

Bolivia's Evo Morales: Capitalism and Plastic No, Mother Earth and Indigenous Products, Yes

Contributed by Jan Lundberg, in Cochabamba
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At the People's World Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, the consistent message is ecological, indigenous, communitarian and anti-corporate. The great majority of speakers sound radical and have the support of the thousands of attendees. The message is welcome at the top, in the person of Evo Morales, the indigenous Aymara former farmer and union organizer who is Bolivia's president.

Two glaring omissions at the conference seem to be the issues of cars and proliferation of technology. These are either considered extremely hard to tackle, or just a byproduct of capitalist excess – as if these problems will take care of themselves in a socialist, people-centered economy. Bolivia is plagued by cars and trucks, while bicycling is quite rare. If bikes were maximized here, this would be good technology that empowers many at low cost. Instead, motor vehicles, including many buses, are totally dominant and in need of tune-ups. One urban professional asked me with hope whether electric vehicles were advancing in the U.S. (I had to disillusion him and explain why it won't happen on a huge scale.) An overt embrace of technology as opposed to simple, natural living was in the form of a telephone corporation's ad slogan prominent at the stadium where Morales spoke: "Technology for a Better Life."

An unresolved issue seems to be Bolivia's petroleum development. Hydrocarbon industries were nationalized in 2006, and applauding it is tempting. However, does Mother Earth care who owns and controls the extracted fossil fuels that change the climate? Bolivia fully intends to explore and exploit the anti-capitalist petroleum. For what, more fuel for motor vehicles? Agricultural chemicals? Plastic production?

We shall see how the contradictory sentiments and temptations are translated into policy. The president of the nationalized petroleum industries told me he believes the world peak of oil extraction is "Not yet. 2012 or 2014." Carlos Villegas Quiroga's job is to somehow fit the maximization of oil and gas exploration and exploitation into a Mother Earth ethic. But with global peak oil here or around the corner, and climate change accelerating, Bolivia may not have much time to obtain prosperity. One does not see corporate logos such as Exxon, Chevron, Shell or BP; rather, the small logo of YPFB: Yacimientos Petroliferos Fiscales Bolivianos. There are many aspiring consumers in Bolivia who could see incomes rise and government services better funded, but not if a petrocollapse scenario takes the wind out of the sails of world oil demand.

President Evo Morales entertained and inspired the conference crowd on April 20 in a coliseum by holding up plastic products for display, pointing out that they contaminate the environment and don't biodegrade [see photos]. He compared a plastic poncho and plate to natural products such as a clay cup and plate. He took a beautiful traditionally woven poncho of wool and showed how no water could pass through it -- a military officer seated behind him helped hold the poncho and pour water on it. He then held the plastic poncho and said "Nothing goes through (no pasa nada) but it contaminates." As I told the Los Tiempos reporter, with this global media act he has become the leading world figure opposing plastic pollution.

I later gave the President the award winning documentary “Our Synthetic Sea” about plastics in the ocean and our bodies – in the Spanish version as well, “Mar Sintetico.” An attaché accepted it, as Morales was busy listening to a speech by his fiery vice president Álvaro García Linera, while sitting next to the Hollywood actress in Pocahontas.

Morales' statements came at the inauguration of the conference where on his way he inspected hundreds of troops, after the crowd of thousands were treated to numerous musical acts offering traditional sounds and lyrics of resistance and solidarity. World representatives from five continents also warmed up the crowd who had the blazing sun as well.

Morales is at home with being the most ecological of heads of state because of his indigenous background. Pachamama, or Mother Earth, is a deity or spiritual concept as strong as the Catholic Church's ideas that coexist. Pachamama tells us that “you can't sell the land. Harmony with nature, human rights, defense of Mother Earth and of water and biodiversity” are compatible with a “communitarian, socialist system.” He started his talk by saying that people struggle for life and equality, but the capitalist system pays most people in the world \$2 a day. He said, “capitalism is synonymous with annihilation of people and the planet.”

