

Using the Past to Construct Present Identities: Memories of Bolivian Ex-Miners

ANNE MARIE EJDESGAARD JEPPESEN

University of Copenhagen

“Everything seems to indicate that the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present.”

Maurice Halbwachs (1952/1992, p. 40)

The restructuring of the mining sector in Bolivia in the mid-1980s is a good example of the social and cultural consequences of the adjustments in economic policies and changes in development planning that have been carried out in Latin America during the past two decades. The forced exodus of the miners and their families from the mining centres, and their struggle to make ends meet as newcomers to the informal labour market in Bolivia's larger cities, illustrate the depth of the changes in the quality of work and livelihood that are taking place throughout the region, and not only in Bolivia.

As public enterprises are privatised or closed down, entire communities may disappear as groups of people, with their respective skills and qualifications, are declared superfluous following the implementation of new strategies for national development in the era of globalisation. One of the consequences is a weakening of important social movements, such as labour movements.¹ Another is the apparent fragmentation of social identities – class, for example (Alvarez & Escobar, 1992; Zermeño, 1991; Rouse, 1991) — and the possible disruption of many threads of memories when people are forced to migrate in search of jobs and livelihood. Yet, while there is no doubt about the weakening of the labour movements, the fragmentation of identities is a much more complex issue that requires further research.

ejdesgd@hum.ku.dk

The fact is that there is scant literature about these groups, their experiences and their memories.² We know very little of how they manage and whether their past experiences have proved useful in their current struggle for survival. Some of the questions that need to be considered are: How do people relate to changes in the workplace and their sense of belonging? Is fragmentation something that exists only in the minds of researchers? What systems of meaning do people create for themselves? We can assume that coherent, alternative frameworks of meaning are fading as working class memories disappear or are silenced in the media and the writing of national history, yet we do not know how this affects the identities of the individuals in the different social groups.

The experiences of these working class people, their narratives, and their memories are not sponsored by any international organisation. It is important that we collect these memories. Not only are they based on first-hand knowledge of repression, the abuse of institutionalised power and neglect, but often they also comprise alternative experiences drawn from group identity, solidarity, political agency and the power and will to influence and transform things, something which is becoming increasingly rare in today's world of rapid change, fragmentation and individualisation. The question, however, is whether these memories do more than reflect the past. Is it possible to construct an identity based on a sense of continuity with the past if the social context for the transmission of memory is missing? Can memories be of any use in a difficult present situation and an uncertain future?

Lesley Gill, in her study of ex-miners and daily life in El Alto, Bolivia, suggests that memories only serve to prevent people from accepting their present situation, and thereby from realising that their identity has changed. One of the subjects she interviewed, Leonidas Rojas, insists on seeing himself as a worker, in spite of his activities as a market vendor (Gill, 1997, 303). He does so 'referring to an orientation that he had acquired in the past' (ibid.), but the article leaves no doubt that this past orientation is what keeps him from acknowledging his present situation, not as a worker, but the same as the other street vendors of El Alto, with whom he does not wish to identify. In Gill's opinion, Leonidas Rojas "should" have changed his identity when he entered the informal sector; he should have stopped seeing himself as a worker.

The point I wish to make in this article is that experiences are transferable and that identity does not change simply because of external changes in working conditions, as structuralists might argue, but because remembering creates a moral link to the past (Rappaport, 1990), if possible a 'usable past' that establishes continuity with the present situation, a usable past that is 'seen to change with the demands of the present' (Wertsch, 2002, 45). Thus, instead of focusing on rupture and shifting identities, I shall concentrate on how memory can be used

as a source of knowledge connecting the past and the present, along the lines delineated by Fentress and Wickham (1992). Through an analysis of individual life experiences and memories, I will discuss the role of memory under changing circumstances, and thereby gain insight into the construction of meaning and forms of everyday resistance among some of the people affected by the changes in contemporary Bolivia.³

The Bolivian miners

Before the National Revolution of 1952, mining was an extremely lucrative private business, which left very little revenue in the coffers of the Bolivian state. After the Revolution, ownership of most of the mines passed into the hands of the State, until 1986.

When the MNR (National Revolutionary Movement) won the presidential elections in 1951, its leaders were in exile. The military quickly decided to intervene and annulled the elections. The winning party had been founded in 1940, as a corollary of the crisis following the Chaco War against Paraguay (1932-1935). Initially influenced by fascist ideology, by the time of the 1951 elections the MNR had developed into a reformist party of 'radical middle-class elements and revolutionary workers and represented a new type of radical populist movement' (Klein, 1992, 225). The MNR decided to rise against the military and, joined by civilians from the cities and miners who had marched from the remote mining centres to La Paz, defeated the military on 9 April 1952.

