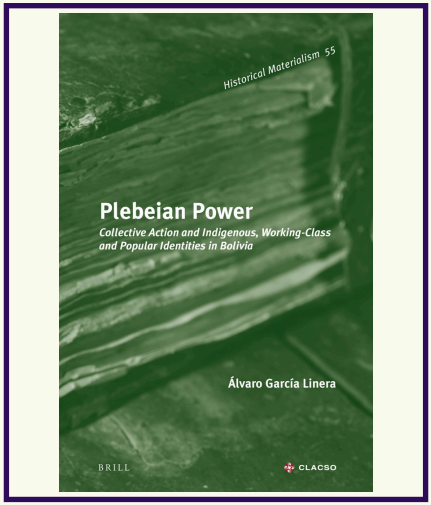
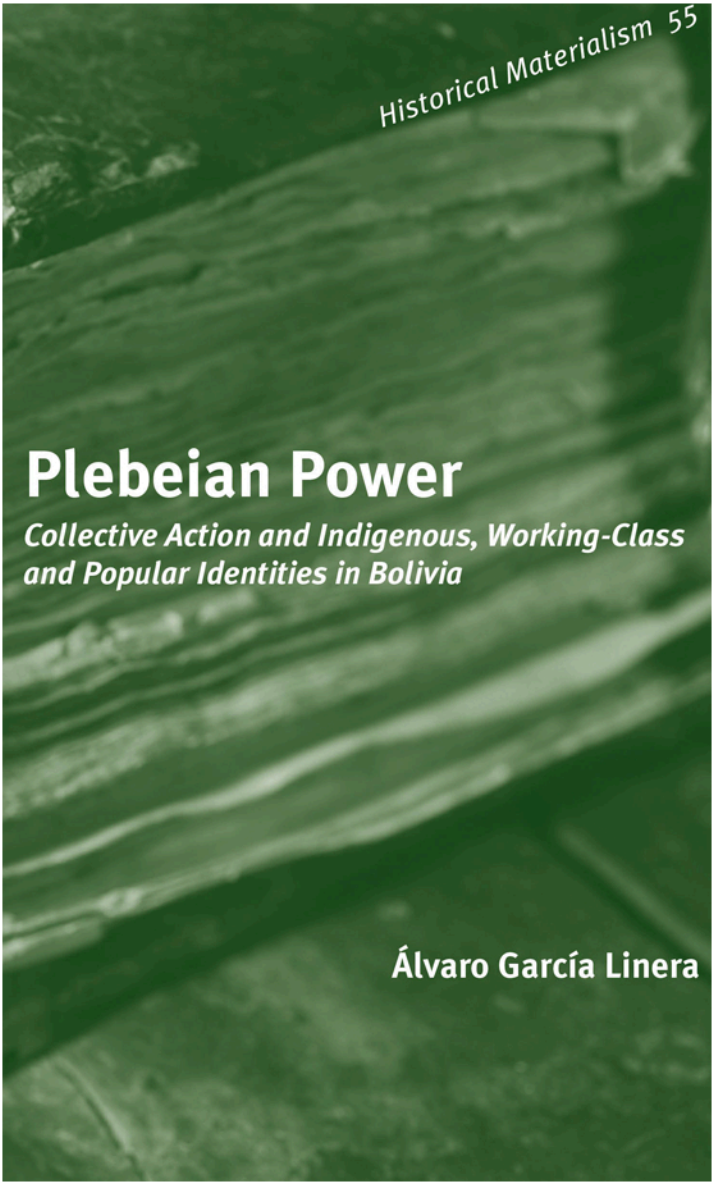
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Plebeian Power
Collective Action and Indigenous, Working-Class and Popular Identities in Bolivia
Álvaro García Linera

Plebeian Power

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Collective Action and Indigenous, Working-Class and Popular Identities in Bolivia

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Álvaro García Linera: Reflections on Two Centuries of Bolivia

Pablo Stefanoni[1]

I see myself as one of the last Jacobins of the French Revolution, and I see Evo as Robespierre.
Álvaro García Linera

In addition to his role as Evo Morales's vice-president and 'co-pilot', Álvaro García Linera is one of Bolivia's foremost intellectuals. As such, he is clearly an authoritative interpreter of the complex political and social process that began on 22 January 2006, when Evo Morales Ayma took office as president of Bolivia. Evo Morales was the first indigenous person to take the reins of this Andean-Amazonian nation, where 62 percent of inhabitants self-identify as indigenous peoples, mainly Quechuas and Aymaras.[2] Indeed, in 2005 Morales called upon García Linera to be his running-mate (after a first attempt to find a 'representative of the national bourgeoisie'), because he considered him to be a 'bridge' – a 'translator', as García Linera likes

1. A journalist and economist, formerly a recipient of grants from the Latin American Council for Social Sciences (CLACSO) and the Swedish Agency for International Cooperation (SIDA), in 2002. Co-author, with Hervé do Alto, of the book *La revolución de Evo Morales. De la coca al palacio* (Stefanoni and Do Alto 2006). Currently, he is the Bolivia correspondent for the Argentinian newspaper *Clarín* and the director of the Bolivian edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

2. The Bolivian census, unlike others such as Ecuador's, does not include questions about *racial* self-identification, but rather *ethno-cultural* self-identification. While the former includes categories such as 'white', 'indigenous', '*mestizo*', and 'black', the latter refers to identifying with specific indigenous peoples: Aymara, Quechua, Guaraní, and so on. Thus there is no contradiction when sixty percent of Bolivians self-identify as *mestizo* (in many surveys) and a similar percentage identify themselves in the census as belonging to a native nation.

to present himself – between the peasants and indigenous peoples and the urban middle-classes.[3] These latter were reluctant to vote for a union-schooled peasant whose only educational credentials were a secondary-school certificate from the country's interior, but were more open to accepting the *cocalero* leader if he was accompanied by 'a man who knows', as promised on one of their 2005 electoral-campaign posters.

