

INTRODUCTION

“Today, the second of August of 1953, ends four hundred years of oppression. . . . Today, more than two million peasants have become part of the nation.”¹ With these words, President Víctor Paz Estenssoro, the leader of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement, announced the decree of agrarian reform that abolished personal labor services by indigenous tenants and redistributed estates among peasants. This agrarian reform, along with the nationalization of mines and the extension of suffrage to women and Indians, constituted the three most important transformations of the 1952 Bolivian National Revolution, placing it within the pantheon of the great social revolutions in twentieth-century Latin America.²

The Bolivian revolution was a very unusual political process in Latin American terms. It was as profound and far-reaching as the revolution in Mexico, yet its agrarian reform did not take decades to be implemented, as the one in Mexico did. Instead, *de facto* peasant land distribution started a year after the 1952 National Revolution and acquired rapid momentum. The Bolivian revolution occurred at the same time that President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala was implementing a similar program of agrarian reform. Yet, unlike Guatemala’s revolution, Bolivia’s was not overthrown by covert CIA operations. It preceded the Cuban revolution by only seven years, but the MNR openly distanced itself from the Soviet Union. The Bolivian agrarian reform was as radical as the reforms led by General Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru in 1968 and by Salvador Allende in Chile in 1970, yet its achievements in terms of land redistribution in the highlands and the valleys were never undone by conservative reaction, as in those countries.

The transformations in terms of land tenure and power begun in 1952 continue to shape Bolivia’s contemporary politics, which makes this country a unique example in Latin America. The revolution and the agrarian reform brought a profound democratization of the state apparatus, the erosion of landlords’ formal and informal means of power, and the expropriation of

hundreds of haciendas in the most densely populated areas in the country (the highlands, the valleys, and the subtropical ecoregion of Yungas).³ Unlike other countries in Latin America such as Guatemala, Peru, or Chile, reactionary military regimes did not dare to undermine those conquests. The subsequent civilian and military regimes that followed the MNR's overthrow in 1964 sought to seal their alliance with the peasantry in order to secure their own political stability. In the late 1990s, when the influence of the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), the once strong mineworkers' Bolivian Workers Federation, faded away and the traditional party system felt apart, the territorial control that peasant unions had in the countryside secured them national outreach. These peasant unions constituted one of the most critical factors in reshaping the balance of political power in the nation in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is impossible to understand the surprising emergence of Evo Morales and the ongoing political weight of peasants in today's politics without tracing the roots of this radical transformation. Although concentration of land in few hands continues to be a predominant factor in the profound inequality in Latin America today, and rural landed societies are still a decisive actor in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, or Paraguay, agrarian reform is no longer—as it was in the 1960s—a subject of discussion in the region.⁴ Yet, the legacies of agrarian reform in Bolivia, and its profound political consequences in the makeup of the country's political map, reveal the enduring importance of this issue for Bolivia and the rest of Latin America.

Who was the engine behind this transformative change? In the first years after the revolution, the familiar image of Paz Estenssoro signing the Agrarian Reform Decree-Law in front of thousands of peasants in the community of Ucreña reinforced the idea that the will of the president and legal fiat were sufficient to break the powerful hold of traditional landowning elites.⁵ Peasant and Indian petitions and struggles to obtain land and transform power relations at the time of the revolution are at the center of the story. By looking at the fraught encounter between landlords, Indians, and peasants, we can see how central government policies were shaped, negotiated, and transformed at the local level. My findings reveal that the timing, depth, and final outcome of the land reform—a process ostensibly carried out by the revolutionary party—was fundamentally defined by local and community forces.

Reassessing Peasants Role in the National Revolution

From the start of revolution, the MNR spread the idea that the party was the leading force for change in the countryside. This suggested that the peasants were the passive and grateful beneficiaries of the agrarian reform. Party officials argued that, although the nationalization of the mines was

a product of mineworkers' widespread mobilization, peasants received land almost without a fight. The MNR used a strong multimedia apparatus (newspapers, booklets, statistics, paintings, murals, and videos) to reinforce this top-down depiction of the agrarian reform.⁶ This representation shaped scholarly interpretations of the agrarian reform for decades. Echoing this view, political scientist Robert Alexander wrote one of the earliest accounts of the Bolivian revolution in English. He states that the MNR's leadership was unquestionable: "For the first time, the Indians had a protector of their interests."⁷

