

Extracted Economies, Extracted Lives: Mining in Bolivia and Mexico 1880-1980

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Honors Thesis: University of Wyoming Honors Programs

History Department

Graduation: Spring, 2018

May 18, 2018

## INTRODUCTION: A POWERFUL, DEEP ROOTED STORY

“I Bury Myself Alive Everyday”, “My Lungs Are Exhausted,” “You Can Die From Working”, “How The Poor Get Buried.” These are the chapter titles of *I Spent My Life in the Mines: The Story of Juan Rojas, Bolivian Tin Miner*, compiled by anthropologist June Nash.<sup>1</sup> This story is just one of many conveying the tragedy that is life in the particularly brutal, dreary, and disenchanting mines of Bolivia. Undoubtedly, mining involves hard, dangerous and often degrading work, mucking through the bowels of the earth for minerals, jewels, and other materials, from which the miner, especially the Latin American indigenous one, gets little benefit. Thus, the field of mining has long been one defined by poor labor conditions due to the nature of the work. In Latin America, specifically Bolivia and Mexico, however mining conditions have moved far beyond a tale of dirty, hard work to one of brutality, massacre and at points outright war between workers and representatives of the overbearing and nearly omnipotent mining company. These confrontations exemplify the edges of capitalist strife between the overbearing global-bourgeoisie of multinational companies, and the poorest of the poor, the landless and routinely exploited rural indigenous peoples of Latin American. Thus, I was drawn to the extreme nature of the conditions which give rise to such a conflictual and brutal relationship, and I began a study from this perspective, enthralled by the explicitness of brutal labor relationships in this sphere.

Certainly contributing to these noted conditions is the general situation of Latin American countries as a producer of primary materials for industrial economies, especially those of Europe and The United States. Thus, the story of mining, and indeed many other primary resource driven

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<sup>1</sup> June Nash, *I Spent My Life in the Mines: The Story of Juan Rojas, Bolivian Tin Miner*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 1992)

economic activities the world over, is an extreme one of extraction. It is one which shows the depravity of drawing out a nation's, or previously colony's, wealth from its land and its most vulnerable people and sending it beyond its borders. These economic factors then are paramount in the conditions found in the mines of Bolivia and Mexico, which will be the geographic focuses of this work, and inexorably contributed to the ways in which mining companies and mining managers exploited the workers of these mines. My goal is an assessment of the lives and conditions of miners, and their foreign managers, with as rich an understanding of their context as possible as it is integral to this conditions. As such in a broad arc, this study will begin with a breakdown of the economic situation of Latin America, moving from there into a discussion of the capitalist hierarchy created by this system, the general labor history of Latin America, and finally an assessment of the "on the ground" conditions of the mines of Bolivia and Mexico. These general themes will be discussed with a conversation between primary resources – from the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming and June Nash's invaluable records of the stories of Bolivian miners – and an array of secondary scholarship in economics, social studies, politics, and political and social history. +

In a general depiction of Latin American history, mining plays an incredibly central role; both in understanding the extractive economies that developed in the countries within this complexly defined region and the hierarchies that manifested as a result of the centrality of mining to many of their economies. Of course, when the Spanish thoroughly explored and claimed the so-called "new world" they were directly driven by a search for cities of gold, silver, and other precious extractable materials that has been well documented.<sup>2</sup> In fact, mining and the

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<sup>2</sup> John Silver, "The Myth of El Dorado," *Latin American History* 34, (Autumn, 1992): 4, accessed March 24, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uwyo.edu/stable/4289179>.

extraction of silver and gold was a central feature of the 300 years characterized by colonialism the world over, as these and other minerals joined the production of other key colonial commodities like sugar, cotton, and tobacco. This directly led to the success of European Imperial economies at the expense of both the environments and peoples of the places of extraction. For their trouble, indigenous and African workers were at the receiving end of mercury poisoning, respiratory diseases of a wide variety and numerous maiming incidents, while the fruits of their labor gained admiration and praise in the bright artifacts of Spanish cathedrals.<sup>3</sup>

Mexico and Bolivia were early sites for the Spanish version of the colonial extractive economy. As June Nash puts it specifically and succinctly, “Bolivia’s entry into world history begins with the mines.”<sup>4</sup> Some of the more famous silver mines of the Spanish Empire were in what is now Mexico and Bolivia. From the mines of San Luis Potosí in Mexico and Potosí in Bolivia came the silver, long recognized as the chief prize of the extracted wealth of the new world, in massive loads of many tons.<sup>5</sup> Both were established shortly after Spanish contact in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and used a forced labor system of *Repartimiento* (Spanish for distribution, partition, or divide) called among the quecha speaking people of modern-day Bolivia the *mita*. In this system the indigenous peoples of the new world were forced to work in the mines, and other Spanish economic and public projects, for allotted lengths of time.<sup>6</sup> While not quite slavery, the system resulted in slavery-like conditions and was clearly an exploitative labor practice.

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<sup>3</sup> Myrna Santiago, “Extracting Histories: Mining, Workers, and Environment,” *New Environmental Histories of Latin America and the Caribbean* 7, (2013): 81, accessed April 20, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26241138>.

<sup>4</sup> June Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines*, (New York, Colombia University Press, 1979), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Santiago, “Extracting Histories,” 81.

<sup>6</sup> Heidi V. Scott, “The Contested Spaces of the Subterranean: Colonial Governmentality, Mining and the Mita in Early Spanish Peru,” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 11, Special issue (2012): 8 accessed March 21, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24394832>.

Unsurprisingly, some of the worst conditions for *Mita* workers were the silver mines of 16<sup>th</sup> century Peru like Potosí, which became particularly notorious.<sup>7</sup> This was a part of the Spanish greater project of “Christian Imperialism” through which native peoples supposedly gave up material wealth and sovereignty in return for knowledge of a Christian God. The *mita* began a precedent for both cheap labor, a lack of respect of indigenous laborers at the lowest level, and a paternalistic, powerful and consuming approach to labor that will be seen throughout this paper.

