

*A Concise History of Bolivia, Third Edition*

Bolivia is an unusually high-altitude country created by imperial conquest and native adaptations – today, it remains one of the most multiethnic societies in the world, with one of the largest Amerindian populations in the Americas. It has seen the most social and economic mobility of Indian and mestizo populations in any country in Latin America. This work, having also appeared in Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, and Chinese in its earlier editions, has become the standard survey of the history of Bolivia. In this new edition, Herbert S. Klein explores the changes that have occurred in the past two decades under the leadership of Evo Morales and his indigenous government, and how his party has emerged in the post-Evo years as one of the most important in Bolivia. The work also expands on the changes in the traditional mining economy and the rise of a new commercial export agriculture.

Herbert S. Klein is Gouverneur Morris Professor Emeritus of History at Columbia University, the former director of the Center of Latin American Studies and Professor of History, Stanford University, and is currently Research Fellow and Latin American Curator at the Hoover Archives. Specializing in the social, demographic, and economic history of Latin America, he has published more than 30 books and 189 articles in several languages. Among these books are four comparative studies of slavery, as well as several on Bolivia, including *Parties and Political Change in Bolivia, 1880–1952* and *Haciendas and Ayllus*.

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*A Concise History  
of Bolivia  
Third Edition*

HERBERT S. KLEIN  
*Columbia University and Stanford University*



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## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

In this third edition, I have incorporated the extraordinary recent developments which have made Bolivia one of the more original countries in the world in the twenty-first century. The rise of self-identified Indian leaders to national office and the emergence of a political party based on popular classes which emerged at the end of the twentieth century and has dominated national politics to this day also resulted in one of the longest periods of stable democratic periods in the history of the nation. This has been accompanied by a massive expansion of urban centers, the rise of a new mestizo middle class, and a major reduction in inequality and poverty in the nation. Much of this was due to an extraordinarily favorable period for Bolivian exports, as well as continued government investments in health and education and the systematic transfers of conditional cash transfers to the poorest families in the nation. It has led to a society that is far more ethnically mixed in all classes than had ever existed in the country. The end of the commodities boom and the impact of Covid-19 have challenged these successes. There is thus no guarantee that all these changes will be advanced or even maintained. But what has been achieved to date is exceptional. The traditional urban elite has been forced to accept the existence of a major new urbanized mestizo middle and popular class as part of the national scene. These new popular classes in turn have begun to appear in the universities, in the professional classes, and in government administration, changing the makeup of the formerly all “white” elite.

In this third Cambridge edition of my history of Bolivia, which is the fifth English version, and will become the sixth Spanish version (five editions in Spanish, two editions with Oxford University Press and two with Cambridge University Press),<sup>1</sup> I was faced with the usual problem of defining periods in contemporary history. As those who have read previous editions of this history will note, I have constantly modified the post-1952 periodization. I have responded to ever changing perceptions of Bolivian historians and social scientists about key developments in Bolivia's historical evolution. Thus, for a milestone between the last two chapters, I use the 2002 electoral process since national scholars have underlined that it demonstrates the emergence of a new political system. It must be recognized that this periodization does not work for the social and economic changes that have occurred. I have therefore incorporated some of these basic changes in Chapter 9 and saved for the final chapter my analysis of most of the social and demographic changes that have occurred over the past half-century. Given the very profound transformations taking place in contemporary Bolivian society and government, it is difficult to predict how they will develop in the future. But there is little question that Bolivia in 2020 is a far different country than the one I observed when I first landed in El Alto airport in December 1959, just seven years after the National Revolution.

In the years since the previous edition in English, a new generation of social scientists and research centers has emerged, producing important works that analyze contemporary change. There has also been a subtle shift in social definitions within Bolivian society in recent years, including the slow abandonment of the word "cholo," now considered pejorative, and the adoption of the more generic term "mestizo." I want to emphasize that the Bolivian definition of "mestizo" differs considerably from the more general meaning that this term has for most of the Latin American population. In Bolivia, the mestizo and mestiza identify more closely with their indigenous past than with the Western part of their culture, and they tend to

<sup>1</sup> The second Chinese edition and the first Portuguese edition are the same as the fifth Spanish edition, while the Japanese version is based on the second English edition.

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maintain clothing and other symbols of identity, even when they adopt Spanish as their primary language. Likewise, the term “indigenous” has become standard to define all those who identify themselves as part of an Amerindian group, even if they are mestizo. Although I have adopted this new terminology in the later chapters of this book, I have kept the old terminology intact in the pre-1980 chapters, as its contemporary meanings were not in use at the time.