Against this view, in the late 1950s anthropologist Richard Patch argues that the agrarian reform was not the result of government initiative but, rather, of intense social pressure sparked by the self-organized unions in the valleys of Cochabamba where, immediately after the revolution, peasants began to seize large estates. This movement quickly spread through the valleys, forcing the government to decree land reform one year after the MNR took power.⁸ On the other hand, the comparative work of anthropologists Dwight Heath, Charles Erasmus, and Hans Buechler states: "The idea of Bolivia's land reform as having been the product of grassroots action on the part of the illiterate Indian majority is not supported."⁹ These authors argue that peasants only started to organize politically when the MNR launched a national program for peasant unionization. In their view, the peasant union was not based on any previous peasant or Indian structure existing in either haciendas or free communities but, rather, was modeled on industrial labor unions, slightly modified to fit the agrarian context.¹⁰ Reinforcing their view that the revolution was a force that spread to the countryside from the top down, they assert that no one in Bolivia would agree with Patch. However, these authors do not fully endorse the MNR's position either. They argue: "The Bolivian agrarian reform was the result of many subtle, interlocking forces. To assert it originated only from above or from below would be to ignore the fact that without leaders there are merely aimless mobs and that leaders without followers are impotent."¹¹ Despite their division over which forces were behind the agrarian reform, in both perspectives Ucareña (situated in the valley of Cochabamba) was at the center of peasant political mobilization.

A new set of scholarly works from the 1970s reexamine the sources of the political mobilization in the countryside, and they all agree it started at the top and worked down. Anthropologist Jorge Dandler demonstrates that peasants organized the first peasant unions in the valleys of Cochabamba more than a decade prior to the revolution. Yet, for him, neither the peasants nor the MNR were the engines behind peasant political mobilization but, rather, political brokers (using Eric Wolf's concept) such as rural teachers and left-leaning political party activists such as those in the Partido

de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (PIR), the Party of the Revolutionary Left. Dandler argues that nonpeasants' active support was vital in connecting parochial peasant demands with emergent national ideologies.¹² According to Dandler, peasant in the valleys caught on to the idea of organizing a union sooner than other peasants because of the specific cultural and social distinctions of this region. According to Dandler distinctions between Indians and mixed-race people had been softening since the nineteenth century in the valleys of Cochabamba, in contrast to the altiplano where social distinctions between Indians and whites were more sharply defined.¹³

In a similar vein, political scientist James Malloy highlights the distinctiveness of the peasant political mobilization in Cochabamba (and Ucureña in particular). Malloy argues that Indian migration from the countryside to the city and especially to the mines was especially important. According to Malloy, this context allowed the development of a small but real peasant class of Indian smallholders who could distance themselves from the uniform condition of vassalage experienced by their racial brothers.¹⁴

These studies challenge the MNR's self-proclaimed role in leading the agrarian reform and bestowing land upon Indians. They offer a denser depiction of the political dynamics of the decades before and during the revolution and enlarge the view beyond the MNR's official narrative. However, all of them stress that Ucureña was the one place where this early peasant politicization took place. These works assert the unique role of this region within a sea of unorganized and depoliticized indigenous and peasant communities.¹⁵ These authors limit political organization to the frame of the peasant union, and all other forms of political action fade from their view.¹⁶

Beginning in the early 1980s (though at a remove from the debates over the Bolivian revolution and the agrarian reform), scholars and activists gathered around the Taller de Historia Oral Andina (THOA), the Andean Oral History Workshop, have explored more deeply both Indian and peasant political struggles.¹⁷ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Carlos Mamani, Roberto Choque, and Esteban Ticona (among others) uncover silenced accounts of Indian and peasant struggles since the late nineteenth century and throughout the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁸ Ramiro Condarco Morales had already revealed in the 1960s that the powerful Indian mobilization led by Pablo Zárate Willka in 1899 was a response to the expansion of large agricultural estates.¹⁹ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui points out that after the 1910s, although defeated by the military, a network of Indian leaders known as *caciques apoderados* battled landlords in the courts by presenting titles conferred by the Spanish Crown to demonstrate community ownership of the land.²⁰

Inspired by this new work, Laura Gotkowitz reframes the 1952 national revolution as the culmination of rural struggles dating back to the 1880s.

She locates peasant and Indian politics at the center of national debates and places the 1952 revolution in the context of prior rebellions that took place in 1899, 1921, 1927, and 1947. For Gotkowitz, the two most remarkable political projects over this period were the development of trans-regional networks of Indian community leaders (the movement of the *caciques apoderados*) and the 1945 National Indigenous Congress. She shows how this long cycle of mobilization, involving both legal efforts and direct action, directly shaped the events of 1952. This work challenges previous conceptions of Indians and peasants as marginal political actors.²¹ Yet, the work of Laura Gotkowitz ends in 1947, and we still need to understand the role that peasant and Indian communities played at the time of the revolution, and that is the story at the center of this book.