Of course mining in this period could possibly be termed as the most dangerous and destructive of any periods discussed henceforth, if such a contest were the goal of this paper. A Jesuit describing the mines at Potosí (in modern day Bolivia and the site of mines to this day) described that workers toiled, “In perpetual darkness, with no idea of when it is day or night; and as these are places never visited by the sun, not only is there perpetual darkness but it is also extremely cold, with a very heavy atmosphere unfit for man's nature; and so it happens that those who enter the mine for the first time feel weak and dizzy.”<sup>8</sup> In Potosí and San Luís Potosí, also manifest the difficulties associated with wealth gained in such a brutal manner as Spanish laid claim to underground riches, while turning a blind eye to the acknowledged perils of mining. By the end of the sixteenth Century, the Spanish ran smoothly established extractive economies in Mexico and Bolivia (then Peru) which centered on large scale mining and the use of forced indigenous labor.<sup>9</sup>

## ECONOMIES OF EXTRACTION

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<sup>7</sup> Scott, “The Contested Spaces of the Subterranean,” 12.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, “The Contested Spaces of the Subterranean,” 8.

<sup>9</sup> Rafael Doblado and Gustavo A Marrero, “The role of the Spanish imperial state in the mining-led growth of Bourbon Mexico’s Economy,” *The Economic History Review* 64, No. 3 (August 2011): pp. 857, accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41262480>.

From these colonial legacies arose the system in which Bolivia, and to a lesser extent Mexico, became members of the group of countries in the so-called, using the terminology of the Cold War, “third world” who have little prospect in the global economy other than to, “present themselves as exporters of raw materials.”<sup>10</sup> These basic economic processes and condition were key to the Bolivian and Mexican economies’ roles in the Spanish empire and would continue to be the mainstay of their economies into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and modern period.

As such, my interpretation of the colonial history of mines is associated with scholarship that tends to place an outsized emphasis on such colonial institutions as the basis for many of the economic problems that present themselves in Latin America to this day, especially slow growth and an uneven distribution of wealth and income. Recently there has been some push-back in the historiography of mining in Latin America, illustrated by Rafael Dobado and Gustavo Marrero’s work on the Spanish Imperial State and mining in Bourbon Mexico. Their work suggests that the economic relationships in this context, in very specific instances, benefitted the local conditions of the extracted economies as well. However, even in this study the centrality of mining to the early (18<sup>th</sup> century) Mexican economy is undoubted, and the focus on this extractive economy is clear as mining is conceded as the main purveyor of economic growth.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless of the specific roots that caused economic disadvantage of states in the Latin American region, few, if any, scholars in a wide variety of fields would argue against their clear presence. Many theories have been purported to describe these problems, all of which have a clear relevance to the state of mining in Latin America, and Bolivian and Mexico specifically, in

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<sup>10</sup> Dirk Kruijt, “Mining and Miners in Latin America: An Introduction,” *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 32, June 1982): pp. 25, accessed February, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25675124>.

<sup>11</sup> Doblado and Marrero, The role of the Spanish imperial state in the mining-led growth of Bourbon Mexico’s Economy,” 856.

the concerned century of 1880-1980. Particularly applicable summations and assessments of this scholarship follow.

Originally, scholars studying development and economics in Latin America saw a trend toward continually steady progress as the result of western foreign investment in the region's economies. Additionally these studies, largely from the 1950s and 1960s, attempted to show that the economies of Latin American nations could follow the example of the western development, towards the glittering goal of a so-called "modern economy."<sup>12</sup> However, more recent scholarship has stressed the problems that define Latin American economies and their relationship to more robust economies on the world stage, especially after the industrialization of Europe and the United States. Key in this scholarship is the idea that capitalism in Latin America developed in a unique way to that for western economies and functions in a different manner, often as a subordinate to these economies.<sup>13</sup>

Economist Ben R. Schneider comes from a school which describes the Latin American economies as typically positioned within a system called "Hierarchical Capitalism." His definition of this system carries many key components which relate explicitly to the mining within Latin American extractive economies. Again, this condition of Latin American economies grows from deep historical roots associated with the colonial past.<sup>14</sup> Schneider argues that countries in the region are subject to a hierarchical system "characterized by multinational

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Carriere, Nigel Haworth, and Jacqueline Roddick, "Proletarianisation, Industrial Relations, and Patterns of Action," in *The State, Industrial Relations and the Labour Movement in Latin America* ed. Carriere, Haworth & Roddick (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Bergquist, "Latin American Labour History in Comparative Perspective: Notes on the Insidiousness of Cultural Imperialism," *Labour* 25, (Spring, 1990), pp. 190.

<sup>14</sup> Ben R. Schneider, *Hierarchical Capitalism in Latin America: Business Labor, and the Challenges of Equitable Development*, (New York: Colombia University Press), pg. 8

corporations, diversified business groups, low skills, and segmented labor markets.”<sup>15</sup> This will most plainly be seen in extractive mining economies through the manifestation and power of multinational corporations within this framework. Additionally, he purports that the broader political system favors “incumbents” and “insiders” – in other words the economically advantaged, pro-business, and conservative minded – who press governments to “sustain core economic institutions.”<sup>16</sup> In turn, the state then plays a decisive role in shaping and enforcing labor strategies of multinational corporations.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Schneider assesses that such a system has not generated a majority of good paying jobs, nor is it likely to.<sup>18</sup> Broadly then capitalism in Latin America is characterized by, “weak or missing formal institutions, undeveloped financial markets, unenforced labor regulations, and shallow and partial coverage by the skills regime.”<sup>19</sup> All of which, even without significant study of economics, are clearly problematic both conditionally and individually for Latin Americans attempting to make a living within this economy and integral to the experience of miners.

Whether termed “Hierarchical Capitalism” or simply a disadvantaged position on the world stage, Latin American economies were exploited weightily for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even beginning at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As such, the countries belonging to the “global north” (examples include the United States, Britain, Germany and other major colonial and now neo-liberal powers) have milked and abused the economies, people, natural resources, and environments of the countries of the “global south” (the Countries of Africa, and

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<sup>15</sup> Ben R. Schneider, *Hierarchical Capitalism in Latin America: Business Labor, and the Challenges of Equitable Development*, (New York: Colombia University Press), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Schneider, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Schneider, 188

<sup>18</sup> Schneider, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Schneider, 7



Latin America especially).<sup>20</sup> In a manner, Latin America remained in a subordinate role economically, as new industrialized world powers adapted and co-opted the extractive economic model of Spanish empire to suite new needs.

