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Indigenous Anarchist Critique of Bolivia's 'Indigenous State'

Interview with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

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June 8, 2014

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Adopted from ICTMN *Bolivian historian and social theorist
Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui is author of the classic work
Oppressed But Not Defeated: Peasant Struggles Among the
Aymara and Quechua in Bolivia, and has recently emerged as
one of the country's foremost critics of President Evo Morales
from an indigenous perspective. Indian Country Today Media
Network spoke with her in New York City, where she recently
served as guest chair of Latin American studies at New York
University's King Juan Carlos Center. The complete text of the
interview appears for the first time on **World War 4 Report.***

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What do you mean by religiosity and spirituality?

I find everything very spiritual. Everything speaks to me. The Pachamama speaks to me. I would never throw away a potato that is deformed, because the Earth gives you meaning through the potato's shape. Here, the supermarkets throw away the irregular potatoes. Does that mean that Pachamama does not speak to New Yorkers? No, she speaks to New Yorkers! It gives them messages. Lots of cockroaches. [Laughs] They are after your waste. That's a signal from the Mother Earth.

Of what?

Of her as a living being, that knows better than you or me, because she has lived longer. We are the wink of a star in the huge enormity of cosmic time. And she knows those rhythms of cosmic time.

What does that have to do with the roaches in my apartment?

That is a signal that we have to take care of our own waste! One of the most revolutionary things you can do in this time is to recycle, and not misuse the gifts of the Earth. And not to waste so much food.

The entire world economy is predicated on waste.

Yes! It is irrational! That's what makes me suffer so much.

Are they consciously anarchist?

Of course! They paint the “A,” they do punk...

Yes, but that’s urban youth. I mean in the indigenous movements...

They are more autonomist than anarchist. And I am an autonomist. I am not a doctrinaire anarchist. I am not indoctrinated, I am not a missionary. I don’t want to convince anybody of what I think.

Oh? You have a point of view, and you express it very strongly...

Of course, but I am not recruiting anybody. It is auto-convocado [self-invoked]... I call myself to action. I do not accept to receive a call from without. Throughout Bolivia, there are asambleas auto-convocadas—self-called assemblies, against mining and so on.

But I think anarchism is a very valid option. The anarchists I studied did not believe in a separation of intellectual and manual labor. And all my work in Bolivia today is based on that idea. And today we are adding a reconnection with the rituals and the indigenous way of life. Because the anarchists were totally atheistic, and I don’t like that. That’s why we call ourselves anarcho-ch’ixi—stained anarchists. Our anarchism is not pure. It is stained with indigeneity. It is stained with feminism. It is stained with ecology. It is even stained with religiosity, with spirituality.

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How do you respond to the criticism that the indigenous opposition, like CONAMAQ, have allowed themselves to become tools of the right and of imperialism?

No, no, no. I have a much deeper criticism of CONAMAQ! Their leaders receive money from solidarity networks in the North. And solidarity networks in the North act out of guilt. And that makes for a vertical relationship. But Evo and his supporters received funds from those same organizations for years and years! All the money they received to build their party and take power came from the same people that now fund CONAMAQ! The Danes, the Swedish, some gringos... They all funded Evo. But now that he has power, he gets money from gas and oil. He now has another funding agency, called the Bolivian state! So it is hypocritical to accuse CONAMAQ of something that have done themselves.

In the indigenous movements that have gained ground in Bolivia over the past 10 or 15 years, do you see a link back to the old anarchist movements?

¡Totalmente! [Totally!] There is a rebirth of anarchism that we are seeing, and not only in Bolivia. My generation knew very little of anarchism, we just had a few hints. But I was very rebellious, even within the left, because I just hated to be commanded by these stupid males. It was an intuitive anarchism. I didn't realize it back then. But the new generation, the generation of my children—they realize it.

A daily process?

Yes. We will never give up trying to do that—even though you know it's impossible. Because you know if you don't do that, you will be swallowed. So at least you have you and certain friends around you resisting the swallowing force of the State. And then you become an anarchist, more and more.