The 1952 uprising and its aftermath, characterised by Klein as 'Latin America's most dynamic social and economic revolution' (1992, 226), is inconceivable without the contribution of the Federation of Mineworkers' Unions (FSTMB),⁴ that played a decisive role together with the MNR. The FSTMB was founded in 1944, in Huanuni.⁵ It comprised about 60,000 mineworkers at a national level,⁶ quite a considerable number at that time, and it eventually became the strongest union in the National Labour Confederation (COB). The FSTMB leader was the legendary Juan Lechín Oquendo, a left-wing revolutionary who nevertheless worked closely with the MNR.

The first political theses of the FSTMB, the Pulacayo theses of 1946, reveal the revolutionary line of the leaders. They also show keen awareness of the dangers of the labour movement being dominated by the government and the bourgeoisie, and a concern for the working and living conditions of the miner and his family (FSTMB-SIDIS 1992). From the outset, the FSTMB assumed

both a political and a social role, as is often the case in Latin American labour movements (Munck, 1988).

The workers enjoyed ample participation in the first revolutionary government, headed by Víctor Paz Estenssoro. The mining and petroleum minister was none other than Juan Lechín Oquendo, leader of the mineworkers' union and also of the National Labour Confederation that had been founded shortly after the uprising in April 1952.⁷ The government had four important objectives: nationalisation of the mines, agrarian reform, universal suffrage and reform of the educational system. The first two were approved basically because of the massive mobilisation of workers and peasants, since the MNR government was reluctant to carry out these attacks on private property. The nationalisation of the mines owned by tin barons Simón Patiño, Mauricio Hochschild, and Carlos Aramayo was handled by a semi-autonomous state enterprise: the COMIBOL. In spite of protests from the workers, compensation was paid to the former owners, while other mines – e.g., those owned by North American interests — were not touched (Klein, 1992, 235). The workers were given two of the seven seats on the board of the state-owned company and had veto power over decisions affecting workers. This was one of the demands stipulated in the Pulacayo Theses, and one that remained an important point also in later claims of the mineworkers.

The miners' unions and the Federation became a political force in Bolivian society that all governments had to take into consideration. According to Mansilla, the miners' unions were superior to all other unions in organization, ideology and finance, and this contributed to their predominance in the COB for long periods (Mansilla, 1993). Mansilla's work, like most research on miners, emphasises the strength of the workers and the dominance of the miners, which are no doubt true, to a point. Still, weaknesses within the miners' organisations are partly overlooked both by Mansilla and by Harry Sanabría, who questions how it was possible that 'the best-organized and most militant, ideologically cohesive, and class conscious segment of Bolivian working class' was so quickly overwhelmed by the state and allied economic elites in 1986 (Sanabría, 2000, 57). These issues will be examined below.

In 1985, the Bolivian government of Víctor Paz Estenssoro launched its New Economic Policy, a traditional neo-liberal economic programme, which in 1986 led to a restructuring of the state-owned mining company (COMIBOL), the closure of several of the biggest and most important mines, and left 30,000 miners and their families on the streets looking for other jobs and places to live (Jetté, 1989; Gill, 1997; Sanabría, 2000).

As will become clear from the excerpts cited, the miners have had to face the destruction of the mining community, i.e. the social context for the transmission of their memories. Many have found themselves with no place to go with their

wife and children, no house, and no job. They have had to face fierce competition for work and the individualisation of the labour market in the cities, as well as the prejudices of a society that regards them with suspicion, forcing them to hide their past as miners.

It is not because I am ashamed. The problem is that society thinks that I'm something that does damage to people. There is this incredible denigration of the *relocalizado*⁸(...) Everything is the fault of the *relocalizado*. They have become a sickness in this country. You can't go into an office and say that you are a *relocalizado* – anything but that. They treat you very badly (Rómulo Mercado, ex-miner, cited in Gill, 1997, 305).

As can be understood from this statement by Mercado, there has also been a lot of pressure that has caused ex-miners to deny their belonging to the group of 'relocalizados,' in order to avoid unpleasant situations. In this way, they have been made to contribute to the general silencing of what has happened to them as a group and as individuals.