Scholars often term the way in which Latin American economies, after their independence, were utilized by European powers and companies, “capitalist imperialism.” Specifically, in their thorough—and admittedly quite radical politically, and controversial—ruination and condemnation of Canadian mining companies activities in Latin America titled “Imperialism and Resistance: Canadian Mining Companies in Latin America,” Canadian political scientists Todd Gordon offer seething assessments of this situation. As simply summarized as possible, they argue that capitalist imperialism results as a logical step of a “socioeconomic system” motivated by “competitive pursuit of profit based on exploitation of labor,” which eventually results in an economy “prone to over-accumulation.”<sup>21</sup> With regard to Latin American countries and others in the “global south” this over-accumulation is especially key as the ravenous economies of Industrial-Capitalist and increasingly global powers sought new markets for, and cheap labor and raw materials to produce, a gambit of newly profitable and mass producible commodities. As one can imagine, and we shall see in the poignant examples of the mining industries of Mexican and Bolivia, this process came with harm and disruption forcefully reorganizing people’s lives according to the “whims” of foreign capital.<sup>22</sup>

The explosion of the foreign capital funded mining certainly seems to represent many of the key characteristics of this important, and relatively recently, debated historiographical

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<sup>20</sup> Todd Gordon and Jeffrey R. Webber, “Imperialism and Resistance: Canadian Mining Companies in Latin America” *Third World Quarterly* 29, NO. 1 (2008): 64, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20455026>

<sup>21</sup> Gordon and Webber, 65

<sup>22</sup> Gordon and Webber, 65

conception of colonial imperialism. As a result of the operations of these new empires in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, mining in Latin America expanded to levels not seen since the peak of Spanish gold and silver mining operations in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The reason for this renewal in mining activities seems obvious. The industrialization of Europe and its newly consumption heavy industry and society created a thirst for natural resources which fueled the boom in Latin American mining. Importantly more specific reasons for an increase in American involvement will be discussed later. As such, “previously ignored natural products” abruptly acquired value in this new economic system which expanded rapidly in scope throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup>

Nearly every Latin American economy during this period produced some resource for the growing consumption of the developed world fueled by its revolution in Industry. For example, everything from the bat *guano* of Peru, to the nitrates of the desert shared by Bolivia, Peru, and Chile would be used in massive amounts in the quickly expanding European agricultural economy of the 1840s-1890s.<sup>24</sup> These booms in economy afforded by extraction resources were tenuous at best and certainly not without significant issue.

Exemplifying this, the aforementioned success of the Peruvian *guano* economy was limited as its height only lasted from the 1840s to the 1870s, by which time these prehistoric reserves of bat-droppings were for all intents and purposes exhausted.<sup>25</sup> Such a volatile industry also reflected the brutality, and danger of the extractive economy for underprivileged and often indigenous workers, as a significant portion of the Rapa Nui (the famously extinct culture of Easter Island) population died of sickness and exhaustion as forced laborers in the *guano* mines

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<sup>23</sup>Myrna Santiago, “Extracting Histories, 81

<sup>24</sup> Santiago, 82

<sup>25</sup> Santiago, 82

of Peru.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the thousands of workers hired by Bolivian magnates to mine the nitrates of the Atacama Desert faced understandably intolerable conditions toiling through “demanding, harsh, and exhausting work” in one of the driest places on the planet.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, these exploitative, extractive, and morally questionable processes which created South American fertilizers drove the industrialization of western agriculture, and western industrialization.

At the same time, competition over the aforementioned suddenly valuable nitrates of the Atacama Desert by Latin American elites sparked a resource war. Chile emerged victorious from this War of the Pacific (1879-1883) – fought between themselves, Peru, and Bolivia – increasing their territory by a third. Such failure left continually disadvantaged Bolivian utterly landlocked.<sup>28</sup> This is one of the many catastrophes that both crippled Bolivia economically while forcing even further reliance on extracting its natural resources like Tungsten, Tin, and whatever silver “the Spanish had left.”<sup>29</sup> Additionally such an international debacle, associated with others like the Chaco War lost to Paraguay in 1935, led to a continued sense of disillusion and lack of control among Bolivians. Said one miner interviewed by Nash who lamented, “in the course of time, outsiders have robbed our country and we have lost a great deal.”<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding high human toll and toil, these highly contested nitrates would be fought over with little lasting effect to the concerned Latin American economies, as by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century such products of “nature’s bounty” lost value to synthetic fertilizers.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the cyclical nature of the Latin

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<sup>26</sup>Adrienne L. Kaeppler “Sculptures of Barkcloth and Wood from Rapa Nui: Symbolic Continuities and Polynesian Affinities” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 44, (Fall 2003): pp. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Santiago, 82

<sup>28</sup> Santiago, 83

<sup>29</sup> June Nash, *I Spent My Life in the Mines*, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us*, 40.

<sup>31</sup> Santiago, 82

American economy of extraction would trudge on with little added benefit to the conditions of the countries concerned.

In summation, the mining economy became a part of a structure created within Latin American economies that was initially constructed by direct imperial exploitation then developed under the control of multinational companies which controlled the whole system of “processing transport, commerce, and distribution.”<sup>32</sup> Despite these drawbacks, mining in Latin America would grow rapidly through the late nineteenth century and 20<sup>th</sup> century as Latin American elites and policy makers, convinced that an export economy “paved the way for progress,” or at least provided personal enrichment, passed laws to welcome foreign investment. As a result, they exposed their ecosystem to “exploitation” and procured the labor required to meet the demands of foreign capital.<sup>33</sup> In this vein for example, Bolivian tin would be extracted in mass by foreign companies as a key component of a number of commodities like canned goods, in addition to its strategic use in the creation of weapons of war.<sup>34</sup>

## AMERICAN FOREIGN INVESTMENT

American foreign capital and investment both in resources and individual energies constituted a key portion of the foreign capital which drove Latin American mining and other extractive economies. Additionally, the hallmark of the so-called American informal empire was the aforementioned process of capitalist imperialism as scholars have dully noted. Sources in this vein were also the most widely represented in primary research from the University of

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<sup>32</sup> Dirk Kruijt, “Mining and Miners in Latin America: An Introduction,” *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 32, June 1982): pp. 25, accessed February, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25675124>.

<sup>33</sup> Santiago, 82

<sup>34</sup> Mark Hendrickson, “‘Sesame That Opens the Doors of Trade:’ John Hays Hammond and Foreign Direct Investment in Mining, 1880-1920,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 16, (2017), 326.

Wyoming's American Heritage Center, who provided a primary American perspective of the respective mining situations of Mexico and Bolivia.

