

Hi there, welcome back to Seedling for Change Over the Radio. My name is Cody McMahon and I am a researcher working in partnership with Seedling for Change in Society and Environment. Welcome to the second episode of our series on radio and social movements in Latin America. Last time, we set the stage for what we are looking at – thinking about what radio really is and its power as both a medium that reflects and creates knowledge.

This episode I want to delve into our case study to understand what role radio has played in various instances of social change in 20th century Latin America. We're going to look at the country of Bolivia. Nestled in Central Eastern South America, Bolivia has a unique geographic position – it is bordered to the West by the Andes region of Peru and Chile, and to the East by the monolithic Brazil. Such a position results in a unique geographic landscape – mountainous highlands make up the Western third of the country, while the remaining drops down into the Amazon basin to form lowlands. For our investigation, we're going to be focusing on Western Bolivia, amidst the Andes mountain range that runs nearly the entirety of South America's Western Seaboard, in an area known as Cordillera Oriental. Without delving too much into the geological landscape of South-western Bolivia, it's important to know that this region is home to a significant amount of igneous rock, the results of volcanic activity thousands of years ago. This hardened magma contains a high concentration of precious metals, and in this case specifically tin and silver. As one might imagine, once these valuable resources are discovered a significant amount of attention is brought to the region and the mining begins.

But before we explore the experience of the men working the tin mines of Bolivia, we need to understand the political context. Mining has been a dominant economic resource of Bolivia since colonial occupation in the 16th century. The largest town in the region is Potosí and this was a central hub for mining in the area. During the nearly 300 years of occupation by

Spanish colonial forces, this region became the silver capital of the world – rough estimates put the amount of silver transported out of the Potosí mines during this period at about 20 billion tons.¹ Although there were fluctuations in the profitability of these mines based on global demand for specific minerals, the mines remained a significant part of economic output into the 19th century, and when Bolivia declared independence in 1825. In the early years of the 20th century, the mines were in the process of industrialization – they were privately owned and incredibly labor intensive.² And they were producing minerals at an incredibly high volume. In the early 1900s, the mines were owned by a select group of individuals known as tin barons; one of these men Simón Patiño was amongst the richest men in the world in the early years of the 20th century.³ Bolivia became a single-export economy, and the country became dependent on these mines and to a certain extent, the mine-owners – even as of 1960, 90% of the country's exports were minerals.⁴ The problem with this export-minded focus was that the economic benefits of mining, the fruits of labour so to speak, remained in the hands of wealthy mine owners and not to the Bolivian people. And this did not sit well, especially amongst the miners themselves.

Throughout the early 1900s, miners from various companies attempted to unionize. Strikes and other labour disruptions emerged across Potosí, however they were often met with violence. And the Bolivian government, not wanting to disrupt the greatest economic asset, often sided with the companies; throughout the 1920s, the Bolivian government sent the national army to Potosí, Oruro, and other mining communities to break strikes with violence.⁵ One of these

¹ Crabtree and Chaplin, 75.

² Nash, 25.

³ Artaraz, 15.

⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

⁵ Nash, 33.

army men who went on to be a miner himself, a gentleman named Jorge, wrote “ we had the task of shooting at the workers. The workers came to us and said that when we got out of the army we would be in the same position as they, and we shouldn’t shoot.”⁶ This tenuous relationship between miners, the companies, and the state was also subject to the greater political climate.

The early 20th century was marked by terrible living conditions for rural Bolivians, many of whom worked in the mines. The prominence of an elite oligarchy and a lack of political voice led to increasing frustrations amongst this population. In 1932, Bolivia officially entered into armed conflict with neighbouring Paraguay over the territory known as Gran Chaco – the dispute over the oil-rich region resulted in staggering casualties on both sides, the majority of which were working class citizens.⁷ This growing disconnect between the people of Bolivia and the government boiled over into a revolutionary overthrow of the government in 1952 by the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario party with the armed assistance of mine workers in La Paz.⁸ This revolution was fundamentally socialist-oriented – the new MNR government instituted free public education, created a national labor federation and importantly, nationalized the mines.⁹ 1952 marked an important shift in Bolivian politics, and thus the lives of mine workers as well. With the new government in power, the nationalization of the tin and silver mines ensured that revenues were directed to the state and the workers were permitted to organize trade unions to ensure fair wages and working conditions.¹⁰ It is within this moment that radio stations emerge as a powerful tool used by mine workers.

⁶ Nash, 36.