If memory must be hidden, and there is no public acceptance of the common past, one might expect to find what Fentress and Wickham call forgetfulness and '*amnesia derived from a sense of unstructured failure; of lives steadily deprived of meaning,*' (1992,122) as was the case of a group of French peasants who were forced to migrate. As we shall see, not all Bolivian miners' lives have been deprived of a sense of meaning. On the contrary, the memories of the miners I interviewed came spontaneously, in the form of vivid accounts and well-formulated narratives, as if they had simply been waiting for someone to listen.⁹ This is probably due to two factors: 1) the character of the mining communities and the miners' unions, and 2) the organizational skills of the ex-miners and their coping strategies. Below, I will examine these two factors.

The Bolivian mining community and the union as the 'locus' for remembering

Mining centres in Bolivia are still found in all highland departments, but the largest and most important mines are situated in Potosí or Oruro, in remote areas, frequently at an altitude of at least 4,000 m. above sea level.

Due to its location and poor infrastructure, the mining community appears to be separated from the surrounding area. This is not really so, although the rugged geography and difficult access to the area by any means other than the

one road leading in and out make it easy to isolate — a detail which the army has not failed to notice and from which it has benefited on many occasions (Nash, 1979, Llobet Tabolara, 1984).

The social demands of the miners and their families since the 1952 National Revolution have contributed, in a way, to the apparent isolation of the mining centres. Prior to that time, the country had no labour legislation, no social security system and an illiteracy rate of 70% (de Mesa, 1997, 602). But after 1952, the state offered housing, state-subsidized shops (*pulpería*), satisfied most of the family's daily needs, and the largest mining centres had relatively good schools. In contrast to many peasants, most miners are literate.¹⁰ In Siglo XX, one of the most important mines, there was even a university of high academic level and a very good hospital. Thus, in many cases, there was no reason for the miners and their families to leave the mining area for their daily needs, and so the mining neighbourhood developed into a very self-sufficient community. Despite some likely differences between the various members of the area, for example in relation to work experiences, the sense of community identity has remained relatively stable and coherent (see Nash, 1979), especially when compared with urban working class communities, where people often come and go and have many different occupations. In the mining community, there is usually only one enterprise, one 'boss,' common to all. In the case of the Bolivian miners, after the 1952 Revolution the boss was usually the state, the COMIBOL.

Furthermore, in the case of the Bolivian miners the close relationship between the community and the workers' organisation reinforced the sense of belonging and opposition to the outside world. According to June Nash, the strength of the labour movement 'draws upon the community that enables workers to resist the most oppressive conditions and the most aggressive attacks' (Nash, 1979, 309). Harry Sanabría's data on the miners reveals that they were organized into 'tightly knit and highly organized social groupings and communities' (Sanabría, 2000). These factors are important for the creation of common narratives about identity and history. The miners' unions have been crucial in creating a common history of class for the entire labour movement in Bolivia, but above all for the miners themselves. The history is recorded and constructed in texts such as documents from the different congresses, teaching material (*Cuadernos de capacitación*) published by the unions, history books, and oral narratives.

Remembering the past

Common to all the ex-miners I interviewed is the fact that they began working in the mine because of obligations to their family. One example is Juan Hoyos,

ex-perforista, former leader of the union of Huanuni and former member of the leadership of the COB,¹¹ who at fifteen had to leave school and start supporting his mother and three younger sisters following his father's death from silicosis (*mal de minas*).

Family responsibilities were also cited frequently as the reason for abandoning work in the mines in 1986. Thus, supporting their family is the basic reason for working in the mine for the people I have talked to, as well as the overall logic behind all their activities – including their political and social work in the mineworkers' union. Very often, social gains (e.g., improvements in working conditions) are highlighted in the memories, as illustrated by Simón Ramírez, former union leader from Catavi/Siglo XX, when talking about the effects of the 1952 Revolution:

Before, you see, there were no electric lamps, the lamps were coal lamps, and the coal that the miner bought for his lamp he had to pay it himself and the lamp was to go to work for the boss, and apart from the lamp there was no security equipment, if he wanted a helmet he had to buy it himself (...) and then, when the revolution came, these changes occurred, one of the changes was that they gave the security equipment to the worker, it was not the coal lamp but an electric lamp, they gave him a helmet which is fundamental to protect your head in the pit because all sorts of accidents can happen there, and they gave you rubber boots, a rubber bag, i.e. there were these changes that were for the benefit of the workers (...) and through the *pulperías* you could buy a radio, a vital and important element not only for the pleasure of a person, but also to know things and listen to the news.