Riccardo Salvatore's assessment of the so-called Anglo-American Enterprise of knowledge is especially relevant to these examples of highly educated and advantaged mining engineers and managers' study of Latin America, with the goal of extracting its resources. Salvatore asserts that this process described the other (Latin America) as in perennial deficit or vacuum, ascribing meaning to 'the mission' of North Americans as they created an informal empire.<sup>35</sup>

Within this context American foreign direct investment in mining reached landmark levels at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This evidenced as mining engineers like those of sources from the American Heritage Center of Eben E. Olcott (who worked in Mexico at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), H.W.C. Prommel (who worked in Mexico after World War Two), and William Lynch (who worked in both Mexico and Bolivia in the 1930s-1940s), represented a new American approach to foreign investment. This new approach focused on export of, and extraction for, American products in areas where investment would be secure, labor recruitable and profits subject to repatriation.<sup>36</sup> Investment in the mining industries by specifically US capital and in the careers of mining management, in this period is then key to understanding the conditions of the mines, and the perception offered on the mining experience from observers that represented this generalized push in US economic policy.

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<sup>35</sup> Riccardo D. Salvatore, "The Enterprise of knowledge: Representational Machines of Informal Empire," *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), edited by Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Riccardo D. Salvatore

<sup>36</sup> Hendrickson, 327.

Increase in foreign mining efforts by US actors directly contradicted a conception of American exceptionalism that was proving to be a less than accurate one. American abundance in natural resources, impressive though it was, could not in perpetuity account for the resources needed for American industry. Indeed, there were some necessary materials that had few or no domestic sources, leading to the conclusion by contemporary mining engineer John Hays Hammond that, “there is little likelihood that we shall be self-sufficient.”<sup>37</sup> The Great War in particular had made it clear to Americans the need to expand foreign investment in mining as the United States had confronted shortages of materials critical to the war effort. As United States Geological Survey Director George Otis Smith wrote in 1920, “the U-boat threat taught us that certain minerals, even the names of which were unfamiliar to most citizens, were in fact ‘key’ commodities without which basic industries could not operate.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, experts counseled that foreign extractive natural resource policies would be necessary to ensure a steady flow of materials to American manufacturers both in peacetime and as a measure of national security should there be a “recurrence of conditions like those existing the Great War.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, foreign investment in mining also responded to the problems of overproduction and over saving in American manufacturing by “opening up markets and exporting investment capital.”<sup>40</sup>

Material evidence for this increase in American investment in mining is palpable. For example, raw material importation to the US increased from 8 percent in 1850 to 33 percent in 1900. In addition, US direct investment in mining enterprises abroad would grow from 134\$ million in 1897 to 720\$ Million by 1900.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Hendrickson, 326

<sup>38</sup> Hendrickson, 325

<sup>39</sup> Hendrickson, 326

<sup>40</sup> Hendrickson, 327

<sup>41</sup> Hendrickson, 328

## EXTRACTION ECONOMIES AND LATIN AMERICAN LABOR RELATIONS

The extractive economy had particular effects on the distinct system of labor relations that have long characterized Latin America. Of course, these have reached specifically brutal points of conflict in the mines of Bolivia and Mexico as has been briefly alluded to, much like the particularly exploitative mining labor systems used by the Spanish. Historiographically, studies of organized labor in Latin America have fallen victim to propositions of progress, wherein unionization and labor organization was seen as a relatively “primitive” developments which would eventually be “superseded... by the emergence of a European-style working class.”<sup>42</sup> This like many previous interpretations has been struck down as too focused on European models of development while ignoring Latin American realities and “fundamental differences in environment.”<sup>43</sup>

As such, this study follows more recent scholarship’s portrait of industrial relations and labor organization in Latin America, while attempting to avoid the well cited problem of undue comparative analysis between the situation of Latin America and that of western ‘developed’ society and the ideas of that society be they liberal, Marxist or even traditionally conservative.<sup>44</sup> In this vein, a regional and general historical assessment of industrial labor relations within the region can be summarized as carrying distinct features of close governmental supervision, chronic conflict, legalism, and a “decentralized model of collective bargaining.”<sup>45</sup> For the

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Carriere, Nigel Haworth, and Jacqueline Roddick, “Proletarianisation, Industrial Relations, and Patterns of Action,” in *The State, Industrial Relations and the Labour Movement in Latin America* ed. Carriere, Haworth & Roddick (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 5.

<sup>43</sup> Jean Carriere, Nigel Haworth, and Jacqueline Roddick, 8

<sup>44</sup> Charles Bergquist, “Latin American Labour History in Comparative Perspective: Notes on the Insidiousness of Cultural Imperialism,” *Labour* 25, (Spring, 1990): 189, accessed December, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uwyo.edu/stable/25143345>.

<sup>45</sup> Efrén Córdova, “The Latin American Picture,” in *Industrial Relations in Latin America*, ed. Córdova (New York Praeger, 1984), 3.

majority of this history, and especially in the case of mining, this has meant immense power in the hands of multinational corporations which knew they were free from legislative and organized restraints, and developed business plans accordingly – reinforcing the conditions of hierarchical capitalism discussed earlier.<sup>46</sup> Within this context then studies have often focused on, and evidenced, elements of class struggle and a “conflictual framework,” as integral to Latin American labor relations.<sup>47</sup>

However, scholars of Latin American labor relations reach differing conclusions about these relations regarding the situations of the contemporary Bolivian and Mexican Economies specifically. This is a factor in the importance of this study, as an in depth look at the mining labor relations and conflicts in both countries through their context to determine, or at least provide new perspective on, the ramifications of said context. To this end, Efrén Córdova’s 1984 assessment of the “The Latin American Picture” Vis-a -Vis industrial labor relations concludes that by that time Mexico characterized a case where labor relations and collective bargaining had reached “an appreciable level of development and maturity.”<sup>48</sup> Alternatively, Córdova shows Bolivia in opposition to this finding and his general argument that labor relations had greatly improved by his time of writing, concluding that the Bolivian economy – particularly mining – represented labor relations characterized by “a high degree of conflict and confrontation” even in the “present.”<sup>49</sup> Bolivia exemplified, and exemplifies, issues with labor relations more generally as well with (again in 1984) “less than 20 percent of the economically active population” covered by labor legislation.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Schnieder, 7-8