When analyzing the role of peasant and Indian communities at the time of the revolution, THOA academics were very critical of the role of the MNR in the countryside. As in the scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s, they endorse the view that the agrarian reform was a program implemented from above. They point out that the organization of peasant unions and the individual distribution of land among peasants undermined autonomous organization and traditional systems of Indian authority. For them, the 1952 revolution was more a continuation than a rupture with previous modernization projects. One of the most critical views of the policies of the 1950s was best articulated by anthropologist Tristan Platt, who held that the agrarian reform of 1953 was a continuation of the privatization policies that started in 1874 (the Disentailment Law) under the Liberals. Platt argues that both laws aimed to privatize land and to undermine the control of land by indigenous communities. Yet, his analysis is so focused on the role of the state and of the indigenous communities that it downplays the political and economic role played by the landlord elite before 1952. The agrarian policy of 1874 allowed the concentration of land in the country in few hands; the agrarian policy of 1953, on the other hand, distributed the land among the peasants, at the expense of the former landlords.²² Also critical of the agrarian reform of the 1950s, sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui holds that MNR “clientelist” policies in the countryside in the 1950s turned peasants from “economic *pongos*” (indentured servants) to political *pongos* (subordinated political clients). According to Rivera Cusicanqui, the agrarian reform gave the MNR the unconditional political support of the peasantry, which allowed the nationalist party to remain in power for twelve years (1952–1964).²³

The literature about the revolution became increasingly critical of the role of the MNR in the countryside. Since the 1980s most scholars have described the MNR as a reactionary force whose ultimate goal was to dismantle long-standing autonomous Indian political struggles. We seem to

be facing a contradiction in the trend of this literature. Although scholars have come to emphasize peasant and Indian political agency prior to the revolution, they have reinforced the view that peasants, outside of Ucureña, passively implemented the MNR's agrarian political agenda after the revolution. With the exception of the early work of Richard Patch, most scholars saw the process of unionization and the agrarian reform as programs imposed to peasants from the top.²⁴

One of the latest works to depart from this tendency is the study by José Gordillo who analyzes peasant political mobilization of the valleys of Cochabamba in the first years of the revolution. Although he views the MNR leadership as politically moderate, he argues that peasant political identity was not shaped from above by governmental policies but was forged by pre- and postrevolutionary struggles, and that this allowed peasants to marshal an important degree of political autonomy.²⁵ Yet, Gordillo's work, is primarily rooted in analysis of the MNR and peasant leaders' rhetoric. In contrast, my aim is to analyze MNR's policies on the ground, to research the impact they had on ordinary people, and to show that the party had to constantly negotiate with and adapt to multiple local demands. My focus is on the revolutionary cycle that started again after 1952, and I examine how peasant and Indian communities radically transformed relations of property and power in the countryside, a process that has long-lasting effects in present Bolivia.

Redefining Relations of Power and Property from the Bottom-Up

In this book I challenge revisionist analyses that have understood peasant unions as obediently implementing the MNR's political program in the countryside. The demand to organize unions in the countryside predated the revolution. In the late 1930s, for example, *colonos* (laborers who work for a landlord in exchange for farming a small parcel of land within the estate) from several haciendas in La Paz, Cochabamba, and Tarija sought to organize unions.²⁶ Conservative governments shut them down because they were afraid of *colonos*' organizing politically on the haciendas.²⁷ This previous history explains why, as soon as the MNR decreed peasant union organization in 1952, thousands of *colonos* and *comunarios* (members of still existing corporate Indian communities mostly concentrated in the altiplano of La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí), following the contours of the haciendas and communities, organized hundreds of territorialized unions.²⁸ According to the government's own reports from Cochabamba, already in 1952, the MNR controlled only 10 percent of the unions.²⁹ The leader of each union—elected yearly on a rotational basis, a principle that followed the Andean principles of political organization—was in charge of dealing with the heavy agrarian reform bureaucracy, both in their provinces and

in the capital city of La Paz. These unions became the most important actors in the implementation of the agrarian reform. They allowed peasants to fight land expropriation as a group rather than as individuals. These practices shaped state-peasant/Indians relations in the countryside. As it was the case prior to the revolution, Indian and peasants understood that only collective action would make them visible to the state and that collective pressure would improve the chances that the government would accept their petitions. Thus, the implementation of the agrarian reform emboldened peasants' communal ties as a means to secure their property and to negotiate with the state. Rather than imposing an individualized experience of citizenship—as revisionist scholars have argued—the unions reinforced a collective relation with the state.³⁰