Unfortunately, after the Revolution mining became less lucrative. During the 1940s no investments had been made to renew machinery and production, output declined and Bolivia had the highest cost of production on the world market (Klein, 1992, 230). The economic situation of the revolutionary government was difficult, consequently it was obliged to accept North American aid and an agreement with the IMF in 1957, which helped overcome the worst of inflation and food shortage. On the other hand, some of the requirements of the IMF—no more wage rises and food subsidies for the mining company shops (*pulperías*)—affected the miners and their families directly. The miners launched a series of strikes, to no avail. The US government put pressure on the MNR government, after the elections in 1956, headed by Hernán Siles Zuazo, and also during the second MNR government headed by Paz Estenssoro (1960-1964),

to separate the government from left-wing workers, especially Juan Lechín. Internal squabbling within the MNR leadership finally gave way to a military coup in 1964, headed by the vice-president, General Barrientos.

The unions and miners completely misinterpreted the character of the military regime. They had supported the takeover, but would soon realise that the consequences were terrible. The military government suppressed all strikes, fired 6,000 miners and, on 24 June 1967, perpetrated one of the bloodiest massacres of civilians in the mining centre of Catavi/Siglo XX.¹² The pretext was that the miners and their unions prevented the COMIBOL from functioning effectively.

Simón Ramírez, who survived the massacre of *San Juan* (Midsummer's Eve), was forced to escape on foot over the mountains:

They came at dawn and violently seized the village in Siglo XX, they occupied the building of the union and the radio, because the radio, the 'Voice of the Miner,' was in the union building and after that they went down to Catavi to do the same, and they also took the radio '21 de Diciembre'(...) We had to stay 'underground'. After that they started to deliver letters of retirement. They went from house to house to deliver the letters to all those persons that they thought were causing conflicts, the extremists, the communists, because that was the word they used for the person who was fighting, arguing, who was against the government, he was called a communist, although maybe he was not, but they called him communist, extremist, terrorist, no matter what the name was or sort of government.¹³

According to Klein, troops were constantly used in the mines during this period, and they 'succeeded in isolating and temporarily controlling the once-all-powerful labour movement' (1992, 248).¹⁴ The truth is that in 1966 the COMIBOL produced a surplus for the first time in many years.

Military rule and anti-labour governments became the norm, except for very short periods,¹⁵ until 1982, when massive worker mobilisation and civilian opposition forced the military government to leave and enabled previously elected Hernán Siles Zuazo, from the MNR, to take office as president.¹⁶

Most of the union leaders I interviewed were imprisoned several times, some were exiled to remote regions in Bolivia, others to Europe, and many have been tortured on account of their activities as union leaders. They have all lost friends, and some also family members, because of military repression. These are experiences of which they do not speak in great detail, opting instead for understatement, as Juan Hoyos does: *This is not something we complain about;*

it is just one more part of our history, or as Alfredo Navarro, another former union leader, also from Huanuni, talking about his imprisonment in 1974, for almost a year, together with the rest of the union leadership: *that was a situation that we knew how to face, because it was a situation of principles, a question almost of honour to defend the cause of our comrades and to defend a just cause*. Their families have endured hardship during those periods of exile or imprisonment, but they have also felt the solidarity of the community, as workers fought to get their leaders back: *That is almost a convention of struggle of the workers, that when the state starts to repress the union leaders, then the workers leave out many other demands and start to fight for the freedom of their leaders* (Juan Hoyos).

The miners organised clandestine, parallel unions to those imposed from above, so that whenever democracy and civil rights were restored, even if for short periods, the old leaders could assume control in already existing organisations. Thus the miners were always ready with new demands. For example, in 1976, at the Congress of the FSTMB in Corocoro, new leaders were elected and a limit of thirty days was agreed upon for negotiations with the government to solve the problem of low wages. Once again, the leaders were imprisoned:

Again I was imprisoned. The manager of the company invited me to his office and said that he wanted to talk with me, and there the soldiers were waiting and they took me. I had not stolen anything, nor had I killed or done anything against the Mine so I was calm, but by force and with a lot of crudeness they took me to La Paz, to San Pedro and later to Chonchocoro, which at that time was a very difficult place, very precarious. I stayed there till 1978 when Banzer took over and I could go back to my district and take up more responsibility and the role as general secretary (Alfredo Navarro).

