken and -written official and public discourse, with a Western-style political structure in which traditionally all the better jobs were in practice inaccessible for citizens with an indigenous background, they were – and still are – very fortunate and elitist, whether they liked it or not. They were the white collar workers hiring the indigenous, they were the teachers educating the indigenous, they were the voices making a plea for a better deal for the indigenous, and they were the travel agencies bringing the tourists to the archaeological sites and the ‘authentic’ indigenous communities. Their ‘distinction’ was their up-bringing, their eloquence, their informal but western dress, and their always-present ethnic identity – an identity-distinction that everybody in Bolivia, in all circumstances, is always aware of, and which is impossible to disengage from a hierarchical societal composition.

What had been taken for granted changed with the presidency of Morales. This group of intellectual and bohemian *blanco-mestizos* sympathises with Morales’ political standpoint (see Ibsen Martínez, in *El País*, 30-05-2006). They voted for him. They identify with the leftist ideological position present in Morales’ campaign and policies and with his fierce criticism towards traditional U.S. interventionism. They, because of the principles involved, support the idea of an indigenous president in a country where the majority is indigenous. But they are *not* indigenous, and feel uneasy about the ethnic card often played out by the new administration. They are concerned about what exactly the ‘decolonizing’ of the education system would entail for them, and they are hesitant about learning an indigenous language – as proposed in the education bill waiting for approval in parliament. They cannot imagine what ‘communitarian democracy’ should be. Their confidence about a whole series of tacitly accepted entitlements is lessening today. They comprise an elite that might be politically close to Morales, especially because of his leftist qualities and his respect for the indigenous heritage, but there is some vacillation about their place in the ethnically circumscribed universe Morales sometimes presents.

The situation is different for the affluent urban indigenous population of mostly Aymara and Quechua who are disputably Evo’s ‘a-political’ followers. At the level of ethnic prestige, they have won an important battle. No longer are they the slighted group of ‘rich but improper’; today they are the ‘rich and acknowledged’. With Evo’s rise to power, they have obtained esteem for their wealth irrespective of their ethnic origins. At the same time, they now may have something to lose. They accumulated their wealth in the shadowy nooks and crannies (as the traditional elites sometimes did too) and became powerful indigenous traders in the former politico-economic system. It was a system that was unwilling or unable to make everybody abide by the law, go by the rules, or pay their taxes. It was a sys-

tem that privileged those who used bribes, and celebrated immunity. In addition to the *blanco-mestizo* elite, these affluent Aymara and Quechua indigenous groups have also benefited from a deficient state control. One of the objectives of Morales' programme is to close the many loopholes for everybody evading the law, including these indigenous well-to-do, by enforcing tighter customs and labour controls to reduce smuggling, protect local industry and labourers, and improve tax collection. This is supposed to increase state income and reduce unequal access to opportunities.

Clear-cut racial distinctions concerning the ethnic composition of La Paz will not work. In the city, historically, many indigenous people 'became' *mestizo* by dressing Western style, speaking Spanish and working in construction or as an *artesano*, instead of working in agriculture. Returning to their communities, however, they became 'Indian' again. Thus, in specific interactions and settings, identities might shift continuously. At the same time, until recently, being an 'Indian' in La Paz would often bring on discrimination and disparagement. This made the ongoing 'play' with one's identity a strategic endeavour. It could be said that over half the population of the city of La Paz has always considered themselves to be 'more than 50 per cent' indigenous in origin – for whatever such a distinction is worth. What has changed is their position in the city. This process dates from long before the election of the first indigenous president. It is part of the indigenous emancipation and accompanying increase in self-esteem that has marked the continent as a whole. According to many observers, the apparent decline in wearing the traditional female indigenous attire, the *pollera* (multiple long skirts), the hair worn in a double plait, and the bowler hat, may actually have reversed in recent years. The city of La Paz now seems to be brashly indigenous.

