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**BOOK REVIEW**

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**Oscar Olivera (in collaboration with Tom Lewis),  
!Cochabamba! Water War in Bolivia. Cambridge,  
Massachusetts: South End Press, 2004, 224 pp.,  
\$40.00 cloth/\$16 paper.**

Reviewed by **Jeffery R. Webber**, University of Toronto

This book addresses the savage neoliberal assault on the Bolivian working class over the last twenty years and the incipient forms of building a revolutionary resistance and alternative from below. While it tells the story of the 2000 Water War in the city of Cochabamba and the impact of neoliberalism on Bolivia in particular, its implications are much further-reaching. Oscar Olivera, the principal author of !Cochabamba! and a shoe factory worker and activist leader, insists on an internationalist perspective that links popular struggles across the globe, and especially within Latin America.

This concise book – effectively a collaboration between Oscar Olivera and the American socialist Tom Lewis, with chapter contributions from Raquel Gutiérrez-Aguilar and Álvaro García Linera – is an inspirational account of the beginnings of popular struggle against neoliberal capitalism in Bolivia, a country that has seen the toppling through mass struggle of two neoliberal presidents since the Water War in Cochabamba: Gonzalo (Goni) Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003, and Carlos Mesa Gisbert in June 2005. !Cochabamba! is clear, accessible, and uncompromised in its radical political orientation. As such, it is a rare tool for activists and serious scholars alike, who seek both to understand and to change the current world order.

The book makes a serious contribution to three areas of current debate and discussion. First, it chronicles the events of the February and April 2000 urban-rural rebellions in Cochabamba which together constitute the Water War. Most fundamentally, on this point, the authors argue that these moments of popular revolt were certainly about much more

than water, as important as water was and continues to be. Second, !Cochabamba! challenges liberal perspectives of democracy and posits a much richer alternative based on self-organization from below and assembly-style decision-making. Finally, both Olivera and García Linera point out the new character of the working class under neoliberalism and the implications for building effective working class struggle.

With regard to the Water War, Olivera shows how a multi-class, rural-urban coalition threw out a multinational water consortium and reversed the World Bank-driven privatization of local water systems. Peasants, environmental groups, factory workers, architects, economists, and others, converged in a monumental struggle from below. The people's struggle and the expulsion of Aguas del Tunari – the major player being American transnational Bechtel – demonstrated, according to Olivera, that “it is ordinary working people who achieved justice,” that “the ghosts of past times of terror [local dictatorships] were defeated on the blockades,” and that, “we want democracy...” (49). The Water War was the first step in a cycle of resistance against the neoliberal economic and political system that was first established in Bolivia in 1985.

In terms of reconceptualizing democracy, the model of reference at the regional level of Cochabamba is the Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida (Coalition of Defense of Water and Life), the key popular axis of mobilization and decision-making during the Water War. According to Gutiérrez-Aguilar, “Basic aspects of assembly-style democracy were reborn inside the Coordinadora.” Between November 1999 and April 2000, “collective meetings evolved from assemblies to city-wide ‘town meetings’ at the height of the April mobilization and have become a permanent trait of the Coordinador’s daily practice” (56). At a more general level, García Linera points out that “a number of times in 2000 (February, April, and September-October), this dense web of assemblies and plebian democratic practices not only demanded rights from the state with its system of parties and parliament, but also replaced the state [on a local level] as the mechanism of government, as the system of mediation, and as the culture of obedience” (81).

Fundamentally, Olivera’s call is for a revitalized socialism from below, and he deserves a lengthy quotation on the matter: “It is a question of organizing working people, ordinary people, and people who do not live off the labour of others and having them take into their own hands the control, use and ownership of collective and communal wealth. The true opposite of privatization is the social reappropriation of wealth by working-class society itself – self-organized in communal structures of management, in neighborhood associations, and in the rank and file” (156-157). Many social movements hope to realize this vision at a national level within Bolivia through a Constituent Assembly constituted by and through them, rather than established through the existing state and political parties which would simply re-establish existing social hierarchies.

Finally, on the question of the “new working class,” both García Linera and Olivera point out that while rates of unionized workers have plummeted, this hardly signifies the disappearance of the working class. Indeed, the working class has expanded under neoliberalism, but now lives more precariously, without job security, with lower wages, temporary contracts, and so on. Replacing the “Fordist” model of large factories, production processes in the neoliberal period have been fragmented into smaller and smaller production units. “An economic model is emerging,” writes García Linera, “based on the fragmentation of workplaces and the atomization of people in small centers of production that are then horizontally joined with other sectors of the commercial economy” (67).

Resistance and struggle within the new working class has, therefore, to adjust to the new environment. Effective struggle means, “to build organizational links to ‘irregular’ workers (and this includes temporaries, sub-contracted workers, piecework laborers, and seasonal employees). This strategy needs to encompass every factory, every mine, every enterprise – whether or not it is privatized – and the hundreds of little subcontracting workshops” (124). Critically important, Olivera argues, is the “need to understand our struggle against neoliberalism as an international one – as a struggle in which the fates of ordinary Bolivians or Argentines or Ecuadorians or Venezuelans or Brazilians, as well as the peoples of every Latin American nation, remain crucially interdependent” (150).

To conclude, a few words of critique. After an important intervention on the new working class, García Linera dresses his theory up in the terribly pretentious and unhelpful “multitude” concept: “For our part, we will work the concept of the multitude to mean a block of collective action through which the subaltern classes give rise to autonomous, organized structures in relation to hegemonic discursive and symbolic structures” (85). This contributes less than nothing to our understanding of the new working class.

With regard to “new” forms of organizing, García Linera’s emphasis on territorially-based popular organizations (71-73), and Gutiérrez-Aguilar’s loose references to undifferentiated “Cochabambinos” (residents of Cochabamba) and “the ordinary population,” tend to obscure class distinctions and hierarchies within these units. Admittedly, this is ameliorated at various points in the book through reference to unity between those who “do not live off the labor of another’s labor” (78).

A potentially more serious criticism is the role that Oscar Olivera himself plays in the Coordinadora and the extent to which this is emblematic of personalistic and Big-Man trends in Bolivian politics and social movements more generally. This warrants scrutiny. At minimum, however, Olivera does not brag about his role in social movement leadership, and his centrality to the uprisings in Cochabamba. Other figures in Bolivian

social movements are prone to just such activity. At the same time, despite proclamations that the Coordinadora is a “horizontal” forum of politics, it is difficult to overlook the very large role seemingly played by one man: Oscar Olivera.

!Cochabamba! is a key reference tool for understanding contemporary struggles in Bolivia. I encourage all social justice, labour, and socialist activists to read this book. It will also make a great contribution to the undergraduate curriculum at universities.