Anarchism is the link between community and revolution. Because Marxism and community didn't get along, when I was 30 years old and the discussion was totally different than today. The Berlin Wall hadn't fallen, the left was totally sure the proletarians were the vanguard of the revolution. It was in the early '70s that I left the city and went to work in the country that I realized the left had no idea what a worker-peasant alliance meant.

Where did you go?

I went to Apollo, a Quechua region in the far north of La Paz [department].

In addition to the urban-rural divide, there has been a divide between the indigenous movements of the Altiplano and those of the lowland rainforest...

I think the lowland movement is very important, politically, epistemologically, culturally, and I will support them. But I have my criticisms. No indigenous movement up to now has fully acknowledged the difference that women make. Until that happens, we will keep repeating the male-centered idea that leadership is words. Leadership is not example, it is not doing, it is political specialization. Political specialists. And what do they do? They sit and talk.

In 1998, I marched with Evo Morales. He led a march of co-caleros from Chapare to La Paz. I joined them near Oruro. In Qalamarka, which has historical significance. Because in the March for Life in 1986, against the privatization of the mines, the march was stopped at Qalamarka. And the local communities welcomed us with food and shelter.

So at first, I held out hope that Evo was Indian enough to counteract the influence of the people around him...

But you still hold out hope that there can be some kind of transformative process?

Under Evo? No. But in Bolivia? Always. In Latin America? Always. I will always have hope of that. Because hope makes things happen!

Do you believe that an indigenous government is possible? Or do you think that it's a contradiction in terms?

You caught me there. That, I have to think a lot. Because there are different scales of government. At certain levels of the scale, you can have self-government, like the Zapatistas' caracoles. But beyond that, it is much more difficult—ever more difficult. If you are talking about a Nation-State—even a small one like Bolivia, with 10 million people—you are talking about a centralization of force that is beyond the will of the people. It is even beyond the will of the individual. It is like a machine, a whirlpool, a black hole, that concentrates so much... That is the historical construction of the colonial State. And that historical construction, I don't know how to dismantle. I think that dismantling it is a daily process.

Evo recently gave the COB a gift of several SUVs and a hotel. Does he want the COB to become an entrepreneur? Or is he so machista that he expects them to use the hotels for their affairs? Oh, shit!

But the COB has not always been a part of Evo's machine...

Not always, no. But he has realized that he has to neutralize the COB. Because when he raised the gasoline prices, the COB was part of the uprising. Since then, they have learned to sobornar, to bribe the COB leadership, so that they keep quiet.

So, we have to prepare a people's revolution...

What does that mean?

I am very familiar with the history of my country. So I know that it will happen again. The leadership will distance itself from the grassroots, and the gap will get bigger and bigger and bigger, and a moment will arrive when the grassroots sees another converging of agendas and networking begins, and... wham! We will throw Evo to the garbage!

In favor of what?

Well, that's the risk of every revolution. Probably we will have civil strife and a lot of fragmentation, and rising and falling of caudillos... Or, we will have right-wing electoral politics capitalizing from the disgust of the people. Now, both these scenarios are very bad. I'm not telling you that I support that. I'm telling you that it is likely to happen. I am recognizing, sadly, what a huge, historic opportunity has been squandered. With so much pain, I say this.

What are you doing here in New York City?

I have been invited as chair of Latin American studies by the King Juan Carlos Center, which is sort of funny, it sounds like a horrible place for me. But Spain should give us back a little bit of what they took! And my salary is like a millionth of a part of what they owe us.

And what are you doing now in Bolivia?

I used to teach at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, which is the biggest public university in Bolivia. And I was very much involved in university politics, because I was trying to fight corruption in the university. In 2005, I had a 15-day-long hunger strike, and we managed to kick the dean out. But he left a lot of corruptos were still there, and I was forced to retire.

Since then, I have been doing community things, trying to network and create micro-politics... Since I wrote my study on anarchism, I discovered the importance of community to politics, as opposed to the individualist liberal conception...

What was the title?

Los Artesanos Libertarios y la Ética de Trabajo (Libertarian Artisans and the Work Ethic), based on oral history.