<sup>47</sup> Córdova, 3

<sup>48</sup> Córdova, 4

<sup>49</sup> Córdova, 5

<sup>50</sup> Córdova, 5



It is from within this polarizing situation that much of our discussion about Bolivian and Mexican mining labor relations and conditions takes place as mines became a frontline in the fight for better conditions and livelihoods. Specifically in Bolivia, June Nash shares a striking first hand observation from an American Labor Organizer and observer M. Kyne – following a 1942 massacre with a death count possibly as high as 400 miners and others -- who she quotes as saying “collective bargaining does not exist in Bolivia at all... no genuine written collective contract has ever been adopted.” In the case of this ordeal, Kyne also reported that three major mine owners operating in Bolivia – Hochschild, Aramayo and Patiño – had met and developed a joint strategy in the wake of the strike, which in this case was enacted following the rejection and refusal to even negotiate on a wage increase by the Company. This joint strategy formed between the major mining companies with express support from then President Peñaranda, concluded Kline, “represented a political front for the mine interests.”<sup>51</sup> Such outright governmental support for company interests in labor disputes represents a recurring theme in these conflicts as well as recalling the trappings of hierarchical capitalism. Corroborating this in describing the company response to yet another round of strikes in 1949, Nash assesses that “administrators of the mines ruled autocratically, backed by a president who carried out their orders.”<sup>52</sup>

Both Bolivian mining labor organization in the 1930s-40s and Mexican efforts to the same ends, in the 1890s-1900s, faced employers and multinational companies that were unequivocally and staunchly anti-union. These institutions blamed unions for “promoting a pampered and lazy” working class, while accusing labor leaders of being radicals and communists. All the while, said companies fired troublemakers (often just workers with vocal

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<sup>51</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us*, 41.

<sup>52</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us*, 47.

union ties) with impunity, backed by government strike-dispersing muscle.<sup>53</sup> At the first signs of labor unrest in Bolivia for example mining companies would immediately bring in federal troops. As one of Nash's interviewee's who served in the Bolivian Army recounts he and other soldiers were called into mine on numerous occasions where they were quartered, paid, and kept on hand by mining companies until labor unrest passed, at which point they were often paid bonuses by the company for a job well-done.<sup>54</sup>

The position of multinational mining companies within labor relations in both Bolivia and Mexico was inexorably tied then to their previously disseminated power in both the local economies and through their ties to local governments. In the case of conflict in the Mexican mines in the 1880s-1910s, powerful mining companies like the copper mines of Cananea in the Sonora province took hardline anti-union positions. They followed a tradition of many of these companies, giving absolutely no concessions to labor in any fashion, reasoning that if they did so the creation of, or increase of power in, unions would manifest.<sup>55</sup> These companies could afford to take such a "hard line" because of the firm support they received from state and local officials.<sup>56</sup> Such a connection between foreign mining operations and local governments would even be reflected in the much later period covered of the late 1940s and 1950s by the diaries of mining engineer and geologist Harold W. C. Prommel at the archives of the American Heritage Center. These diaries detail many close interactions with the government in 1945-1952 when Prommel was present in the Sonora Province of Mexico including an interesting interaction

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<sup>53</sup>Jonathan C Brown, "Introduction: What is Workers Control?," in *Workers in Control in Latin America, 1930-1979*, ed. Jonathan C. Brown (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us*, 45.

<sup>55</sup> Michael J. Gonzales, "United States Copper Companies, the State, and Labour Conflict in Mexico, 1900-1910," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 3 (1993): 665, accessed March, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/158311>.

<sup>56</sup> Gonzales, 666.

where Prommel and his men provided transportation for the local governor after he had “radiator trouble.”<sup>57</sup>

In turn, proximity to support from local governments resulted from the prominent position Cananea’s copper mines held in the local economy. Specifically, the town of Cananea owed its very existence to the mines and mining capital as they “owned the most property, employed the most people, and paid the most taxes.”<sup>58</sup> The power of companies in Bolivia manifested similarly. For example, Bolivian mines often owned and controlled essentially everything in their enclave. In this setting, Companies owned and operated the hospital, school, company store, homes of workers and even the literal soil of the whole area. Indicatively, in the town and tungsten mining enclave of Chojilla, Bolivia at every turn workers encountered “the property – and the power of – the International Mining Company.”<sup>59</sup>

Despite the avowed obstacles presented by the power of mining companies Labor organization in both Mexico and Bolivia achieved high points of success and notable change to the status quo of conditions within their mines. These arguably surfaced most prominently in the period analyzed as one of “worker control” by Jonathan Brown and others from 1930-1970.<sup>60</sup> This period was facilitated by shifts caused by the great depression, which disrupted the reliance of Latin American economies up extractive processes since there was simply less capital to purchase the resulting products. Resulting then was an increase in rejection of free market doctrines, an uptick in state regulation of industrialization and a heightened sense of economic

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<sup>57</sup> Diary entry January 7, 1944, Box 7, 1944 Diary, Harold W. C. Prommel Papers 1914-1970, #02283, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>58</sup> Gonzales, 666

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Boeger, “Struggling for Emancipation: Tungsten Miners and the Bolivian Revolution,” in *Workers in Control in Latin America, 1930-1979*, ed. Jonathan C. Brown (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 217-218.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Brown, 2.

nationalism and desire to “nationalize basic industries.”<sup>61</sup> Politically this increase in radical labor resulted in a period of populism, revolution and growing state centralization while the Cardenas regime in Mexico and the Siles regime in Bolivia particularly forged multiclass political movements recognizing labor as integral to the political life of the nation.<sup>62</sup>

## INEQUALITY, BRUTALITY, AND RESISTANCE

As a result of all of these preconditions and the intersections of their many principals, from the economic, to the hierarchical, to the inter-relational, the lives of actual miners in Bolivia and Mexico in our concerned period are particularly interesting case studies. Put succinctly their lives were characterized by inequality and lack of dignity, subjected to the whims of powerful people and organizations, they worked dangerous and dirty jobs for little compensation. Referring back to the life that Juan Rojas ‘spent’ in the Bolivian mines the duality of the meaning of this word becomes apparent, he both ‘spent’ his time and literal days there, but he also spent an aspect of his humanity.<sup>63</sup> These miners, subject to the powers of hierarchical capitalism and the odds against them were unbowed however, the extraction of their lives was met with a myriad of resistance, and some would argue the seeds of outright revolution.<sup>64</sup>

Most Bolivian mine workers in our period were indigenously descended peasants, with few options to turn to, the same whose ancestors manned the brutal mines of the Spanish.<sup>65</sup> Befitting the labor climate demands of American and other foreign companies their labor was

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<sup>61</sup> Brown, 2-3

<sup>62</sup> Brown, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Nash, *I Spent my life in the Mines*

<sup>64</sup> Andrew Boeger, “Struggling for Emancipation: Tungsten Miners and the Bolivian Revolution,” in *Workers in Control in Latin America, 1930-1979*, ed. Jonathan C. Brown (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, 225