In writing this current edition I have been fortunate in being able to rely on the help of several Bolivian friends and colleagues. I have been aided as usual by my former students, Clara Lopez Beltran, Antonio Mitre, Manuel Contreras, and Mary Money. Also José Alejandro Peres-Cajias provided research help at an earlier stage of the research for this book. I would also like to thank Manuel Contreras for organizing a virtual seminar whose participants read and critiqued this manuscript. These included Rossana Barragán, Erika Brockmann, Horst Grebe, Roberto Laserna, María Machicado, Verónica Paz Arauco, Ernesto Pérez de Rada, Cecilia Salazar, Rosa Talavera, Carlos Toranzo, Miguel Urquiola, Fernanda Wanderley, María Teresa Zegadae, and José Alejandro Peres-Cajias. To all of them I am greatly indebted.

Palo Alto, California  
November 2020

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In this fourth version of my history of Bolivia (two editions with Oxford University Press and two with Cambridge University Press) I have been faced with the usual problems of defining periods in contemporary history. As readers of the earlier editions will note, I have been constantly changing the post-1952 periodization. What constitutes key turning points is a continually changing perception among Bolivian historians and social scientists. Thus I have used the election of 2002 as the break between the last two chapters since national commentators have stressed its political significance in presaging the emergence of a new political system. It should be recognized that this periodization does not work for the social and economic trends that clearly straddle this divide, and that this breakdown will most likely be redefined in the future. I also recognize that I am making judgments about contemporary trends in the midst of some very profound changes that are occurring in Bolivian society and polity, and that future historians will see these changes from different perspectives. It is clear that some of these contemporary political, economic, and social changes will lead to unanticipated developments. Although some readers may feel that it is too early to evaluate what has been occurring in the last eight years, I would simply note that I have reached an age when I will not be around to see how this all turns out. But my fascination with Bolivia compelled me to undertake this latest version since I felt that I could offer some insights, even at this early stage in the process of change, based on my reading of the past and my long

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experience with this country that has fascinated me for most of my academic career.

In the eight years since the last edition, a whole new generation of social scientists and research centers have emerged and have produced an important literature analyzing contemporary change. There has also been a subtle change in social definitions within Bolivian society in recent years, with a slow abandonment of the word “cholo,” which is now considered pejorative, to the more generic term of mestizo. I would stress that the Bolivian definition of mestizo differs considerably from the more general meaning of this term for most Latin Americans. In Bolivia the mestizo more closely identifies with his or her indigenous past than with the Western part of their culture and tends to maintain clothing and other symbols of identity even when adopting Spanish as their primary language. Equally the term “indígena” has become the standard to define all those who identify themselves as pertaining to an Amerindian group, even if they are mestizos. Although I have adopted this new terminology in the later chapters of this book, I have left the older terminology intact in the pre-1980 chapters since their contemporary meanings were then not current.

Unless otherwise indicated, all the current statistical information that I cite comes from Bolivian government sources, above all the National Census Bureau (INE); the Presidential Planning Commission (UDAPE); the Central Bank of Bolivia (BCB); and the relevant government ministries. For comparative Latin American statistical data I have relied on data provided by the UN and its Latin American research groups CEPAL and CELADE. In undertaking this new edition I have been greatly aided by the research assistance of José Alejandro Peres Cajias. As usual, my friends, colleagues, and former students listed in the earlier edition have continued to provide me with support and advice.

Menlo Park, California  
June 2010

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The evolution of the peoples of Bolivia is one of the more complex and fascinating of human histories. It is the most Indian of the American republics whose monolingual speakers of Spanish remain a minority to the present day. The Amerindian languages of Quechua and Aymara still predominate, and even such pre-Incan languages as Uru are spoken. Thus, Bolivia is not simply a colonial replica of its last conqueror, but a complex amalgam of cultures and ethnicities that go back centuries. A society that has successfully adapted to one of the highest altitudes of human settlement on earth, the Bolivians have created a constantly changing and vital multiethnic society.

For the mass of Bolivians, their culture is a blending of pre-Columbian and post-Conquest norms and institutions. Spanish systems of government were grafted onto pre-Spanish kinship organizations, ecologically disperse settlements were converted into nucleated villages, and local and state religions were syncretized into a new folk Catholicism highly mixed with the symbols and myths of Mediterranean popular religion. Traditional exchange systems coexist with a highly developed market, and wheat is grown along with pre-Columbian staples such as quinoa and coca. In the Quechuan and Aymaran languages, Spanish loan words form an important part of the vocabulary, while among the popular urban classes, pre-Columbian belief systems can be found mixed with modern Western norms.

