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Maureen Heffern Ponicki

*The University of Illinois at Chicago*, [heffernponickim@cod.edu](mailto:heffernponickim@cod.edu)

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## What Can a Micro-level View Tell Us About Plurinational Bolivia?

Review Essay by Maureen Heffern Ponicki, Department of Political Science, University of Illinois at Chicago, mheffe2@uic.edu

Borda-Niño-Wildman, Carolina. *The Medicalisation of Incest and Abuse: Biomedical and Indigenous Perceptions in Rural Bolivia*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Ellison, Susan Helen. *Domesticating Democracy: The Politics of Conflict Resolution in Bolivia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018.

Bolivia is a country to watch as it evidences immense progress on the socioeconomic front as well as an increasing political fragility. It is maneuvering through a unique historical period governed by its first indigenous president, Evo Morales, who was first elected in 2005 and then again in two subsequent elections. Morales engineered the creation of the new Plurinational State of Bolivia recognizing the rich ethnic diversity of the country along with a new constitution that was put into effect in 2010. In 2018 the population rejected a referendum that would have allowed Morales to run again for reelection in 2019, although Morales has hinted that he might just ignore those results and run anyway. Morales is himself Aymaran, one of the largest indigenous groups in the country, and has worked to usher in greater inclusion of Bolivia's varied and historically marginalized indigenous populations as well as steep drops in poverty. The country also clocks in with impressive rates of women in elected office—it leads the Latin American region with the greatest political inclusion of women. Yet, at the micro level, challenges of race, class, and gender still plague the new plurinational state.

As all eyes seem to be focused on the presidency and its future, both Carolina Borda-Niño-Wildman and Susan Helen Ellison's anthropological studies redirect our gaze to the micro level and provide a particularly vivid lens into Bolivian life at the grassroots. Both books attest to the power the micro narrative provides in understanding the macro level. Borda-Niño-Wildman accomplishes this by examining the role incest and sexual violence play in the lives of women who have been institutionalized at a psychiatric facility in Sucre, Bolivia. Her study examines the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in one particular institution and argues that women are revictimized as their experience of violence and abuse is medicalized, calling into question what it means to be human in this particular context. Ellison's study provides a different, yet complementary, view into Bolivian life by zoning in on one specific piece of the larger constellation of foreign aid dynamics—Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) programs and their entanglement with local culture, especially Aymaran culture and practices, and other postcolonial political projects. Both authors command a remarkable knowledge of Quechua and Aymaran culture and language—which are the two largest indigenous groups in Bolivia. Both books provide the reader a deep dive into Bolivia's indigenous cultures, utilizing their languages, and the frequent multiple meanings residing in those words, as a door into cultural understanding. Both writers adeptly employ people's voices as a principal means of arguing their theses from a bottom-up perspective.

In *The Medicalisation of Incest and Abuse: Biomedical and Indigenous Perceptions in Rural Bolivia*, Borda-Niño-Wildman fills a gap in anthropological research by studying sexual violence in psychiatric institutions. She argues that intergenerational incest against women is often an ordinary process and not an exceptional event as often explained by mainstream anthropologists. In fact, she questions the very category of incest as something universally

understood or agreed upon and states that “any encompassing or universalizing category falls short of explaining all the complexities of the political economy of sexual exchanges” (p. 206). This cementing of inaccurate classificatory schemes infers a universality that ignores diverse realities. By studying incest and sexual violence, and the way in which it is medicalized in a psychiatric setting, another understanding of incest emerges. It is a bleak picture for indigenous women who have suffered sexual violence, rape, or incest. Her argument is based on a one-year ethnographic study that included participant observation in the women’s section of the national “Gregorio Pacheco” psychiatric hospital, interviews, archival research and the analysis of historical documents. Borda-Niño-Wildman provides ample evidence to support her argument that women who have experienced incest are considered mentally ill only if they fail to proceed in their assigned roles in the community as if nothing happened. In many indigenous communities, women are expected to continue on after being victimized and, when they do not, they risk being labeled as mentally ill and even risk institutionalization. Therefore, it is the failure to experience abuse in a socially-acceptable manner that begets a further dehumanization of a woman. Borda-Niño-Wildman then skillfully uncovers the way in which psychiatric professionals begin to medicalize these women, rarely asking them for an account of their challenges and relying on family members’ accounts instead, thus missing the abuse completely or failing to understand its role in the women’s lives. Borda-Niño-Wildman’s archival research suggests that 25% of the institution’s total population have survived sexual violence despite little to no treatment that focuses on that abuse.<sup>1</sup> Few of the medical staff even knew that the women suffered any sexual violence—psychiatrists being the least likely to know about the past abuse. And, yet, Borda-Niño-Wildman infers that the sexual violence is what gave birth to many of the women’s supposed illnesses. The power of her analysis emanates from the women’s voices themselves, which she gives ample space within her book. In a country where indigenous organizations have been fighting for political, cultural, and economic rights, she suggests that the rights of women—especially indigenous women—seem to take a back seat. She shows how power and violence are used over women both in Andean communities and in institutions of the state. Reading her book, one walks away with a different view of Bolivia than if one had merely read the statistics and the state of politics at a macro level.