In terms of property relations, my study shows the radical political role played by hacienda workers and indigenous communities in the implementation of the agrarian reform. First, in contrast to what the MNR presumed, I found that, soon after the revolution, the government was reluctant to begin a generalized program of land redistribution and tried instead to introduce a wage system on the haciendas. In the context of the revolution, many landowners were willing to implement this system, but my work reveals that peasants refused any new arrangement without redistribution. By 1954 the government had to give up on the project for rural proletarianization. Over the course of the implementation of the agrarian reform, colonos expanded the limits of land redistribution beyond the large unproductive estates. As a result, many medium-sized and productive properties were also expropriated because of peasant pressure.

Second, I argue that peasant unions led the process of land distribution among the beneficiaries as the government quickly lost control of the process. In the agrarian courts landlords often denounced the continual growth of the number of peasants demanding land. Many landlords complained that not only the colonos on the estates but also their landless relatives were acquiring parcels of land, at the expense of plots that should have remained in the landlords' hands. In many legal cases, the local judges and the Consejo Nacional de Reforma Agraria (CNRA), the National Council of Agrarian Reform, restricted land redistribution only to the colonos. Yet in his verdict, acknowledging how difficult it was to expel peasants who were already occupying the hacienda, the president often ruled differently, declaring the expropriation of the property in favor of all "settlers," whether they were colonos, temporary workers, or landless peasants. The MNR yielded to the peasant unions and allowed them to define the distribution of land among peasants.

Third, my work also reveals the distinct political agenda of *excomunarios* (members of former indigenous communities who had lost

their land to the expansion of the hacienda and who had become a dependent labor force on the land they used to work or on neighboring haciendas). I explore how leaders of indigenous communities, who led one of the most important campaigns for land restitution prior to the revolution, adapted the nationalist discourse after the revolution to reclaim their lands. Uneasy with a government agenda that proclaimed “land for those who work it,” ex-comunarios proclaimed “land to the original owners.” Ex-comunario political action after the revolution succeeded in reshaping the government agrarian agenda, and ex-comunarios used the new legislation to regain lands lost to hacienda landlords since 1900, and in some cases even prior to 1900. In this study I uncover some of the disputes over land that emerged between colonos and ex-comunarios after the agrarian reform. Colonos rightly feared that the ex-comunario principle of “land to the original owners” threatened their own rights to land. Ex-comunarios’ struggles for the restitution of their lands and the occasional conflicts with the colonos on the altiplano expose crucial economic differences among peasants after the revolution, a subject scarcely analyzed by previous literature in Bolivia, which often refers to the peasantry as a flat category.³¹ The implementation of claims of land restitution also shows that ex-comunarios, when successful, were able to consolidate considerably larger plots of land than colonos.

My analysis of court cases on land distribution shows that the state had only a limited voice and ability in defining the process of land distribution among peasants. The final outcome of this process created a map comprised of both individually and collectively owned plots in a variety of different shapes, sizes, and uses. In fact, the very chaotic and uneven character of this map reveals the strength of bottom-up decisions relative to top-down governmental planning.³² The government preferred to accept and endorse peasant union plans for land distribution that were rooted in earlier practices rather than risk sparking political conflict in the countryside. Considering the political pressure that the government faced almost from the start of the revolution from the mine and urban workers to radicalize the revolution and from conservative sectors in Bolivia and from the United States to restrain it, the MNR sought to consolidate its alliance with the peasantry by accommodating its nationalist discourse to local political forces.³³ The government signed for the expropriation of a property but then played little role in the internal organization of land redistribution. In the absence of maps or censuses and with very little effective control of Bolivia’s territory, official authorities relied heavily on union leaders and communal authorities to implement the long, tedious, and politically less profitable process of land distribution among peasants. In this new political scenario, peasant unions and Indian communities

won a major new role in defining land redistribution and mediating the new conflicts among peasants.

The files on agrarian reform show that, over time, peasant unions won legitimacy among their members beyond issues about land. Union leaders began serving as mediators on a number of disputes over property boundaries, rights to pasturelands and water, and even family conflicts. Court cases in the altiplano, the valleys, and the Yungas show the role of communal authorities and union leaders in solving judicial conflicts among peasants and in tying peasants' individual choices to communal decisions. Numerous cases reveal that communal authorities' decisions often outweighed those of local state officials and demonstrate that plaintiffs realized that agreements hammered out locally were the most useful, since the state—whose presence was more nominal than real—had no effective capacity to enforce its edicts. Despite the Bolivian state's weakness, or precisely because of it, peasant unions and peasant communities became powerful political actors in the countryside over the second half of the twentieth century, gaining effective territorial and political control in the countryside.