But this description of Bolivia as a dual society does not mean to imply that Bolivia is simply a laboratory of peasants developing

a new cultural idiom in a difficult environment. For Bolivia is, and has been since the sixteenth-century Spanish Conquest, a capitalist Western class-organized society in which the Indians were for many centuries an exploited class of workers. The government, which extracted the surplus from the peasants and workers, was traditionally run for and by the “white” Spanish-speaking and Western-oriented elite. While, phenotypically, the Bolivian “whites” look much like their Indian ancestors, their economic, social, and cultural position has placed them squarely in the classic mold of a Western European society. Educated by Europeans to European norms, and even practicing a religion distinct from the folk Catholicism of the peasants, the “whites” ruled over and exploited the peasantry.

But the elite itself has slowly miscegenated, as in all such multiracial societies, and over the centuries there has emerged a new biological grouping of mixed background. Thus, Bolivia, like most multiethnic societies in the Americas, has come to define race as a social rather than a genetic or even phenotypic term. The upper classes, speaking Spanish, wearing Western dress, and consuming nonindigenous foods, were the “whites,” or, as the peasants called them, the “*gente decente*.” The urban lower and middle classes, and the rural freehold farmers who wore European dress and spoke Spanish and one of the Amerindian languages, were the *mestizos* or, as they are called in Bolivia, *cholos*. The monolingual peasants speaking Indian languages and consuming traditional Andean foods were the “Indians.” Indians were denied access to power except as they abandoned their traditional norms and languages and integrated into the national society as *cholos* or whites. Thus, the more marginal, ambitious, or able of these peasants have constantly fed the white and cholo classes. Even among the traditional monolingual peasantry, there were internal divisions between rich and poor, hereditary high-status individuals and commoners, original members of the communities and later migrants. Although these dichotomies changed over time, and especially since the introduction of mass education and effective political democracy, Bolivia still contains many of the elements of a racist society, although with a far more powerful and aggressive cholo class than is found elsewhere in Amerindian America.

In its political evolution, Bolivia has been typical of such multi-ethnic societies in the long domination of one ethnic group and its fight to maintain its monopoly on power. In fact, there is considerable debate as to whether the Indian masses did better under the Crown than under the Republic. Much of local politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries involved the white elite's attempts to organize themselves into a cohesive group capable of denying power to the cholos and Indians. The limited parliamentary republican regimes that they created were the exclusive preserve of the small elite of Spanish speakers. But, like most such systems in the Americas, the impact of modern economic change in the second half of the nineteenth century forced the disintegration of these closed political worlds, and the elite were forced to expand the political system to include the middle class and urban workers. But this process of partial inclusion and increasing democratization eventually broke down. At this point in its political evolution, Bolivia sharply diverged from the common Latin American pattern when a massive popular worker and middle-class revolutionary movement swept aside the entire preexistent political system in the National Revolution of 1952. The resulting social, economic, and political reforms, while they did not destroy the dual society, radically reduced the level of exploitation and even opened the door to an alternative means of acculturation to modern society without abandoning Amerindian culture and languages. Indians were finally given political power, along with their lands, and the basic export sector was nationalized. With its polity, economy, and society so drastically altered, Bolivia's evolution in the last several decades, while sharing the Latin American horrors of military rule, has nevertheless continued to evolve in a manner distinct from the rest of the hemisphere.

In its economic development, Bolivia also has shown itself to be a relatively unusual nation. In a spectrum of economies in the world, Bolivia stands somewhere at the extreme as an almost classic case of an open economy. Concentrating on mineral and primary exports from the sixteenth century until today, the Bolivian economy follows world market conditions to an unusual degree. International changes in supply and demand are immediately felt in a national economy totally dependent on primary exports. Given the

small size and extremely low density of the national population (the lowest in Latin America), a national industrial structure is virtually precluded from developing except under the most extreme conditions of world crisis or international integration. Bolivia thus differs from most of the developing world in its loyalty to the system of comparative advantage.