She argues that anthropology must work to not merely document women’s accounts, but to witness them in order to provide a deeper account of a community and all its inhabitants. To effectively witness, she enters into the everyday life of this institution profiling the staff—psychiatrists, nurses, domestic staff, and residents. She studies the discourses that the staff produce about incest and sexual violence and she overlaps that by describing the ethnic, class, and gender hierarchies from the outside that are then slapped on patients, leaving indigenous women at the bottom of the hierarchy. She then takes the reader on a journey of indigenous culture in explaining the concept of *qhencha* that pervades the book and is a needed tool to understand sexual violence in the Andes. It is an ambiguous term denoting an excess of sexual energy that refers to sexual misconduct. Women can be seen as inviting incest because of *qhencha* and are thus held responsible for such an attack. As Borda-Niño-Wildman writes, “The usefulness of *qhencha* as a category of moral understanding of violence is that it allows for the conflation of both the victimization and accountability of sexual violence, on the one hand, and the emotional distress of the individual, on the other” (p. 123).

The strength and weakness of her work can be found in one woman—Victoria. She takes the reader on a journey back through Victoria’s life, and back to her community to understand the origins of Victoria’s “illness.” Victoria was raped on three separate occasions (twice by

relatives) and her breakdown is closely correlated to these incidents and, yet, nary a mention of the abuse is mentioned in her medical records. Rather, Victoria is diagnosed as being schizophrenic and mentally retarded by the professionals. Victoria's story provides powerful evidence to back Borda-Niño-Wildman's claim that the victim's social existence became precarious within her own rural community and then subsequently within the psychiatric institution after her abuse. Victoria failed to "carry on" after the abuse and her family and community expelled her, while her abusers suffer no similar fate. The indigenous healer in her community believed that Victoria needed to ask for forgiveness for her role in the abuse, which Victoria refused to do. The psychiatric institution exerts power and violence again as it ignores the abuse, medicalizes her failure to adapt to it, and prescribes drugs, electroshock, and restraints when she then refuses to accept her medical diagnoses and submit to treatment. This life story effectively demonstrates how an institution embodies the cultural, racist, and sexist views that live outside of it. Yet, the over-reliance on one woman's story also serves to diminish the power of her argument, leaving the reader craving a wider view and larger sample.

Bolivian micro-level realities are also brought alive by Susan Helen Ellison in her book *Domesticating Democracy: The Politics of Conflict Resolution in Bolivia*, which analyzes the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) program in Bolivia through a democracy lens. The ADR program is an extrajudicial conciliation service and was historically funded by The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) but is now funded through Bolivia's Ministry of Justice. One of Ellison's key arguments is that the ADR programs cannot be uncoupled from the macro politics of democracy promotion and good governance in Bolivia that are embedded in a historical package of neoliberal reforms meant to create the conditions needed for private markets to flourish. Ellison provides an exhaustive overview of the contentious politics surrounding ADR programs, international development policies, democracy assistance programs and foreign aid in general. She takes a hard look at the microfinance industry in Bolivia and her critique is grounded in real people's lives. Furthermore, from the starting point of individual experiences of people living in the city of El Alto, she explores the intersections of ADR, foreign aid, and the flourishing NGO sector in Bolivia and shows the links to violence, especially domestic violence, and the economic precariousness which dominates many of their lives.