What kind of artisans?

Shoe-makers, carpenters, masons. In La Paz. They founded the Local Workers Federation. The foundation date is uncertain. We more or less think it was 1926 or '27...

An anarcho-syndicalist federation?

Yes. It actually started with discussion circles as early as 1908—purely workers, without any intellectuals. Only intellectuals that were workers at the same time. I discovered that my great-uncle, from an estranged part of the family—because he was a worker, a mechanic, so my mother wanted nothing to do with him—was an ideologue of this movement.

This federation still exists?

No, no, no. It was destroyed by the MNR [National Revolutionary Movement, which took power in 1952]. Because under the Marxist view of the labor movement at the time, the artisans are not workers, and therefore they deserve to be erased from history! Only “proletarians” count, only the slaves of the machine count.

The final blow was in 1964, with the dictatorship. Only one union remained from the Federation, it was all-female union of flower vendors, in the Mercado de Floristas. We managed to find them still alive and conduct these interviews in 1985, '86. And that archive, which is 100 cassettes long, I have been working full-time digitizing them here in New York...

And this relates to your current community work?

Yes, I am still working with artisans, with urban self-reliance groups in La Paz, ecological and feminist groups, working in the qhatu, or traditional peasant fair or market. This is a very ancient tradition from colonial times, in which indigenous communities used the market to prevent being used by the market. There is always a barter section, negotiation of prices, at the local level. It is a market that is

He kicked McDonald's out of the country, no?

McDonald's was going anyway! McDonald's left on its own, before Evo, because McDonald's was not making money. That's why McDonald's left.

You have a Starbucks in La Paz?

It's coming. It's coming, and it's not Evo's fault. But he's not putting any obstacles to corporations. And what's even worse—because with Starbucks you can either go or not go—but if a mining company is contaminating the water you drink, you have to drink it. And his new Mining Law is resulting in exactly that.

Evo's whole program is based on the idea of centralization of the State and making the State stronger. And what I think makes Bolivia such a special case in terms of indigeneity is the fact that we're very decentralized. There is a lot of locality, community, networking—and, at the same time, the ability of crossing borders between localities. What they call the “Gas War” happened because many, many local constituencies and groupings came to the same conclusion. That's why one little spark set the whole thing ablaze. Because the readiness was there at the local level.

Radio was very important in coordinating a decentralized movement. A network of small transmitters, basically under the control of the left-wing clergy. But there is a big struggle underway now for the independence of this network from the government. There has been a lot of *prebendalismo* [patronage]. They have been trying to buy them, more or less. Giving concessions in expectation of loyalty. And there is a lot more surveillance in Aymara—previously, there wasn't.

In Bolivia, the indigenous are a majority and the mestizos a minority, no?

Mestizo is a construction. From one point of view, you can say mestizos are a majority because most Indians are mestizos anyway, because they speak Spanish, they pray to a Christian god, they use money in transactions, they are individualist, and they want their children to speak English. But from the other point of view, those weird things that we do are indigenous, they are a part of the indigenous heritage that we all share. And from that point of view, we are a majority Indians. Therefore you can say yes and no to your question. This is again the Aymara trivalent logic.

You've said that the current Bolivian government is not truly an indigenous government.

No. It has an indigenous face. But, unfortunately, you do not want a “face” to be happening. You want an episteme to be happening. You want the world view, the syntax of the culture to be happening. To really change things, you have to change the episteme, the matrix of the culture. And what Evo is doing is putting an Indian face to corporate capitalism. And that is even worse than putting a hard face to corporate capitalism, which is its real face. It's a disguise.

If you think that “development” means to have malls and to bring WalMart and to bring Starbucks—got to hell! I don't want development!

But is Evo doing that?

Evo is doing precisely that!

not depersonalized; it is a conscious market, where people are there, not just prices and commodities. It is against the supermarket, against the mall. It is against the corporations and brands and selling things that are pre-packaged. You harvest lentils from your own garden, and you never put it in a plastic package. So the qhatu is a form of resistance to the world market. It is resisting the market with market—it is almost like a vaccination!