Finally, in this book I rethink the role of the revolutionary nationalist movement and government in the countryside. Although the MNR showed caution before launching a general program of land distribution, the party undertook critical decisions soon after the revolution that changed the balance of power in the countryside. First, Víctor Paz Estenssoro, afraid of landlords' political maneuvers, dismantled their association known as the Sociedad Rural Boliviana (SRB), Bolivian Rural Society, undermining their capacity to respond as a class. Second, the MNR deactivated the rural councils (the entities that represented the most "notable" neighbors in the province), which before 1952 had been the mediators at the local level between the state and rural society, and replaced them with peasant unions. The elimination of the rural councils and the institution of the unions as a mechanism of political control transformed everyday politics in the countryside. Third, the MNR challenged the church, one of the most important landlords in Bolivia. Fourth, Paz Estenssoro—more pragmatic than dogmatic—signed the decree for community land restitution in 1954, as a state response to Indian political pressures. This last decree clearly diverged from orthodox notions of modernization in nationalist and left circles. These four decisions were political landmarks that contributed toward the radicalization of the political process.

Rethinking the Timing of the Revolution in the Countryside

I also rethink the timing of the revolution in the countryside. A number of scholars have identified that the revolutionary process ended in 1964 when General René Barrientos overthrew the Paz Estenssoro government.³⁴ Bar-

rientos's regime started a new era of tumultuous military regimes that ended in 1982 when Bolivia returned to democracy. Other scholars have also argued that the MNR became a moderate force if not conservative as early as in 1955. Sergio Almaraz, James Dunkerley, and James Malloy, along with Kevin Young and Steven Cote in their more recent works, state that the decline of the revolution had already begun in 1955 when the MNR shifted to the right. These studies point to the fact that the government approved a new code on hydrocarbons, which opened up investments by US oil companies in 1955, passed an austerity plan for monetary stabilization in 1956, and launched the Triangular Plan, which gave the government a new opportunity to discipline the combatant workers' movement in the mines in 1960.³⁵ Although these policy changes are key to understanding the course of the revolution, particularly in terms of the government's relation to the United States in the midst of the Cold War, the timing of the revolution in the countryside does not parallel the timing of the revolution in the mines and in the cities. Peasant land seizures started at the end of 1952, yet peasant legal claims for land expropriation began only at the end of 1954. Although president Paz Estenssoro signed few cases of land expropriation in 1955, it was in his second presidency that Paz Estenssoro (1960–1964) boosted land expropriation in favor of former colonos even further than his predecessor President Hernán Siles Zuazo (1956–1960) as a way to consolidate his alliance with the peasants.

After 1964, General René Barrientos (1964–1969), who aggressively repressed the combative miners, as soon as he took power was also eager to secure his alliance with the peasantry. He enacted the Military-Peasant Pact. Scholars such as René Zavaleta Mercado and Rivera Cusicanqui have highlighted that the Military-Peasant Pact favored the military because it have guaranteed peasant subordinated support, we might reconsider the importance of the pact for peasants. When Barrientos took power, dozens of former landlords petitioned the new president to review the last twelve years of agrarian reform.³⁶ They argued that the MNR had illegally expropriated medium- and small-sized properties as well as those that had significant capital investment. But neither Barrientos nor the more violent regime of General Hugo Bánzer (1971–1978) reversed those processes. In fact, Barrientos enacted key decrees that prohibited any revision of lands already granted to peasants, and in 1975 General Bánzer ended the economic compensation that peasants had to pay to landlords for the land they received as a result of an expropriation.³⁷ Although most of these decrees simply reinforced a reality that was already in place, the military, unlike other cases in Latin America (Guatemala, Chile, or Peru) were not able to reverse the process of land reform that started in the 1950s. Under the Military-Peasant Pact, peasant unions' control of internal affairs in the countryside continued.

Despite the subordinated relation that peasantry had at the national level, as a number of authors point out, agrarian court cases show it was in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s that landlords, unable to recover their old power, sold or abandoned the lands that the government granted them as medium-sized properties because of the continued pressure of the peasant unions. This pressure was applied through everyday forms of revolution, such as former colonos' rejection of work for the former landlord in spite of wage offers, their stealing of livestock, their burning of hacienda houses, which all ended up pushing landlords out of the countryside. It was over the course of 1960s–1980s that the peasant unions won full political and territorial control of the countryside. The countryside became predominantly indigenous. The unions exercised control over all local state positions.