The COB, headed by the miners, was a leading force in the opposition to the military dictatorships. In the struggle for democracy, the unions, and especially the mineworkers' unions, acquired considerable moral authority, particularly after the wives of four miners went on a hunger strike in 1977, during the dictatorship of general Banzer, which in few days developed into a mass demonstration that forced the general to grant amnesty to union leaders and political activists, and later to resign.

By the early 1980s, the FSTMB and the COB had become important civilian pro-democracy organisations that any government had to take into consideration.

Moreover, tin mining had yielded a considerable surplus since the end of the 1960s, and in 1981 mining still constituted 71% of all the country's exports (de Mesa, 1997, 769). This was due more to the rising prices of tin on the international market than to the not-so-efficient investment in the mining sector in Bolivia. In fact, during the military governments most of the surplus derived from mining was spent on areas other than mining, and in the development of the Santa Cruz region. Nevertheless, the miners were in a position of strength in 1982, when democracy was finally re-established, given the importance of the mining sector for the economy.

However, the economic situation was not favourable for the new democratic government. The military regimes had left the public sector bankrupt, a huge foreign debt (the servicing of which in 1984 was equivalent to 36 percent of the value of all exports), and a private sector in decline (Klein, 1992, 271). The demands of the COB and the mineworkers were extreme, considering the situation of the economy, and the so-called co-government, i.e. the participation of mineworkers in the management of the mining companies was inefficient and, in many cases, damaging (Jetté, 1989). After a while, inflation reached catastrophic levels. Protests, demonstrations, street blockades, and strikes weakened the government, and it gradually lost credibility. In the end, president Siles Zuazo was forced to call an election. Yet the lack of stability was so great, that the COB, and especially the FSTMB, also lost credibility. When, at the end of 1984, tin prices began to fall,¹⁷ as did the output of the mines, the situation in Bolivia became desperate.

After the elections in July 1985, the former leader of the MNR, Víctor Paz Estenssoro, was appointed president of Bolivia for the fourth time in his life. He had been the leader responsible for carrying out the nationalisation of the mines in 1952, together with the FSTMB and the COB, and now he was about to enforce a structural adjustment programme and implement a neo-liberal economic model that would privatise the mines, dismantle the public sector and do what all the military dictatorships had failed to do: seriously weaken the powerful miners' union, the backbone of the Bolivian labour movement. Already in August of that same year, decree 21060, the cornerstone of the new economic programme, was passed. This decree made significant changes in labour legislation. It was now possible to discharge employees and to hire workers on a temporary basis. This was applied both in the private and in the public sector, in a way that increased work instability and competition among workers (ILDIS-UCB, 1996; Gill, 2000; Ejdesgaard Jeppesen, 2002). The COB called a general strike that lasted for more than two weeks and paralysed the country, until the president declared 'estado de sitio' and arrested 150 union leaders, who were banished to the north of Bolivia for over a month. Among them was Juan Hoyos, together

with the general secretary of the FSTMB and the COB, Juan Lechín, and many other important union leaders:

We made a hunger strike in the building of the Federation of the factory workers in La Paz to make the government listen to our demands. Unfortunately we were repressed and exiled to Pando, the Amazon jungles of Bolivia (...) the government entered with democracy but applied 'mano dura' against the union leaders who were claiming our fair rights, and of course also opposing the decrees that Dr. Víctor Paz Estenssoro was preparing (Juan Hoyos).

The implications of decree 21060 for the mining sector were the closure of several mines and the privatisation of others. This process was initiated in 1986, but it was preceded by a long period of hunger, during which miners and their families were more or less forced to leave the mining centres because of food shortages in the *pulperías*, the shops in the mining towns:

...the worker cannot work on a ration of starvation, because we, in the district where the nationalised mines are, we do not have food supplies now. In the first place, the worker goes to work in the morning having had only something to drink. We would want it to be a cup of tea or coffee or milk, but we only have peel of oranges or mandarinas, we would want at least some sugar, but that is breakfast, and people cannot work in that way, with hunger... (Leader of the Amas de Casa, Siglo XX). (CEBIAE/CEDLA, 1986, 7)

Another housewife recounts:

Well, in the *pulpería*, the COMIBOL shop, there is nothing, every month they give us a little oil, every two or three months a little rice, once a month one bag with noodles, but that is only now and then, when we protest, when we start to fight... (Leader of the Amas de Casa, Siglo XX). (CEBIAE/CEDLA, 1986, 7)