El Alto is the second largest city in Bolivia, lying adjacent to the capital city of La Paz, and is proudly host to a largely indigenous population. Alteños are known for being politically active and partial to contentious forms of protests such as street blockades, strikes, marches and other forms of mobilization. In fact, Ellison argues that this predisposition for street protest is one reason foreign aid groups targeted the city in an attempt to tame the people's fiery methods and convert them to what Ellison calls "entrepreneurial and counterinsurgent citizenship" (p. 18). ADR is meant to turn citizens away from confrontation and toward conciliation. Ellison concedes that the indigenous people of El Alto have a deep distrust of the Bolivian state, making them open to dealing with conflicts outside the formal machinations of the state. As Ellison states, "the law and its accompanying institutional apparatus are widely perceived to be *antithetical* to justice, whether in their absence or their arbitrary and abusive presence" (p. 37). The ADR programs, originally used for mediation in corporate settings, were promoted as a way to circumvent an overburdened justice system and to help ordinary Bolivians deal with conflict in a nonconfrontational manner. El Alto provided a receptive setting, not only because of their residents' distrust of the state and the state's historical record of neglect, but also because Andean culture had traditionally relied on third-party mediators (rural authorities, neighborhood leaders, or kin) to resolve conflict.

Ellison's methods paint a vivid picture of life at the micro level. For example, she traces one industrial sewing machine in a masterfully crafted chapter as it bounces from household to household as collateral for a web of debt woven within El Alto's neighborhoods. She uses this one machine to reveal how pervasive indebtedness and economic precariousness is and shows how it is often compounded by domestic violence—all of which leads to conflict and thus people's desire for conciliation. Conflict around debt and violence tend to dominate the ADR programs. Ellison points out the seemingly innocuous approach ADR programs take to conciliation which narrows conflict to the interpersonal without addressing the political-economic macro factors that fuel the conflict. Ellison points out that as *Alteños* turn to private conciliation their tradition of social and political mobilization risks dampening. This forensic accounting of the sewing machine also reveals the dark underside of the microfinance industry. Bolivians are deeply indebted and beholden to a multitude of private banks and NGO microfinance programs. Ellison argues that El Alto has become an overlapping network of lenders and borrowers in which husbands beat women who become overindebted, friendship and kin relationships become strained by lending amongst one another, and this pervasive moneylending strips people of their social ties. As the industrial sewing machine bounced from home to home as collateral, one young woman eventually took her life, apparently too overwhelmed by her indebtedness and her isolation from family and friends as a result of her unpaid debts.

Like Borda-Niño-Wildman, Ellison relies on over a year's worth of participatory observation (as an intern at one of the centers administering an ADR program in El Alto), an expansive list of interviewees such as jurists, policymakers, donor representatives, aid recipients, NGO staff, Bolivian officials, and, most importantly, the participants themselves. The voices that come through the loudest in her book are the indigenous citizens of Bolivia. These voices are powerful, and yet Ellison manages to reveal the complexity and lack of uniformity of thought on the ADR programs.

While Ellison provides a stellar ethnographic account of Bolivia's lived realities and its link with contemporary development politics, whether ADR programs are truly "taming" or domesticating the Bolivian indigenous population is unclear. Tracking the incidents of violent protests might have added to her story, but even if she had done so, a myriad of other factors would complicate that causal story. It remains unclear if the aims of ADR are to pacify, to make Bolivians more entrepreneurial, to fill a void left by a deficient state, to genuinely create a culture of peace, or to do all of the above. Either way, Ellison provides a conceptual frame to analyze each of the above possibilities.

Both authors adeptly use people's voices from the grassroots to tell their stories; they dive deep into indigenous Bolivian cultures and they show how the ambiguity of language is often manipulated for gain. For Ellison the use of the term "culture of peace" is wielded by many with as many different interpretations and, likewise, Borda-Niño-Wildman shows how the term *qhencha* is manipulated by those with power against those with less. It is this detailed knowledge that strengthens both books and provides a deep glimpse into a country struggling to shed a past replete with racism, sexism and exclusion to become inclusive and plurinational. Ellison herself believes that by studying the micropolitics of Bolivia, a deeper understanding of what "democracy means to people in practice" is unearthed (p. 13).

The cracks in Bolivia's approach to inclusionary democracy are apparent at the macro level with Morales' refusal to respect a referendum denying him the right to run for another term. And, so too, are the pitfalls revealed at the micro level by both authors. Latin Americanists,

political scientists, anthropologists, international development practitioners and scholars—especially those interested in microfinance, and those studying gender—will be particularly interested in both books. It is a lens into Bolivia at a key historical moment and interpreting the country's macro politics will be made easier by looking from the bottom up. Both Ellison and Borda-Niño-Wildman have provided a frame from which to do so.

### Notes

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<sup>i</sup> In 2012, of the 51 women hospitalized in the Intermediate/Chronic Unit of the Bolivia's National Psychiatric Hospital, 13 had experienced sexual violence (p. 107).