Everyday Forms of Revolution

To track day-to-day peasant struggles within revolutionary times, I adapt James Scott's notion of "everyday forms of resistance" to "everyday forms of revolution."³⁸ My own notion refers to the ways in which rural actors followed news about the unfolding events of the revolution, how they understood what the revolution was about, and how they accordingly redefined their political engagements. Also, the notion of everyday forms of revolution applies to the almost two decades of legal and political struggles that followed the enactment of the agrarian reform legislation. The signing of the decree led to years of hacienda seizures, livestock theft, union organizing, public auctions, legal disputes, geographic measuring and mapmaking, and government lobbying that went on through sustained small-scale efforts. The notion of everyday forms of revolution challenges the view that the revolutionary state fought for, designed, and pushed through the agrarian reform on its own initiative.³⁹

My conception of everyday forms of revolution both stems from and diverges from Scott's call for understanding peasant political practices outside the moment of political rupture, beyond the revolutionary event. Scott understandably sought to foreground everyday resistance as the ordinary mode of peasant struggle in history, arguing against the tradition in peasant studies of focusing on the rare moments of radical and overt peasant revolt, which he also considered less effective in advancing peasant interests. I too am interested in the ordinary and day-to-day agency of peasant political actors. But my work also draws from Sinclair Thomson's critique of Scott. Thomson argues that Scott's emphasis on informal, isolated, petty, and covert acts of resistance unnecessarily privileges "resistance without protest and without organization." This tendency, Thomson continues, plays down the importance of direct action and overt mobilization against the ruling

order, which have been recurrent if less constant forms of peasant struggle. I believe that Scott's attention to the quotidian dimension of peasant politics can be productively applied to revolutionary processes as well as nonrevolutionary periods in history.⁴⁰

In the spirit of Scott, and based on innumerable reports from landlords beginning in the late 1930s, my research shows, for example, how before the revolution colonos refused to work the amount of hours expected by landlords, or they gave less of the amount of the harvest than landlords required. All such quotidian, small-scale, and cumulative individual actions weakened the peonage system before the revolution. However, like Thomson, I challenge the idea that these everyday individual actions counted for more than the organized collective action on the part of colonos and Indian community members that was carried out through ongoing and often invisible campaigns to advance their cause in the courts, to pressure political authorities, and to secure and defend the lands they claimed.

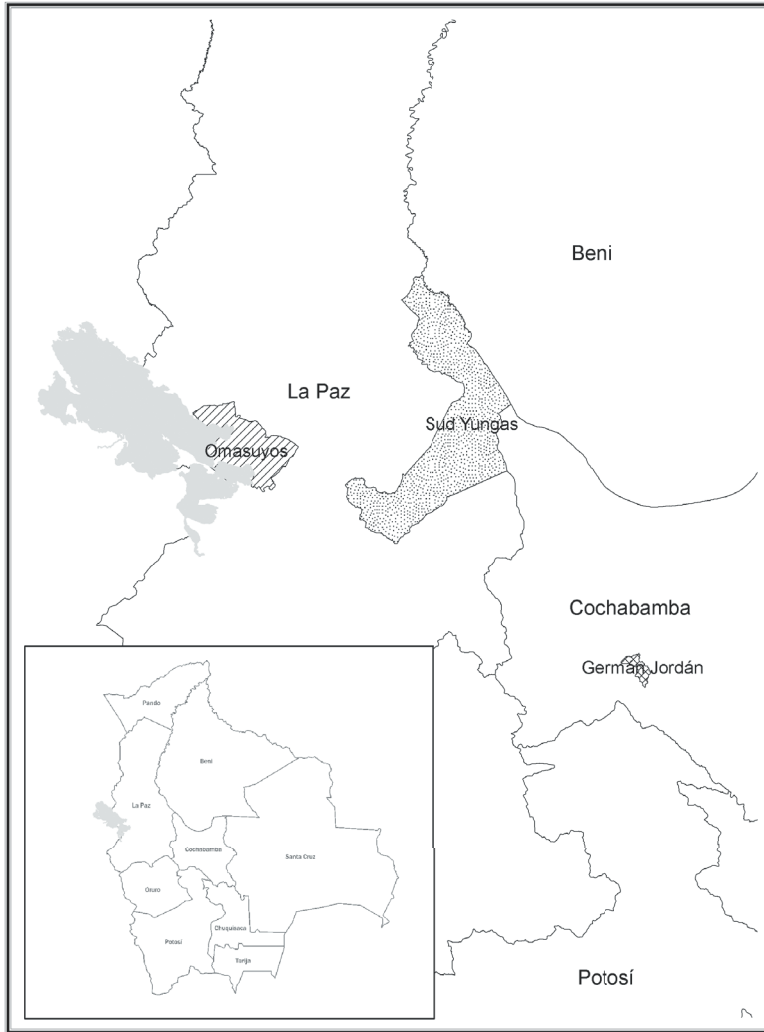
Tracking the Voices of the Peasant Actors of the Agrarian Reform