More than two years after coming to the vice-presidency, nobody can seriously claim that García Linera is the 'brain' of the government, but this does not deny the fact that this self-taught mathematician and sociologist, an enthusiastic follower of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (whom he frequently cites in media and academic interviews), holds a position in the new Bolivian administration that sets him apart from the insignificance that has traditionally characterised the vice-presidency. In fact, he scarcely uses his official office, instead carrying out his work in a more modest office just a few steps away from that of the head of state, in the governmental palace – Palacio Quemado – in La Paz. The Bolivian president has almost no important meetings without García Linera also in attendance, normally dressed in a three-piece suit (almost always without a tie) and a black overcoat.

The current vice-president was born to a middle-class *mestizo* family in Cochabamba on 19 October 1962. He became interested in politics during the 1971–8 Hugo Banzer dictatorship, and immediately after the fall of this régime – when he was 17 years old – he witnessed the great Aymara roadblock in La Paz, organised by the *Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia* ('United Confederation of Peasant-Workers' Unions of Bolivia', CSUTCB), already strongly influenced by the Indianist ideas advanced by the Katarist movement.[4] Shortly afterwards, his interest in the link between politics

3. When applied to Bolivia, the concept of middle-class can, at times, obfuscate more than clarify. The existence of 'ethnic capital' means (even the low-income) white-*mestizos* are considered middle class, and excludes the '*cholo*' (urban-indigenous) sectors that have accumulated significant economic capital, primarily through informal commerce.

4. The Katarist movement emerged in the 1970s, promoted by urban-Aymara sectors with access to post-secondary education. Inspired by the ideas of Fausto Reinaga, it is considered the first contemporary Indianist movement in Bolivia. The Katarists introduced an interpretation of Bolivian history as a passage from Spanish colonial domination to domestic colonialism, maintained by the republican élites, and they contributed to the construction of an Aymara-Quechua 'Indian' identity. Despite their important influence on peasant-unions, they never succeeded in establishing themselves as a political movement. After splitting up over the issue of political participation in the 'liberal' state in the 1990s, one of their leaders, Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, became the vice-president of Bolivia as part of an alliance with the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* ('Revolutionary Nationalist Movement', MNR) in their neoliberal phase, under the leadership of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. From this position, he advanced the constitutional recognition of Bolivia as a 'pluriethnic and multicultural' country. The current process of change,

and ethnicity persisted in Mexico, where he moved in order to get a degree in mathematics at the Universidad Autónoma, 'because I thought that I could learn the 'soft' sciences by myself'.[5] There, in the context of the campaigns in solidarity with Central America's armed movements, he was attracted to the debates over the Mayan ethnic question promoted by the Guatemalan guerrillas, and – as he recalls – he began to move away from his more philosophical and abstract studies linked to *Capital*, Hegel's dialectics and Kant's philosophy, turning to a more practical approach, which, by the 1980s, would entail a shift to 'more Leninist' readings.

Unlike most in Bolivian intellectual circles, García Linera was never an activist of the traditional Left – historically represented by the *Partido Obrero Revolucionario* ('Revolutionary Workers' Party') and the Bolivian Communist Party – and nor was he involved in the groups based on a Christian-Guevarist ideology, such as the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* ('Revolutionary Left Movement, MIR'), which he regarded with some contempt. Indeed, his interpretations of Marx, Lenin, Althusser and Gramsci were useful in his challenge to the 'old Left' and for his search for a Marxism suited to the Andean reality, previously attempted by the Peruvian communist José Carlos Mariátegui. His return to Bolivia in 1985 coincided with the resounding failure of the reformist *Unidad Democrática Popular* government ('Popular Democratic Unity', UDP), originally made up of the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario de Izquierda* ('Revolutionary Nationalist Movement of the Left'), the Communist Party and the MIR, overwhelmed with hyperinflation and the conflicting pressures of the then powerful *Central Obrera Boliviana* ('Bolivian Workers' Central', COB) and conservative business-sectors.

With the UDP's early withdrawal from power, the Left disappeared from the electoral scene, except for the MIR, which survived at the cost of converting to neoliberalism. At the same time, García Linera's politico-intellectual path became increasingly more focused on combining 'two revolutionary rationalities' in dispute at that time: Marxism and Indianism.[6]

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led by Evo Morales, acknowledges Katarism as one of its political-ideological roots. For a study along these lines, see Rivera 1987.

5. Stefanoni, Ramírez and Svampa 2009.

6. The military-peasant pact, signed between the peasant-movement and the military president René Barrientos in the 1960s, served to isolate the miners (massacred by the dictatorship) and generated a long period of working-class distrust toward the peasants, exacerbated by the peasants' supposed 'betrayal' of the Argentinian-Cuban guerrilla fighter, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. These prejudices were partially overcome with the growth of Katarism and the new worker-peasant alliance that began in the late 1970s. Since 2003, it has been the peasants who consider themselves the 'vanguard' of the process of change led by Evo Morales.