Morales is not a typical leftist leader looking to divide differently the pie being consumed. He praised indigenous plants such as coca and manzanilla (camomile), and touted quinoa as the best food in the world. He compared these to transgenic and chemically-grown crops “which can be eaten but can't nourish.” He criticized hormone-laced chicken and Coca Cola -- “Better to drink our corn beverages.”

After his demonstration of indigenous and campesino practices of making biodegradable clay plates, and winning this press-credentialed activist's heart with his educational and fun attack on plastics, he wound up his talk by distinguishing once again that “the capitalist system invents wars when capitalists can't sell arms.” He spoke of the right to water -- he and the city of Cochabamba near the conference site are famous for kicking out the predatory Bechtel Corp. as the privatized water utility. What's more, “the right to water means not having chemicals in it.” Why? As he said, “these rights extend to all plants and animals and Mother Earth.”

Morales has the world's attention as almost no other head of state does, after the disappointment of Copenhagen and the way financial bandits have shown their basic immunity to mild reformists such as Barack Obama. Morales reached out to them in any case, writing a few days ago: “The 192 governments at the United Nations have also been invited to attend and challenged to hear the voices of civil society and together to develop joint proposals that cannot be ignored by governments subordinated to transnational capitalist economic powers.”

As far as Culture Change can tell, the matter of overpopulation is not being addressed, although it is possibly being mentioned on Panels at the Conference. Bolivians are generally close to the land, with excellent production from small-scale farming and gardening. An executive with the nationalized petroleum industry informed me that 80% of Bolivians are not dependent on petroleum, so only 20% of the population will be in danger from the loss of supplies due to peak oil's effects. I pointed out to him that about 99% of USAnians are seriously dependent on the stuff. As with parts of the U.S., Bolivia's long-term water supply problems (due to melting glaciers) does not bode well for growing population or maintaining it (Bolivia has almost ten million people and rising). No doubt many at the Conference believe population size is not nearly as threatening as capitalism.

A Politically and Ideologically Energized Conference

Most of the speeches have been rich in political passion while light on hard information. The position of the government which organized the conference, and the position of speakers and most attendees, is that "The principal cause of climate change is capitalism" -- written on a sign outside a grassroots-activist workshop.

While it's true that the world needs action and not a mono-diet of just more information, the statements made at the podium in Tiquipaya (the university town of the Conference outside Cochabamba) have been light on specifics for saving Mother Earth. Evo Morales has been the exception, such as with his suggestions on natural foods and materials -- and rejecting plastic and Coca Cola.

How far can the global climate justice movement get by fighting capitalism? There is strong logic in attacking an unfair system that corrupts governance and divides people into competing workers. The failure of the Copenhagen U.N. climate meeting in December was definitely related to corporate business interests pulling puppet strings of politicians.

But can a social movement do such things as turn around overpopulation and make collapse survivable for everyone? Most of us looking at the vulnerabilities of the dominant system and the state of the ecosystem believe not. At this conference there is no evidence of awareness of petrocollapse or collapse by any other name. There is fear of climate change and anger at capitalism and all its ills (consumerism, loss of community, ecocide). What is unsaid is that because climate change is out of control, getting rid of capitalism may be too late. Abolishing capitalism at midnight around the world would leave us with about the same climate-crisis challenge. Fortunately, Evo Morales advocates one more practice: massive planting of native trees. As climate author Albert Bates has told me, in a matter of months the excess carbon in the atmosphere can be removed if everyone in the world planted trees daily.

An exception to the Conference's mainstay of criticizing capitalism and upholding nature and indigenous rights is some of the workshops. I am scheduled to perform a bit of my eco-music for a workshop on the bicycle's role in upending capitalism. The workshop's organizers are doing something about the low use of bicycles especially in dangerous urban areas; the countryside enjoys more bike use. The nation is of course mountainous, but the car domination of the metro area of Cochabamba, which has a million people, has no justification.

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Further reading:

Conference website www.cmpcc.org

"Our Synthetic Sea / Mar Sintetico" documentary movie from Algalita Marine Research Foundation

Albert Bates The Great Change

Ciclistas del valle de Cochabamba

Photographs by Bronwyn Lundberg