I am part of a collective that produced hand-made books and hand-woven bags from recycled plastic, as well as lettuce and potatoes and fava beans and sweet peas and medicinal herbs. Grown in community gardens in La Paz. And we sell them at the traditional markets in La Paz.

And we have made campaigns—a campaign against plastic bags, a campaign to promote walking instead of taking trucks or buses or cars. Walking is very difficult in La Paz if it's uphill, because of the altitude. So we have a slogan, Camina La Paz, aun que sea la bajada—Walk through La Paz, even if it's only downhill! At least just get a bus ticket one way!

So we try to link every public issue where human rights, indigenous rights, and the rights of the Pachamama are involved. So we joined with TIPNIS, we joined CONAMAQ, we joined the support network for the human rights office that was almost taken over by the government. We are defending the CONAMAQ people who were kicked out of their office... We are just there for them, if they need shelter for the night or a good breakfast, we go and do that. We are not many, but we do whatever we can.

We call ourselves Colectivo Ch'ixi—from the Aymara word meaning “stain.” We are mestizos, but we have a strong Indian stain in our souls. We are “impure.” We are not “pure” people. And we have to recognize also that there is a European stain in our bodies and in our subjectivities. And the good part of that stain is the idea of freedom and individual rights. From the Indian part we get the idea of community and of cycle, intimacy

with the cycles of nature. But we do recognize the value of individual freedoms and rights—sexual rights, the right to have a sexual identity that is different from the rest, or of abortion. All this comes from the best contributions of European civilization and the Enlightenment.

Is there necessarily a contradiction?

They are contradictory. But we live the contradiction with joy. It is not a schizophrenic contradiction. We live the contradiction as if the contradiction gives us energy. And contradiction without a synthesis is totally against the grain of Marxism.

This has to do with the Aymara trivalent logic, as opposed to Aristotelian binary logic. Aymara philosophy is based on the “included third.” A is not B, and B is not A. But there are things that are A and B at the same time. In binary logic, one excludes the other. But when you have the logic of inclusion, you have enormous possibilities of intercultural action.

This is inscribed in the Aymara language. In Aymara grammar, you can say “it is,” and you can say “it is not,” and you can say “it is and it is not” at the same time. Jisa is yes, jani is no, and inasa can be yes and can be no.

Is this related to the Quechua concepts of hanan and hurin?

That is the same idea projected into space. There is an upper space, there is a lower space, and there is a middle space. The middle space is at the same time upper and lower. In Aymara that space is the taypi. In Quechua it is chawpi.

And yet you say that you’re a mestizo. Just because you grew up speaking Spanish as your first language?

Not only. I have Jewish blood. On my father’s side. It was the colonial Jewish people who came to the Andes in the 16th century, escaping the Inquisition in Spain. So on both sides, I am against the Inquisition, and against the king of Spain!

Your indigenous side and your Jewish side. The Jews were Marranos [crypto-Jews]?

Yes, Marranos. I discovered it in the library in Austin, Texas. In the rare book section there was a fichero [file folder] called “Judios en América” [Jews in America]. And the first name I saw was Rivera! That was a commonly Jewish name. It was then I decided I was a Jew. And a Jew and an Aymara make a very interesting mixture...

And Quechua as well, no?

Yes, Quechua as well. And probably some Basque and some other things. But I don’t care about “blood.” I hate “blood” talk. Because I think identity is constructed by living in the present. I have taken my love of the Aymara to such an extreme because I discovered the healthier aspect of my European side through the Aymara recognition of otherness. It is the Aymara side that helped me to discover the good parts of my European heritage.

This raises some interesting questions about identity...

Sure. My identity has a lot of Indian-ess, because since I was a small child, I used to hear songs in Aymara and rituals to the dead.

From whom?

From my mother, from my father, and from the servants of the house. My father and mother were middle-class, pretty well-off, because my father was doctor. And they hired to Aymara persons, and one of them to take care of me. And I thought she was my mother.

My real mother wanted me to be an upper-class woman, and I decided not to. Because I was for my substitute mother's way.