To track peasant political struggles on the ground, I worked at the Agrarian Reform Archives in the cities of La Paz and Cochabamba. There, I reviewed about three hundred court cases (each of them could range from one hundred pages to several volumes) that contained the complaints, arguments, and strategies that peasants and landlords deployed in the conflict over land redistribution. These records became available after government intervention to reorganize the CNRA in 1993. The promulgation of a new agrarian reform law in 1996 further pushed the government to centralize the CNRA archives. Today, these archives—virtually untouched by scholars until now—are accessible at the Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) and offer an unprecedented view of decades of agrarian reform. Most trials comprised the history of a property for at least thirty years before the revolution, revealing the ownership and expansion of the large estates and the networks of landlord elites. They offer colonos' descriptions of their life on the hacienda before 1952, as well as descriptions of the landowner elites who have remained obscure behind the country's more visible mining elite. Every trial is also a powerful illustration of the contrast between state proposals and actual state attempts to enforce the laws. Every trial reflects state decisions from the local level to the national level and, thus, the history of what the state could and could not do.

In addition to the Agrarian Reform Archives, I drew on three valuable collections at the Archivo y Biblioteca Nacionales de Bolivia (ABNB), the Bolivian National Archive in Sucre. The Presidential Correspondence (PR) collection gathers letters and requests from all sectors of the society, including many from peasant leaders, indigenous communities, and landown-

ers to the president. The letters offer insight into the proposals, demands, pledges, or political discussions that exceeded the frame of the political party debates or the voices of the recognized leaders. They depict ordinary people from rural and urban backgrounds and their concepts about the revolution, demands concerning land distribution, and views on what was considered fair or legal. Second, Walter Guevara Arze, one of the most important MNR leaders, donated his private documents to the national archive. His collection on the agrarian reform gathers private letters, official reports, and internal debates on land at the time of the revolution.⁴¹ Finally, I used the collection of political pamphlets, political party programs, conference proceedings, and memoirs published throughout the 1940s by different political parties and actors. These offer a wonderful understanding of 1940s political debates, illustrating how each party understood agrarian reform. I completed my research with official correspondence at presidential, departmental, and local levels in the Archivo de La Paz (ALP), the Historical Archives of La Paz and Cochabamba, where I drew on the Prefectural Correspondence (PE) to review local official reports from the 1940s to the 1960s. Finally, at the Biblioteca y Archivo Histórico de la Asamblea Legislativa Plurinacional de Bolivia (BAHALP), the Library and Historical Archive at the Plurinational Legislative Assembly, in La Paz, I looked at laws, decrees, congressional debates, and newspapers. Overall, I used these sources to compare national debates and political party discussions with the everyday struggles at the rural level.

In this work I provide a comparative framework for three distinct and significant regions where the hacienda system was particularly strong: Germán Jordán, a temperate valley where large estates existed alongside expanding small mixed-race properties and where pioneering peasant trade unions grew increasingly influential; Omasuyos, a high plateau area with fertile irrigated land and strong Indian peasant organization; and Sud Yungas, a highland valley area profitable for coca-growing landlords where the peasants were less strong politically. Each province constitutes a window for understanding the hacienda system in a specific region—the valleys of Cochabamba, the semitropical valleys, and the highlands of La Paz. Despite the striking geographical differences and their distinct histories in terms of the expansion of the hacienda, the three regions make up the core of the latifundio (extensive estates) in the country prior to the revolution. Peasant political mobilization was also prominent in all the provinces before and after the revolution. First, President Paz Estenssoro decided to sign the Agrarian Reform Decree-Law in the historic village of Ucureña in the province of Germán Jordán. This decision was a recognition of the early organization of peasant unions in this region. Second, decades prior to the revolution, mobilized indigenous leaders organized rural schools all across



Map 1. Elaborated by José Octavio Orsag. The map indicates the three provinces described in this study: Omasuyos and Sud Yungas in La Paz and Germán Jordán in Cochabamba.

the altiplano, and the movement was particularly strong in Warisata in the province of Omasuyos. The most combative peasant union leaders after the revolution—such as Jorge Soliz, Luciano Quispe, and Toribio Salas—came from Ucuireña (Germán Jordán) and Achacachi (Omasuyos). Third, several middle- and high-ranked leaders of the MNR came from the province of Sud Yungas. After the revolution, landowner Federico Álvarez Plata became

not only one of the most prominent members of the MNR but also member to the Commission for Agrarian Reform.