⁷ Farcau

⁸ Lagos, 49.

⁹ Defronzo, 449.

¹⁰ Schmucler and Encinas, 45, in O’Connor

Now that we've established the greater context, we can dive into how 20th century Bolivian miners connect to radio and social change. The 1952 revolution itself was a significant moment of social change led in large part by these miners. From this moment on, the miners were able to make their voices heard. Tin mining formed an incredibly valuable part of the national economy well into the 1980s, and thus the men tasked with carrying out the mining had an important position that they used strategically to advance their positions. The relationship used to be between the mines, the companies, and the state – with nationalization, companies were cut out of the process and it became a back and forth relationship between the miners and the state. The solidarity of mine workers and their communities allowed them to achieve a variety of their goals and ensure more favourable wages and working conditions throughout the mid-20th century.¹¹ However, the geographic landscape of the mining regions made it difficult to establish solidarity across mining communities. Communities existed in isolation, both from urban populations and the government in La Paz, but also one another. In order to properly exercise power, the miners and their unions needed to communicate across time and space. This is where the power of radio emerged.

I'll ask that you think back to last episode's discussion about the accessibility of radio. That relatively inexpensive technology that allowed the transmission of aural sounds through radio waves. Given the geographic isolation of mining communities, radio became a way to communicate to a broader public – a way for miners to express themselves and their desires. Now in order for this to make sense, the community needed access to radios. But in reality, the miners were actually capitalizing on changes that had occurred during the 1952 revolution. You see, when the MNR took power, they distributed radio sets to nearly everyone in these mining

¹¹ Gill, 70.

communities. This was part of their broader goal at informing the public on national affairs – keeping in line with traditional Marxist governance, the MNR established Radio Illimani, a broadcasting station that would act as the voice of the Service for Press Information and Culture, the state-run media.¹² The miners capitalized on the fact that everyone had a radio, and used it as a tool to enact social change. Radio stations began to pop up across the mining region. By 1956, there were 19 different mining stations, each owned and operated by the miners themselves; between 1957 and 1965, this number jumped to 30, with about 32,000 listeners. One of the most popular of these stations was Radio Pió XII located in Siglo XX mining centre.¹³ The miners who broadcasted over the radio sought to bring attention to any plight and suffering experienced working in the mines and bring it to the public. They prepared dramatic radio shows, with titles like “From the Heart of the Tin” and “The Price of Tin” – as one miner named Manuel put it, the shows were “about the workers, how they ought to know the suffering and sacrifice.”¹⁴ One would imagine that there was a cathartic element to these broadcasts.

Through radio, the miners were able to tell their stories and challenge the Bolivian government to ensure they wouldn’t continue to suffer. These radio stations brought communities together – they not only broadcasted news about the mines, but also aired programs that allowed local musicians, singers, and other artists to broadcast their content.¹⁵ To understand how this is social change in action, we can look to an example in another part of Latin America around the same time. In 1947, a Catholic radio station in Colombia emerged called Radio Sutatenza. This radio station was founded to spread faith-based education to rural Colombians,

¹² Lozada and Kúncar, 21 in O’Connor

¹³ *Ibid*, 20.

¹⁴ Nash, 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

but do so in a way that also combatted adult illiteracy.¹⁶ Author Mary Roldán argued that this radio station, and others like it that emerged in mid-20th century Colombia, designed specific programming that served as models for social change. For example, one of the more popular forms of radio shows was theatre – radio dramas. We might think back to Great-Depression era murder-mystery shows, but in Colombia, these shows served as teaching tools. The shows tackled important social issues, including appropriate family and spousal relations.¹⁷ These teachings were fundamentally based on norms of the Catholic Church, but nonetheless radio served as a medium through which social change occurred. Bringing it back to Bolivia, something similar was occurring. Much in the same way that housewives in rural Colombia saw their own social position differently as a result of radio programming, the miners and their families understood and reaffirmed their social position to one another by reaching out and broadcasting – not just their working concerns, but their culture, music, performance, etc. Radio was the conduit for social change, one that brought isolated communities together and helped miners form solidarity with one another.