Your mother spoke Aymara?

No, only the imperative! [Laughs] My father did speak Quechua, though. He spoke it at home in his house when he was growing up.

So your antepasados [ancestors] were indigenous?

Of course!

How does this relate to the concept of synthesis in Marxist and Hegelian dialectics?

It is dialectics without synthesis. The synthesis arises from the desire for unity. And when you have unity, you are without possibilities. It is closed. The possibility of change is because there is contradiction. If you leave it open, there are possibilities—that the margins become the center, that the one side turns to the other side. There is fluidity, there is movement. If you reach the “synthesis,” you reach the Communist State—another fucking State!

Some would argue that was a vulgarization of dialectics...

No! If you maintain the idea that the contradiction is there, you will never be looking for a synthesis, you will not be craving for the unity of a State, of a central power. I think that we have to discover the way of freedom and self-organization beyond central powers.

The current Bolivian situation seems to be one of many contradictions...

I had so much hope at the moment when Evo Morales came into the government. But he has come to crave centralized power, which has become a part of the Bolivia's dominant culture since the 1952 revolution. The idea that Bolivia is a weak State and needs to be a strong State—this is such a recurrent idea, and it is becoming the self-suicide of revolution. Because the revolution is what the people do—and what the people do is decentralized. It is a megalomaniacal kind of

thing to have a “strong nation.” It is an inferiority complex. I think we should have many reasons to be very happy with what we are. Instead of always craving to be more modern, more developed, more fucking big—more highways, more technology...

Yes, let’s have technology. But let’s relearn the technologies of old and combine them wind energy or solar. The technology of more and bigger machines and highways—to me that is megalomania and an inferiority complex.

One can anticipate the response that in the real world, Bolivia is trying to assert control over its own territory and resources against the hegemon of the North, the United States, and other imperialist powers. And it is therefore necessary to form a strong State.

I would say that the strength of Bolivia is not the State but the people. And the people have been strong and stubborn enough to be what they are, and to put their own desires as the terms and conditions of what is going to be the change. And that is what saves this process of Evo. What saves him is that there are people behind him who have not been bought completely, and they rely upon themselves.

There is a peculiarity of the Bolivian people in general, with a lot of diversity, a lot of community, a lot of locality, a lot of ability to network and to make friendships. There is also a huge diasporic Bolivianess. I would say half the population of Bolivians live outside Bolivia. There are probably 9 million Bolivians in the diaspora—in Argentina, in Spain, in Italy, Chile, the United States. All over the place—even China now!

But you cannot say that we Bolivians are being well-treated by whatever strength our State has. It is not the weakness of the State that has thrown people away—it is the strength of the State that has thrown people away! Because they are starting to normalize, homogenize, totalize, control and make difficult the lives of the people.

How?

In so many ways. For instance, there is no support for self-employment strategies. There is only support for big State-owned companies and enterprises. And to get a job there, you need to be a militant of the party in power. So what happens to the rest of the people?

We have all the forces we need to create a small-scale industrial culture through processing and adding value to the raw materials that we ourselves produce. The most important asset that the Bolivian people has is knowledge of the environment. The environment of Bolivia is very rare. Only two peoples in the world live at such high altitudes—the Tibetan people, and we. For this land, you don’t need tractors. You don’t need huge harvesters or huge machines. For that, you need to know what the weather is going to be next month. And for that, you need the people who know how to look to the stars. That is the big asset. The stars and other predictive knowledge tell you when to sow, and when an early rain is coming. The ability to understand nature and its cycles and its messages.

And that is completely outside the ideas of Marxists. But it is part of the Indian epistemic that we, the mestizos, have within our bodes.

We still have the culto de los muertos—the cult of the dead. You should come to my house in Bolivia and meet the skull of my ancestor. I am one of many, many, many paceños, many people from La Paz, who has this Cult of the Dead, very, very strong. Now a skull is a thing, you can just see it as inert material. But it’s not... There is a spirit there; there is a spirit everywhere. You have to be attuned to that. And Marxists don’t believe in that shit. [Laughs.]