In August 1986, the miners organised a march to La Paz 'for life and for peace.' They were stopped by the army outside Calamarca, about 100 kilometres from La Paz, and forced to return to Oruro by train (CEBIAE/CEDLA, 1986; Jetté, 1989). In a way, this constituted a final defeat for the miners. They were not able to resist the economic programme of the government, their families

were suffering from the lack of salaries and food supplies in the mining areas, and there was even a lack of equipment for production. Many simply gave up and left. It was then that the great exodus began. Families were put on buses and taken to Oruro, La Paz/El Alto, Cochabamba, or even to Chapare, the coca-growing areas, in search of work and livelihood:

Well, first you had to leave the house that belonged to the company. Sometimes there was a bus waiting at the doorway with a time limit of six hours or eight hours for us to leave with all our belongings. Nobody knew to where, but we had to leave. But, señor, where am I going to go, I would like you to give me a couple of days, the coming Thursday or Friday and I will hand over the house in order. No señor, these are definitive instructions from the government, you have from now, and it is eight o'clock in the morning, you have till two o'clock this afternoon to leave the house. There have been lots of cases, lots of pushing and outrage at that moment for many workers, that was how the situation was (Alfredo Navarro).

The situation created a feeling of defeat:

It was like a boat going down, it was everybody fighting to survive. They wanted to destroy us and they have achieved it. What they have not been able to do in many years with weapons in their hands, they managed to do simply with a decree, decree 21060 (Simón Ramírez).

Alfredo Navarro says:

The enemy of the working classes has on many occasions been very fast,¹⁸ and there is a saying that to win you must divide, and they have started to divide us with different excuses (...) and there was a certain confusion, a certain division of ideas and attitudes and that is what the enemy needed to reign, and it has been a tragedy unfortunately...

The organizational skills of the ex-miners and their coping strategies

Alfredo Navarro was one of the lucky people who had a small house waiting for him in Cochabamba. The miners and their unions had founded housing cooperatives already in the 1970s and 1980s, and some of the older miners had a house, or a small plot of land on which to build a house, reserved for their retirement. But most families, like Juan Hoyos' and Simón Ramírez', had nothing. Furthermore, there were many rumours and prejudices about the miners:

I tell you, that when we came here we felt so disoriented and unfortunately so rejected, because they said that we were carrying tuberculosis, but the miners do not have tuberculosis, it is silicosis, and silicosis is not contagious, you can control it and stop it. But there were publications warning about this, saying that in Cochabamba they should not permit that we settled down here because we were carriers of tuberculosis (...) But we managed to organise, because every day new miners were arriving, miners from the North, miners from the South, from everywhere miners came with their families (Alfredo Navarro).

The first problem was housing:

There was a group of miners from Japo who lived in tents, and to find a solution we organised, but that required a lot of work. Maybe we should thank the international organisations that helped us in that respect, because they helped and I am very thankful for that. We have been able to settle down in a piece of land that was owned by CONAVI, an institution that belonged to the state and that had large plots of land here in Cochabamba and they did not distribute them, probably because they waited for an opportunity to give land to their clients. So we investigated and found out that in fact the land belonged to CONAVI and then we went in with 700 'relocalizados.' But conditions were so bad because there was no water and no electricity, so many left, but fortunately we have managed to arrange the papers for 376 families who now live there and have their houses (Alfredo Navarro).

Alfredo Navarro participated in all these activities and identified completely with the families who had no housing, as did many others. Today Cochabamba is surrounded by poor neighbourhoods that stretch for kilometres along the main

road through the valley. Ex-miners and other emigrants inhabit many of these. Some places even bear the names of some of the most important mines, like Siglo XX. These living areas are the visible results of the organisational capacity of the miners.¹⁹ They have had to fight for everything, water, sanitation, electricity, all kinds of infrastructure, and schools, etc., but they have succeeded in many ways, and their housing conditions seem better than those in El Alto.