To give an example of the power that these stations had in transforming Bolivian society, in 1965 the Bolivian military seized control of many of the mines. In the mid-1960s, the rise of armed revolutionary movements with a healthy dose of foreign capital from the United States, led to disconnects between the Bolivian government and military.¹⁸ In a coup d'etat, the military led by René Barrientos Ortuño and General Alfredo Ovando Candia seized control of the presidential palace and gained political control of Bolivia. As part of this process, they seized control of the mines and their workers. One of the first places they went to upon arriving at the

¹⁶ Roldán, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁸ Defronzo, 450.

mines were the radio stations. They sought to shut down these stations as they knew that radio was a valuable tool of community mobilization.¹⁹ This demonstrated the power of radio for a group of marginalized people, and the threat to state power that such a technology had. Bolivian miners used radio as a tool to mobilize social change, and unfortunately were met with violence and repression in the process. However, while the radio stations lasted they provided these men with the ability to amplify their voices and achieve solidarity amongst their isolated mining communities.

In the process of doing research for today's episode, I was struck by a feeling of sympathy for these men and their work. In my time here at Brock Radio, I've learned a lot of about the technical aspects of recording and the steps that need to be taken in order to put music or voice on air. But what I'm also discovering is the solitude of radio. I'm sitting in a room, talking into a microphone, reading my script – once that's done, I turn the lights off and go home. There's no dialogue, no response, no immediate conversation. It's helped me understand the experience of these miners in a way. The men who broadcasted at Radio Pió XII and YYY were reaching out to communities in similar situations through the radio, but it would have been difficult to gauge a response. Radio is a fabulous means of reaching out to a broader community, but it is not the most convenient way to hear back from the community. As discussed last time, one could argue that the response is the way in which the community embodies what you are saying and acts upon it. And this was the case for the Bolivian tin miners, who shared ideas and established solidarity with their fellow miners. But this must have been a lonely endeavour. In the high-altitude landscape of rural Bolivia, radio was a means to reach out – but it wasn't an immediate process. There's an element of faith that is involved with radio. I'm producing this

¹⁹ Nash, 109.

with the hope that there are listeners. If not, that's ok. I learned something in the process and am happy with it. But what happens if the stakes are greater. For these men who are trying to improve the lives of themselves and their families, having someone listening on the other side could have been a matter of life and death. So radio was a force of liberation – to bring ideas to a greater audience. However, that force was only as powerful as the actions of those who were listening. I'm experiencing this in a fraction of the way these miners were, but nonetheless it helps me empathize with them. Ultimately, I think this is the value of challenging the status quo and approaching history in a different way. As you may remember last time, I was suggesting that this podcast is an example of creative thinking instead of critical. Rather than challenging or affirming aspects of the miners live, through learning how to use radio I was somehow brought closer to them. Not through time and space, but by putting myself in a position to learn what they would have had to learn. To do something similar to them in form, and in the process learn to empathize with their experiences. There's an optimism to this process of social change that I admire.

There's an often-used quote by Albert Einstein that says "insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results." Maybe we should think about this in terms of how we do history. I'm not saying that what I've done is in any way radical or groundbreaking – just simply experimenting with forms and different mediums may be a way to bring about new insights. In this case, I feel as though through an understanding of radio, I've connected the community in which I currently exist to historical communities. Ultimately, we will never know what things were exactly like in the past. But perhaps if we thought about history as less distant, and try to connect it more to our present, we might gain a deeper appreciation and understanding.

There's a poem pinned on a wall here at Brock Radio called Broadcaster's Poem by Alden Nowlan. I want to read a small portion of it, because after going through the process of learning about radio and then seeing it in action through the case study of Bolivia, I've come to appreciate it a bit more.

I used to broadcast at night
 alone in a radio station
 but I was never good at it
 partly because my voice wasn't right
 but mostly because my peculiar
 metaphysical stupidity
 made it impossible
 for me to keep believing
 there was somebody listening
 when it seemed I was talking
 only to myself in a room no bigger
 than an ordinary bathroom
 I could believe it for a while
 and then I'd get somewhat
 the same feeling as when you
 start to suspect you're the victim
 of a practical joke
 So one part of me
 was afraid another part
 might blurt out something
 about myself so terrible
 that even I had never until
 that moment suspected it

I thought about places
 the disc jockey's voice goes
 and the things that happen there
 and of how impossible it would be for him
 to continue if he really knew.

That's all for my series on radio and social movements in Latin America. I hope you have enjoyed listening as much as I have enjoyed making this. If there is one thing I could ask you take away from this, it would be to think about how history is connected to the present. To stop

thinking about the past in a distant way, but rather to understand time and place as uniting rather than dividing factors. Thank you again to Deborah Cartmer, Brock Radio, and Seedling for Change in Society and Environment. I'm grateful for all. Until next time.

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