The pioneers of this dynamic action were the inhabitants of the historically indigenous districts of the city, the prominent and more affluent indigenous groups, in the habitually poorer districts of La Paz. An important vehicle for the advancement of many of these people, often coming from the countryside in the 1960s and '70s, were the *fraternidades*, which were religious groups, regional organizations, dancing ensembles and associations all rolled into one. These *fraternidades*, which have often had somewhat strained relations with the official Catholic Church and its local parish priests, have become the main protagonists in a yearly parade of costumed dancers in La Paz called the *Fiesta del Gran Poder* (Guss 2006).

However, these fraternities also have in their midst some very wealthy members. Being unable or reluctant to enter the *blanco-mestizo* social circles and neighbourhoods, they flaunt their prosperity by participating in the increasingly massive, flamboyant and audacious parade of *Gran Poder*. As the prominence of *Gran Poder* has increased, so has the prestige increased of those who co-finance and participate in it. They demonstrate, by purchasing and wearing immensely costly costumes, their riches and success. 'For them (the indigenous inhabitants) the dance would be a vehicle through which the city would be remapped, erasing old boundaries and with them the stigmas that had been long associated with native cultures. Through the ostentatious display of their new economic power the dancers would inevitably receive the respect and acceptance that had always eluded them. Or at least that was the hope, as using dance to negotiate new social realities can be fraught with ambiguity and conflict, [...] these dances reflect the contradic-

tion and tragedy of “group[s] poised in the space between two cultures” (Salomon 1981:164) – neither rural nor urban, traditional nor modern, Indian nor *mestizo*’ (Guss 2006, 318; Albó and Barrios 1993).

Although this elite may be ethnically close to Evo Morales, the political differences in interests are considerable. Their ostentatiousness in the dance parade and membership in the *fraternidades* sits uneasy with the political and economic tendency of Morales’ administration to equalize the different elite groups. Their political standpoint has hitherto remained undefined, but their ‘demonstration effect’ as examples of a different type of indigenous (instead of *blanco-mestizo*) elitism is not to be underestimated.

The last group is made up of the leaders of social movements and intellectuals, and their stern, ideologically motivated supporters that, with their incessant protests, brought down previous presidents and gave Morales his presidency (Salman 2007). They are both *mestizo* and indigenous, although a majority most probably consider themselves as indigenous. Most of their elite-emblems are *anti*-emblems. They often reject protocol and pomp and circumstance; they will not tolerate any of the grandeur of government formalities and in many cases even have an ambivalent relationship with the current government *because* it is a government. They prefer ‘movements’ over ‘institutions’, and ‘struggle’ over ‘governance’ (although this *is* a group that in the end has confidence in the formation of a ‘de-colonized’ state) and take pride in their ‘decent poverty’, their indigeneity and colloquial vocabulary and codes.

Others among this third group, however, have entered government circles. They are in ministries, in parliament, in the constitutional assembly installed by the current administration, in strategic state institutions and in committees established by the executive to study future policies or recommend on existing ones. They of course share, to a certain degree, in the booty that comes with such positions. But they are very much aware of the vigilance of their ‘bases’ (Crabtree 2005, 96), and in general keep a low profile in terms of demonstrating the fruits of their elevation. The insignias of their new elite status are and remain first and foremost the political ones: their ability to mobilize and inspire a crowd by eloquently and convincingly formulating the demands of their followers. In the second place, however, their ability to ‘come close’ to the central power-holders, and to get things done for their supporters, has expanded. But this is no visible elite-badge they are carrying around; their status depends on something which, in the end, only exists if articulated among their followers. Their elite status is a virtual one: it is not recognized by the traditional elites, not expressed in luxury or more ‘elevated’ lifestyles. It is acknowledged as ‘political progress’ only by their supporters, and not as a recognition of any superior position. They themselves will often emphasise their humble background and their place as ‘ordinary people’, not being better or above those they represent.