The next problem was even more difficult: work and livelihood. People were forced to hide their identity as ex-miners. Not only were they accused of being carriers of illness; rumours had it that they were troublemakers, communists or even guerrilla-supporters. '*Sangre de minero, semilla de guerrillero*' goes the saying that at other times might have made the revolutionary miner proud, but that under the fierce competition for jobs on the Bolivian labour market was no positive label. The workers who had had 'marginal' activities in the mines, like the carpenter, the book-keeper, schoolteacher, and others, were much better off than the *perforista*, the driller, who had had the hardest, but also the most important job in the mine pit. Together with the loss of work and housing came the loss of prestige of the breadwinner.²⁰

The situation in many families was desperate.²¹ De Mesa concludes, with regard to this chapter of Bolivian history, that: '*the consequence was a very serious social situation, with low salaries and high levels of unemployment. There was a very intense growth in the informal sector in the most important cities that were flooded by street vendors and smugglers, defined elegantly by statistics as independent workers*' (De Mesa, 1997, 692).²²

Looking back, ten years after leaving Siglo XX with his family, Simón Ramírez concludes:

What we want most is work. Work is the fundamental thing, because the rest comes as a consequence of work. What good does it do if they say that there will be a health system and education if there is no work? Then there will be neither health nor education (...) This government promised to create jobs, but they are doing the opposite. Instead of creating jobs they have been closing permanent jobs, and it is very wrong. The government says here is work, and they start to make temporal jobs, as for example in the construction of a building, but it is for three, four or five months and after that the worker is again looking for a job, and he devotes himself to trade, and that is not work (...) the government has an obligation according to the constitution to give every citizen a worthy job and a worthy salary and that does not exist now.

Many miners, like Simón Ramírez (born in 1939), who now lives in a house that belongs to a brother and is barely able to provide for his family with a small shop and a stand in the marketplace, never found a job. The older ones of course found it more difficult to compete on the labour market than the younger ones. Juan Hoyos (born in 1945) explains:

I have never found a job. I have been an adviser, but that is not a job, I have to make my family work more than myself. Here we have to work man and wife, maybe also the oldest son. I have a grown-up son and he works, he could not finish studying, he has to work.

Thus the negative cycle repeats itself. Juan Hoyos is not able to offer his son the possibility of studying that he wants, and in this way enable him to escape poverty.

Survival has become an individual problem, or at least a problem that each family has to face on its own:

As we are now living in a neo-liberal country everybody goes along from an individual point of view, because we are desperately seeking how to survive (...) what we are going to eat, what we can do, etc. That is what the new social and political reality is about (Simón Ramírez).

In a sense, the miner was not very well prepared for this reality. The competition among workers, the individualisation, and the lack of work in general could not be confronted with the strategies they had learned in the mines. The differences between the past and the present are clearly analysed by Juan Hoyos:

The private employer ignores the rights of the worker in spite of the fact that they are clearly formulated in the law (...) In the mine I have not experienced that. The miner knew his rights and maybe he was rebellious because of that. He knew how to use his strength and his fight to impose his will to obtain this right (...) But we, the miners, we confronted only one employer, the state, and we did not just fight every mine on its own but united as a whole, together with the factory workers and the COB against the state (...) The demands were always general and the unions made their claims also to the local administration so that the union has played a very important role in every firm, but that does not happen today. I

would dare to say that more than 80% of the factories do not have a union, the workers have no leadership and furthermore they are under a constant threat because of the employers' permission to hire freely, which means that if the worker starts to claim his right and the employer does not want to recognise it he can fire him from his job, it is a sort of blackmail, a sort of coercion that should not exist (...) and the government does not carry out the labour legislation, it does not fulfil the law, that is the big difference.

What is highlighted by Juan Hoyos is the strength and capacity of the miners. The past is almost romanticised in this statement, and facts about the internal divisions in the labour movement are forgotten, although when viewed from the perspective of the present, this might be understandable. It is evident that the miners' struggles of the past are remembered as fights for better working and living conditions. It is also evident that, after being discharged from the mines, they have been most successful in their social gains (housing, schools, water, electricity, etc.), having failed to change either the structural conditions of the labour market, or the economic policy of the governments, both before the closing of the mines, and afterwards.

Alfredo Navarro clearly distinguishes between the labour and the political work of the union, when he explains:

The activity of the labour union is connected directly to the work experience, the relationship to the workers (...) it is something else to overthrow the governments, the first thing was always to improve the living conditions of the miner, that was the objective, of course within the political scope our plans were much more ambitious, but the union work was about social problems.

The Bolivian miners were never united in a political party that could take up the political work once the government had been overthrown. They were basically a labour movement, although there were always important and influential communist and Trotskyist groups within the unions and the COB, as well as other political parties. Historically, the tendency at the local level was to balance all political groupings within the leadership of the unions, so that no important group would be left out and not feel responsible for the decisions²³ (Mansilla, 1993). This might have been important when it came to fighting for the improvement of living conditions, but it was still a serious weakness when it came to creating a politically viable alternative to the MNR and other political parties that represented the Bolivian elites (Mansilla, 1994; Ardaya & Verdesoto,

1994; Sanabría, 2000). This is very often overlooked in the literature about the Bolivian miners. When the miners were expelled from the mines and the unions weakened, what remained was their capability to organise and fight for social improvements.