<sup>65</sup> Nash, 74

both recruitable and cheap.<sup>66</sup> Often this labor would be recruited by a system called the *reenganche* where workers were recruited with cash advances and various promises, however it is telling that as few as one in thirty of workers recruited this way worked in the mines for more than a month, “Faced with the demands and dangers of work underground and the low pay, many took what remained of their cash advance and fled.”<sup>67</sup>

As William Lynch noted in his biography about his time in Bolivia, “Miners were a mixture of between Indian and Spanish blood... to me the picture was also one of poverty and accompanying squalor, however picturesque.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Lynch and his the Hochschild company for which he was mine superintendent in Potosí, took advantage of the under-privileged nature of their prospective labor force, paying women 10 cents while men worked for 25 cents.<sup>69</sup> Also Lynch would assess after the fact that the operations of the mine from his perspective were “primitive” but not altogether “inefficient” stating, “One, like myself, had to become used to the fact that cheap hand labor is sometimes more economical than machinery, even though the picture is distasteful.”<sup>70</sup> Lynch was however – like many American mining engineers, mining companies as discussed earlier, and other foreign workers of the managing class – a staunch anti-unionist, noting earlier in his biography that he owed the success of a mine he worked at in

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<sup>66</sup> Gonzales, 665.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Boeger, “Struggling for Emancipation: Tungsten Miners and the Bolivian Revolution,” in *Workers in Control in Latin America, 1930-1979*, ed. Jonathan C. Brown (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 223.

<sup>68</sup> Pg. 69 of Lynch’s Biography “One Man’s Life”, 1973, Box 7, Biography, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Pg. 71 of “One Man’s Life,” 1973, Box 7, Biography, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

Jerome, Arizona to the fact “that in my 10 years of being in Jerome there was no unionization or any signs of labor trouble.”<sup>71</sup>

Conditions facing Mexican miners especially at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century consisted of similar trappings, certainly owing to the considerable similarities in contexts politically, economically and hierarchically on the World Stage. As Michael Gonzales puts in his work on the labor conflict at the Cananea mine from 1900-1910, the Mexican copper economy represented a fundamental contradiction in capitalist development, whereby massive capital was invested and profited from, but a substantively less portion reached local communities.<sup>72</sup> This again is a palpable reflection of the more global and conceptual position of mining in the economy and politics of our concerned period. Indeed, it was a stated goal of American mining exploration of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century that the “United States should extract as many natural resources from abroad as possible” while still staying isolated in most other industries and with respect to their own natural resources.<sup>73</sup> Mexican mining in this period also reflected the outsized influence given to mines and mining companies by local officials and favorable mining laws. In an expansion upon the refutation of dependency theory necessary to understand trends in Latin American History, Gonzales argues that the influence of US mining was a result of “generous tax breaks, concessions, and favourable mining laws offered to foreign firms by the Mexican government.”<sup>74</sup> Specifically, the governments of Porfirio Diaz passed major incentives from the 1880s- that allowed foreigners to own subsoil rights (1892), buy land on the border (1892), and limited the ability of the government to tax corporations (1884), as a result of these

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<sup>71</sup> Pg. 55 of “One Man’s Life,” 1973, Box 7, Biography, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>72</sup> Gonzales, 651.

<sup>73</sup> Hendrickson, 329.

<sup>74</sup> Gonzales, 653.

statutes powerful foreign mining companies, and general American investment flooded the region.<sup>75</sup>

For Mexican miners, again often indigenous and disadvantaged members of the local classes, this meant exposure to the horrid conditions of industrial mining. As a result of innovative technology and the mass of investment already discussed, mines in Mexico that had once been abandoned colonial mining sites were revisited by US companies who could now dig deeper. In this process a new toxin, “cyanide was thrown into the mix and released into the environment,” increasing the already substantial health risks of mining.<sup>76</sup> This was compounded by silicosis, as suffocating and brutal disease of the lungs, and the possibility of entombment by cave-ins.<sup>77</sup> From the managerial perspective offered by William Lynch, who worked in both Bolivian and Mexican mines in his life, it is noted that the dangers of mining were many, and hard to completely mitigate, concluding that “it seemed impossible to avoid accidents entirely.”<sup>78</sup> By the time of the famous uprising covered by Gonzales at Cananea in 1908, Mexican laborers could present a laundry listed of grievances including falling wages, horrid conditions, health risks, and the “power and arrogance of US companies.”<sup>79</sup>

A key aspect of the conditions of both Bolivian and Mexican miners uncovered by my research, both in the primary sources at the American Heritage Center, was a hierarchical structure that favored foreign managers over local, and often indigenous laborers. In the Mexican mines of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were designated roles for Mexicans as opposed to their

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<sup>75</sup> Gonzales, 656.

<sup>76</sup> Santiago, “Extracting histories,” 82.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Pg. 54 of “One Man’s Life,” 1973, Box 7, Biography, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>79</sup> Gonzales, 651.

American counterparts. Mexicans worked at Cananea as drillers, haulers, and shovellers while Americans formed the majority of the accounts and finance sections and foreigners generally even “monopolized skilled jobs including boilermaker, plumber, electrician, moulder, pipe fitter, and pressman.”<sup>80</sup> Such a situation Gonzales argues “should be attributed to US managers' social, ethnic and racial prejudices against Mexicans.”<sup>81</sup> This is reflected in the primary sources from the American perspective as well whereby Ralph J. Cutler, a prospector and mining engineer working in Sonora in the 1940-1970s could consistently complain about the unfitness of local Mexican laborers and workers, noting in a particular case, “these people, including Flores, are poorly educated and un-business like.”<sup>82</sup> As a result of prejudices and the division of labor Mexican workers were largely under-paid, poorly housed, and unappreciated.<sup>83</sup>

In opposition to this foreign managers were treated to a life of abject luxury, especially in the period at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also in the later period exemplified by sources provided by Cutler. Evidencing just some of the luxuries provided for higher level American managers was Eben E. Olcott who worked as the Superintendent of St. Helena Gold Mine outside of Hermosillo, Mexico in the 1880s.<sup>84</sup> Here he was afforded a life of relative luxury that involved riding horses for leisure, and allowed his wife to complain about the various standards of their “chinamen” servants.<sup>85</sup> Olcott himself however noted the even greater ambivalence and pride with which the money behind the mining operations acted, recounting a story in one letter about

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<sup>80</sup> Gonzales, 659

<sup>81</sup> Gonzales, 660

<sup>82</sup> Report of trip to Durango, Mexico, Box 1, Biography, Ralph H. Cutler Jr. Papers, # 05774, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>83</sup> Gonzales, 661

<sup>84</sup> Biographical Manuscript compiled by Daughter, Box 2, Folder: Manuscript, Eben E. Olcott Papers, #01233, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>85</sup> Letter Mrs. Olcott to “Effie,” Folder: Manuscript, Eben E. Olcott Papers, #01233, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.



traveling with “Mr. William B. Procter” the owner of the mine who had “no idea of rustling in the wild west.” At one point in their travels, out of money on hand, they were forced to barter with local “Indians” to cross a river, which incensed Procter, who insisted that “Singer mining Co. Checks were good the worlds over and the Indians must take them in payment.”<sup>86</sup> Within this context it is of little surprise that Mexican miners would rise against the power and abuses of their foreign capital in the Mining Strikes of Cananea and elsewhere in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and why reform of the mining industry was a key part of revolutionary Mexico’s projects.