Despite this external dependency, Bolivia also has had an unusual degree of national control over its own resources, especially in the national period. Bolivian entrepreneurs made up of whites and cholos dominated the mining industry and succeeded in passing their control to the nation without the massive intervention of foreign entrepreneurs until the last few decades. Bolivia has obviously not been immune to the machinations of its neighbors or of more distant world powers. Yet, the creative spirit of its peoples has enabled it to survive and to condition these external interventions in the context of its own needs and concerns.

For all its fascinating historical evolution and the rapid changes that have occurred in the contemporary period, Bolivia still remains a poor and relatively backward society and, in terms of human survival, one of the harshest regions in the Americas. Even today, its eight million nationals, despite significant improvements, still have among the highest death rates, lowest life expectancies, and lowest per capita wealth in the Western hemisphere. Yet, even here there have been profound transformations in the past couple of decades, which have finally brought public education to the entire population and reduced illiteracy to a low level even by Latin American standards.

Unique as it is in so many ways, Bolivia forms an intimate part of the common history of mankind, from its development as a multiethnic conquest society to its contemporary emergence as a nation that has undergone profound social and political change. It is this fascinating interaction of Western patterns and pre-Columbian traditions, of class organization and dual social systems, of poverty and exploitation and vigorous independence and social creativity, that I will attempt to explore in the pages that follow.

In undertaking this survey of Bolivian history, I have tried to distill some forty years of reading, research, and participant observation on this subject. Although one not born into a culture will

miss many of its nuances, I hope that my distance from the subject will compensate for potential distortions. Equally, as a member of an advanced industrial society, I have tried to remain as objective as possible without suspending my own moral or intellectual judgments or going to the extreme of being patronizing.

In my long education as a “Bolivianist,” which began in the late 1950s, I have had the advice, instruction, and constant support of a large number of scholars and friends. Bernardo Blanco-Gonzalez and Teresa Gisbert introduced me to the subject in formal courses, and Gunnar Mendoza and Alberto Crespo guided me in my researches when I arrived in Bolivia in 1959. Antonio Mitre, a long-term friend and former student, has constantly challenged my assumptions, and I am also indebted for guidance, criticism, and support to Silvia Rivera, Xavier Albó, Josep Barnadas, Philip Blair, Thérèse Bouysson-Cassagne, Tristan Platt, Terry Saignes, Karen Spalding, Enrique Tandeter, and Nathan Wachtel. As intellectual mentors and close friends, Marcello Carmagnani and Nicolás Sánchez-Albornoz have been of inestimable value to me on this project. At various times this manuscript has been critically read by Stanley Engerman, Harriet Manelis Klein, Richard Wortman, and Maria Ligia Coelho Prado.

In undertaking the revisions from earlier versions of this work,<sup>1</sup> I have continued to receive the support and criticism of friends and scholars including Ricardo Godoy, Erwin Greishaber, and Eric Langer. I also would like to thank my former students Brooke Larson, Clara López Beltrán, Manuel Contreras, Mary Money, and Ann Zulawski for sharing their ideas and research with me. Manuel Contreras has been especially helpful to me in getting access to the latest social and economic data on Bolivia and critically examining my interpretations of this material. In turn, Clara López Beltrán has been my constant source of current information on the latest in historical studies. Finally, Judith Schiffner made this whole process of writing a wonderful experience.

In this new age of electronic access to materials, Bolivian government agencies have been extraordinarily generous in providing vital

<sup>1</sup> This work was initially published as *Bolivia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society* by Oxford University Press, in 1982, and revised in 1992.

data on their society and polity: this has included the Banco Central de Bolivia, the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, UDAPE, and the Bolivian National Congress as well as the United Nations and the World Bank, to which I am deeply grateful. I would like to thank as well the journal *Annales* for permission to reprint the map “Les señoríos aymaras” in T. Bouysee-Cassagne, “L’organisation de l’espace aymara: urco et uma,” *Annales, E.S.C.*, 33 (1978) 1059. Map 1-2 is adopted from E. Boyd Wennegren and Morris D. Whitaker, *The Status of Bolivian Agriculture* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), p. 20 and reproduced with permission of Greenwood Publishing Group; and map 1-3 is adopted from Rex A. Hudson and Dennis M. Hanratty, eds., *Bolivia: A Country Study* (Washington: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 1989), figure 3. Finally, I would note that I have adopted the most common current spellings of Aymara and Quechuan Indian terms used in the national literature, though recognizing that these are constantly changing, and I use the Spanish term *cacique* for Indian noble, which is the norm in the Bolivian literature, rather than *kuraka*, which is the Quechuan term used in Peruvian studies.

Menlo Park, California  
August 2001