Another element possibly contributing to this configuration is that traditionally in indigenous communities, including some urban indigenous communities, leadership positions rotate. Therefore, it is not possible for leadership to be detached from ‘ordinary’ life. A person’s prestige in the community depends on how he or she has performed as an authority during a term in office. Moreover, regular assembly-like meetings often take place and these are characterized by massive

communal participation. The mode of decision making is frequently deliberative, lengthy and consensus-seeking, rather than limited to pre-empted vote-legitimizing statements. Instead of assuming a personal sovereign status as 'representative', authorities consider themselves 'delegates' in constant need to *relate* and to reconfirm their position and legitimacy (Rivera 1990; Delgadillo Terceros 2004, 107-109). 'There is a strong sense of accountability among community leaders towards their grass-roots' (Crabtree 2005, 96). Additionally, they value highly (and practice as much as possible) the ritual dimension of such leadership: they practice certain rites the first time they enter the governmental palace; they take advice from *yati-ris*³ and *amautas*,⁴ read coca leaves and perform libation acts, and they bring a handful of soil from their communities to symbolically unite each other, thus expressing the re-unification of the shattered indigenous peoples of Bolivia. This then, is an elite that does not conform with many of the attributes usually connected to elite positions. They owe their position solely to the political conjuncture. And most likely, they would vehemently reject being part of any elite group.

For all three groups, the question of how to be elite in Bolivia today is a conundrum. The transition process has shaken up the traditions and habits that marked social distinction. At the same time a new type of political leadership seems to be incipient. Albeit still fragmented or sometimes partial, among new elite segments and among large sections of the population, a sense of a new political style and code, based on delegation, participation and deliberation, instead of on 'handing over' authority, is emerging. But how exactly these 'elites' will distinguish themselves in such a setting has not yet crystallized.

The groups of the progressive *blanco-mestizos* and the politicized, often indigenous societal leaders share their political commitment. But their 'social capital' is of a completely different nature. The first group enjoys a wealth of connections in 'educated circles', and international orientations are important to them. They take their modest affluence for granted, and might feel a moral affinity with the poor, but have little affective and intimate personal relations in those layers of society. Their 'elite behaviour' consists mainly in the *level* of their work, their daily conversations, and their reading. It is precisely this 'elaborated code', as Bernstein (1971) would have coined it, that provokes the aversion of social movement leaders. These *blanco-mestizos* are 'comfy socialists', in their view. They draw their own status solely from the recognition of their work and expertise accorded them by their followers. Their humble background, in their view, gives them an extra, and to some degree exclusive, entitlement to speak for the poor and play a decisive role in today's political management. The affluent indigenous group has yet another code of identification: they might share celebrations and clan-like family or community ties with social movement leaders, but they recoil from the leaders' uncompromising political commitment and fervour. They support Evo and his goals because he is 'one of ours', and not necessarily because they share his ideology.

Based on my interviews, it is my opinion that the three groups interact only on an incidental, political-professional basis, and not as intimate friends. What the progressive *blanco-mestizos* and the social movement leaders share, nevertheless, is a reluctance to 'show off' as elites. The group of the wealthy indigenous, to the contrary, is happy to impress the public with their opulence, but rejects translating

it into political fervour.

All three groups are, at best, 'remote cousins' of the old elites, who most of the time did not hesitate to impress the 'populace' with their wealth and act as if their political leadership was their natural entitlement. For the newly emerging 'distinctive' groups, new elite theories are needed to take into account the political fault lines that determine how the elites identify themselves and act in specific societies and political constellations. Such theories would have to combine a focus on the material and cultural-symbolic together with political dimensions in their contingent configuration. The latter dimension might, in specific cases, alter or even largely disqualify the indicators traditionally thought valid in the material and cultural-symbolic domains. Bolivia is a country where such a process seems to be taking place.

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Ton Salman studied philosophy and anthropology and did his PhD in 1993 on grass root organizations in Chile under Pinochet. He is specialized on Latin America, and does research on social movements, democratization, urban culture, and citizenship. At present he is Associate Professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the VU University Amsterdam. <aj.salman@fsw.vu.nl>

Notes

1. *Gran Poder* is a yearly grand indigenous festival in La Paz. Thousands of exuberantly dressed dancers take the main streets of the capital, celebrating Jesus Christ's power, in an unique blend of folkloristic and religious inspirations. See also below.
2. And some criticize the fact that too many *blanco-mestizos* are in Morales' government, for reproducing colonial patterns and for toning down the political changes.
3. *Yatiris* are medical practitioners and community healers among the Aymara of Bolivia, Chile and Peru.
4. *Amautas* are spiritual leaders and traditionally were advisors to (political) authorities and leaders.

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