It is worth noting however that even half a century later similar trends with respect to American mining engineers and their Mexican Labor counterparts was still present. In H.W.C. Prommel’s diary from the 1940s there was still a clear division of labor between him and his Mexican Laborers as he attempted to set up various mining ventures in Sonora. For example his duties often involved light white collar work “in camp” while Hispanic-named individuals toiled at the harder labor. This often resulted in injury which Prommel only notes briefly; like “Madro broke Ankle” he notes in January, 1944, or “Espinoza dislocates arm at shoulder, Lou put it back.”<sup>87</sup> <sup>88</sup> Meanwhile the discussion of Prommel’s severe cold is a several day long saga, as is his description and lamentation of “Mr. Moore’s... badly sprained ankle.”<sup>89</sup> <sup>90</sup> Further evidence for continuing inequalities is the fact that while still in the early stages of mine development, resources were being put aside for a mason and a carpenter to set up Prommel’s executive

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<sup>86</sup> Letter February 19 1884 to wife, Folder: Manuscript, Eben E. Olcott Papers, #01233, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>87</sup> Diary entry January 12, 1944 Box 2, 1944 diary, Harold W. C. Prommel Papers, # 02283, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>88</sup> Diary entry January 19, 1944, Box 2, 1944 diary, Harold W. C. Prommel Papers, # 02283, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>89</sup> Diary entry February 11, 1944, Box 2, 1944 diary, Harold W. C. Prommel Papers, # 02283, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>90</sup> Diary entry July 16, 1944, Box 2, 1944 diary, Harold W. C. Prommel Papers, # 02283, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

office.<sup>91</sup> On the whole companies used the ethnic and social divisions in Mexican mines to their advantage and as a buffer to fight unionization, knowing that largely different ethnicities wouldn't organize together.<sup>92</sup>

Similar inequalities manifested in the Bolivia mining situations encountered in my research. Here, as in Mexico, workers lives were defined in their relation to the company and thus the deplorable conditions under which the company kept them, where they were vulnerable and undignified.<sup>93</sup> The Bolivian tin miners which Nash interviewed all exemplified a long and exploitative history, which though countered by resistance, was usually countered by more violence and repression.<sup>94</sup> As Nash interpreted poignantly on her first view of the mines and mining communities, "I sensed that Bolivia represented the nadir of an industrial development which, although it had nationalized some enterprises, was more concerned with the balance of payments than with the welfare of the producers."<sup>95</sup> Nash's stories of the miners convey in brutal and lengthy detail, the struggles of the Bolivian Tin miners she encountered. In the vast majority, their tales were ones of violence, and extraction of their lives. For example one of her interviewees named Ephraim's, thoughts had to be recorded by hand because his lungs were so silicified and his teeth so lacking, that his voice could not be recorded by Nash's equipment. Nonetheless, he shared a power story of beginning working 15 to 16 hour days in his teens in a life defined by foreign managers, who often beat and berated him. The worst of these to Ephraim were the Chilean managers who didn't even know his name, though it had been given to him by

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<sup>91</sup> Diary entry January 27, 1944, Box 2, 1944 diary, Harold W. C. Prommel Papers, # 02283, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>92</sup> Gonzales, 664

<sup>93</sup> Jonathan C. Brown, Introduction, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 5.

the mine administrator at his birth.<sup>96</sup> His story seems indicative of the extractive toll on workers lives as he worked “12, 14, 15 hours a day, in at dawn out at sunset, and when we died they threw us out. The company didn’t give anything for death, even when we died in the mine.”<sup>97</sup> The stories the Bolivian miners often reflect that of Celso a miner who began mining in the 1930s stating, “I would have continued with my studies, but my mama didn’t make enough for our food much less our education... for this I am leaving all my youthfulness in the mine and I have nothing to show for it.”<sup>98</sup>

At the same time, again in Bolivia as in Mexico, the sources of American foreign managers tell a different tale. William Lynch upon his assignment as general manager of the Hochschild mine in Potosí Bolivia was brought in a “fine cabin on a fine ship.”<sup>99</sup> Once he arrived Lynch would reside in “sizeable house, electrically heated, with 5 bedrooms, 4 bathrooms, a large living room, and a dining room with a table for 12.”<sup>100</sup> He was also provided a company car and a chauffeur named “pinto.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, as I think anyone in his situation would, Lynch concluded that, “altogether, I lived in Potosí in relative luxury.”<sup>102</sup>

Workers in both places, and through different eras however did not respond timidly to these unequal and exploitative conditions. In fact some have argued that mining in Bolivia and the strikes at Cananea in elsewhere in Mexico played key roles in Bolivian and Mexican

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<sup>96</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 28.

<sup>97</sup> Nash *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 28-31.