My study of court cases in the three regions shows very similar tendencies: local judges tended to ratify local agreements, favoring the strongest voices in the region. For instance, in Omasuyos, where peasant unions held strong, local judges qualified several properties as *latifundios*, regardless of their investment. In Sud Yungas, where landlords preserved some power after 1952, judges granted almost all landlords at least 150 hectares, the maximum for a medium-sized property in the region according to law. The Ministerio de Asuntos Campesinos (MAC), the Ministry of Peasant Affairs and the president of the republic closely followed local verdicts. If applying any technical and legal criteria suggested by the CNRA meant sparking political conflict in the countryside, the president overlooked the law and changed the final verdict. For instance, large estates with demonstrated investment or medium-sized properties would be declared *latifundios* if this guaranteed that the strong peasants' unions in Germán Jordán and Omasuyos would be appeased. In other words, politics rather than legal or technical criteria shaped the course of the agrarian reform.

Remapping Bolivian Agrarian Reform

In this work I examine Bolivia's radical redefinition of property relations and power in the countryside beginning a decade before the revolution and continuing through to the 1960s, although some of the court cases lasted even up into the mid-1980s. In Chapter One, we analyze the central place of land in establishing, consolidating, and reifying the power of elites. In both buoyant times and downturns, miners, businessman, and politicians acquired land to secure their capital. We study a conservative program for land reform that emerged a decade prior to the revolution. This program saw landlords as the centerpiece of the economic change and development. In Chapter Two, we see debates over "agrarian reform" among left- and right-wing politicians prior to the revolution and examine how both the right- and left-wing parties' technical and avowedly scientific considerations of the agrarian question were deeply embedded in racial ideologies that saw indigenous communal landholding as incompatible with ideals of productivity and modernization. The focus in Chapter Three is on the first two years of the revolution, and on how expectations about "what the revolution could bring" changed for all political actors: the MNR's top leaders, civil servants, colonos, majordomos (*hacienda administrators*), and landlords, which reflects the fragmentary and complex politics of the revolution. We also track the failure of the MNR's moderate program of labor reform that preceded the agrarian reform. The nationalist party expected

that turning colonos into waged workers would be sufficient to appease the turmoil in the countryside. But the program ultimately failed as colonos organized unions and militias that rejected attempts to limit reform to the renegotiation of labor contracts and instead forced the government to decree land redistribution.

In Chapters Four, Five, and Six we survey the politics behind land distribution. In Chapter Four, we look closely at the charged debates that followed the 1952 national revolution on agrarian reform. By tracing local petitions, intellectual proposals, and political party debates, I portray the challenges of running an expanded program of land reform that would expropriate hundreds of rural private properties. I also show the crucial role of Latin American intellectuals, especially those from Guatemala and Mexico, in nurturing Bolivian debates. Once the government enacted the law, we track the two most iconic cases of land distribution in Ucureña and Achacachi, both of which demonstrate the key role of peasant leaders in radicalizing the process from the start and from below. In Chapter Five, I engage with former members of indigenous communities' distinctive claims to land. Previously scholars have assumed that communal demands vanished with the MNR's enthusiastic embrace of a modernization plan focused on implementing a medium- to small-size individualized system of property. Instead, I show how *ex-comunarios* pressured the government to enact a decree for communal land restitution that challenged not only the properties of large established landlords but also, in some cases, lands more recently granted to other peasants. In Chapter Six, we see the effective transfer of ownership to the peasants. In this transfer, the government gradually stripped itself of the legal principles that the law had imposed to protect the owners of medium-sized properties or the landlords who had demonstrated investment by privileging distribution of land to peasants. We also see the leading role of peasants' unions in the land-allocation process. The multiplicity of shapes, sizes, and uses of land reflected on the new map of property that emerged after 1953 were rooted in the complex and contentious historic, social, and geographic practices of peasants rather than in the uniform vision of a successful state modernization project. In the final part of the chapter, we trace agrarian reform policies following MNR's overthrow in November 1964. Reviewing new demands concerning land distribution I show that military regimes were incapable of undoing the agrarian reform in the altiplano and valleys, but that landlords' old power continued to erode over the course of thirty years. It was over the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s that peasants transformed the countryside into their own world.