<sup>98</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 51

<sup>99</sup> Pg. 65 of “One Man’s Life,” 1973, Box 7, Biography, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>100</sup> Pg. 71 of “One Man’s Life,” 1973, Box 7, Biography, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid*

<sup>102</sup> Pg. 72 of “One Man’s Life,” 1973, Box 7, Biography, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

revolutions, in the Bolivian revolution this is especially evident as the conflict was essentially a nationwide mining strike expanding directly out of labor and political movements started in the mines.<sup>103</sup> <sup>104</sup> William Lynch would experience Bolivian labor unrest first hand in 1937. While he was living a life of luxury, workers went on strike to protest increased food prices at the company store, a basic response to a lack of dignity, which Lynch under company orders was not allowed to accede to. Instead he called in government forces, and, at least on this occasion physical altercation, was avoided.<sup>105</sup> He would leave the country soon after, at would he determined to be a “propitious time,” as after he left rioting swept through the very mine he ran and mines would eventually be nationalized in the Bolivian Revolution in 1952.<sup>106</sup> His short time in Bolivia which had been characterized by the strike and labor struggles, which left Lynch with the take that Bolivia was no place to do business, saving a New York Times article from 1974 stating that “apart for political considerations Americans living in Bolivia are in constant danger of assassination by Dynamite explosion or gunfire... this seems to leave no doubt that Bolivia no longer offers attraction to the American mining engineer.”<sup>107</sup>

That by that point Bolivia supposedly offered little for the American Mining business however was the eventual boiling point of years of resistance and a growing class conscious that Nash identified among Bolivian miners. Nash assesses that Bolivian miners were the most revolutionary segment of the working class due to their shared and largely awful experience of brutality, extraction, and exploitation and though there were only 28,000 at the time of her work,

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<sup>103</sup> Gonzales, 668

<sup>104</sup> Nash, *I Spent My Life in the Mines*

<sup>105</sup> Pg. 76 of “One Man’s Life,” 1973, Box 7, Biography, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> New York Times Article 1974, Box 7, unprocessed, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

she asserted that they have “profound effect on labor movement of the nation.”<sup>108</sup> Eventually in her interviews it is seen that by the late 1940s union struggles had increased to even more prominent levels as there was increased polarization between workers and management in addition to a growing “class consciousness.”<sup>109</sup> Nationalism played a definitive role here, as it would with the coming hopes of the Bolivian revolution as one of her interviewees main complaints were foreign technicians and foreign management, claiming resoundingly that “Bolivians could and should run the mines themselves.”<sup>110</sup> Another interviewee by the name of Eduardo encapsulated the situation of the labor fight when he said the following:

But that is why I say that the man tries to improve himself in every way, seeing the economic circumstances in which the country lives. In our case here in Bolivia, one becomes aware of the nepotism of the high bosses, of the big capitalists. And these are the circumstances that make the worker have this desire to overcome, to try to be something more in life, not only a sad proletarian... I have seen this inequality, this lack of opportunity, although logically a worker can be better than any professional in any respect... I would say that humanity is one, only there are economic differences.”<sup>111</sup>

Lynch shares a similarly enlightening, if not too blatantly Anglo-American and of his time, take on what he saw as characterizing the Bolivian political conscious, “it is poverty, in my opinion, that accounts largely toward its (Bolivia’s) trend toward communist governments.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 2

<sup>109</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 47

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*

<sup>112</sup> Pg. 76 of “One Man’s Life,” 1973, Box 7, Biography, William Lynch Papers, #07183, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

Worker organization in both Mexico and Bolivia were met with the fierce brutal massacres that initially brought my attention to this subject. A strike called to protest conditions, prices, and worker deaths at a mine in the Catavi administration of Bolivia offers one of the most striking descriptions of the horrors faced in this massacres, which themselves were the results of wanting to improve the horrors already present in the mines. A wife an employee recounts the following: “This time the Colorado regiment was mobilized, and I saw how they killed people without pity. If they saw a child they killed a child. Any man walking they shot. I saw how the poor women fell down below the Racing Club. They fell as if they were tops, their *polleras* (Skirts) spinning around, those poor women... They were bodies of those who were completely destroyed, they just threw them in (common graves.) In any case Catavi has been a mining center that is the vanguard of unionism, and so they have always destroyed it.”<sup>113</sup>

Facing such power and state violence, which has been broadly disseminated previously, the miners of both Bolivia and Mexico needed to create widespread political change. To an extent this was achieved in both places with the main congruent crux of both struggles being the nationalization of the mines. This eventually achieved goal both recognized and responded to the undue power of foreign corporations, and the disrespect of foreign managers. In Mexico, this process has gained positive recognition by scholars, but it was really the source of income afforded by oil nationalization that was used for economic development and a movement of the economy away from extractive and in large part exploited mining reserves.<sup>114</sup> This allowed for a more diverse Mexican economy, which needed the extractive and exploitative industry of mining far less than it previously had.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 49

<sup>114</sup> Santiago, 83

<sup>115</sup> Gonzales

Bolivian nationalization of the mines also involved some short term benefits as one miner described it promptly, “there was a great deal of killing, after which the worker won his independence and the proletarian class won... and we improved our conditions somewhat.”<sup>116</sup> In the long run however the State has acted much like the previously present multinational corporation supported mining super-state.<sup>117</sup> As Jonathan Brown put it in a summation of nationalization in a number of Latin American Industries, “The entourages of populists and other revolutionaries represented other constituencies. Thus, a popular government’s nationalization of an industry... provided no guarantee that workers would achieve their goals” and because of a governments own agenda they “behaved suspiciously like old employers. So the struggle never really ended.”<sup>118</sup> In fact Nash’s visit and study of miners was far into the nationalized period, and for the workers and communities she interview, conditions were still atrocious. In 1973 she gazed at the graffiti adorning the side of a mining building, “In large red letters, dripping from the hastily executed inscription, the word ‘Liberación’ dominated the walls of the company store. It was as though the cry of the French revolution for Liberty, Equality, and fraternity were reduce to its minimal demand: liberty to work out their own destiny.”<sup>119</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This brings us to a disconcerting and maybe even depressing summation of the mining labor conditions of Bolivia and Mexico, showing some of the more destructive practices of our developing capitalist society bringing some of our most desperate people through lives of misery. The story of mining in these places, Latin America, and the world shows the danger of the

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<sup>116</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*

<sup>117</sup> Struggling for emancipation

<sup>118</sup> Brown, 11.

<sup>119</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 4

consumptive nature of the relatively young industrial society within which we currently live. Some would even say that these mines have driven America's particular success as US investors and mining engineers largely orchestrated the latest boom in Latin American extraction that even now continues, though with more of a focus on its environmental concerns. Even without exploring the massive implications of Latin American mining industries on their environments, the preceding study of the laborers involved already calls into question the sustainability of such a practice. Unfortunately as a historian I carry only the qualifications of disseminating a past, one which has spent the lives of miners in both Bolivia and Mexico, which was indeed fought through resistance. This resistance however was often crushed and when successful associated with a government that had been an integral part of the systemic problems in the first place. In a word, such an economy of extraction reflects the interconnections of many of the persisting problems of our afflicted society. To express the hopelessness of this situation is one last thought of a Nash interviewee, "I bore all this with so many governments, with so many presidents. And what do I have for it? Nothing. I have wasted my lungs. My lungs are spent. They have thrown me out in the street. In the street they strike me."<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat us*, 55.



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