Mansilla describes the COB, and by extension also the miners' unions, as being not very flexible and not very self-critical (Mansilla, 1994, 20). This might be true at the top level and for the people still active in union politics, but it is contradicted by the very self-critical assessments I have encountered among the ex-miners I have interviewed. Simón Ramírez, for example, characterises the co-management of the mines under the Siles Zuazo government (during which he himself was appointed leader) as simply 'anarchic,' and claims that it never really worked and that the workers were responsible for its failure. His analysis of union activities during the last months of 1986 is also very critical:

I have always thought that in 1986, instead of making strikes we should have worked (...) If you start a fight against a business it is because you want to affect its economic interests (...) because then the director will come and say let's talk and ask you what you want, because they do not want you to strike (...) but if we made strikes against COMIBOL it only benefited the firm because they did not have to pay electricity, they did not have to pay salaries to the workers and the company would only have a smaller deficit (...) but I was not understood and the strike was made, I forced the comrades to work for two days, but again there was a general strike until the mine was closed (...) what we should have done was to have continued working. You see without losing one single shot the government has dismantled the two biggest unions of Bolivia, the one in Catavi and the one in Siglo XX (...) we were responsible for not having analysed the situation better, for having oriented it badly, and for not having been understood.

The feeling of defeat is clear in all the interviews, but so is the capacity for analysing social problems and thinking of alternative ways of doing things. This capacity is still being used to analyse the present situation of Bolivia.

The miners agree that they were the ones who fought for democracy and won, but they also think that the present government is not using its right to govern as it should, i.e. for the benefit of the people. In general, the attitude was that the democracy they have witnessed since 1985 only benefits 'those who are at the top' and that the government is handing over all the riches of the country to foreign powers, especially the USA and the IMF, who are the ones who really

govern Bolivia. They had expected that their political rights would be respected, that they would have stable working conditions, a better health system and education for their children. None of this has materialised, on the contrary:

They [the government, AMEJ] are much more oriented in favour of foreign capital than in favour of the human capital that is Bolivian (Alfredo Navarro).

During my fieldwork in Bolivia in 1996 and 1997, the government of 'Goni' Sánchez de Losada was coming to an end. This was a somewhat contradictory type of administration. On the one hand, it had continued the economic programme of the MNR government of Paz Estenssoro. In fact, president Sánchez de Losada had been minister of economic affairs during the first MNR government (1985-1989), and had launched a series of political reforms heavily supported by international aid. These reforms included decentralisation, popular participation in municipal governments,²⁴ recognition of the country as a multi-ethnic society, and educational reform. But at the same time, it repressed popular demonstrations, arrested union leaders and continued the paramilitary campaign in the coca-growing areas of Chapare. While I was interviewing ex-miners in Cochabamba, in December 1996 and January 1997, the massacre of Amayapampa/Capacirca (also called the Christmas Massacre) took place. Eleven people were killed and 36 wounded when the military attacked the miners and peasants who had occupied the mining area that belonged to the Canadian mining company Da Capo (Comisión de Derechos Humanos, 1997; Orellana Aillón, 1998). The Bolivian press labelled the Sánchez de Losada government the bloodiest of the three democratic governments after the period of military dictatorships (*Ultima Hora*, 5 May 1997). It is no surprise, then, that the alternatives to representative democracy that miners formulated were based on their experiences with trade unions.

Our idea of democracy is different; it is what we call popular democracy or working class democracy (...) For us it is fundamental that there is a real representation of people to the government and that it is really the people who choose the government (...) for example, the factory workers vote for one representative in their congress of the federation, and that person could be the delegate in the chamber and the same way the merchants (...) and so on, and that would be more representative, because these people would know the reality of the people they represent, but unfortunately this does not exist (Simón Ramírez).

This vision of democracy is surprising, on the one hand, because it does not give political parties any role; on the other hand, it is based directly on the experiences of the union. In my view, it expresses a fundamental disenchantment with the political parties of Bolivia. At the same time, however, there is still the need to participate in the representative democracy that prevails at the moment. As Juan Hoyos says, when asked about any organisation of ex-miners in his neighbourhood:

No, not anymore. We have now joined the famous OTBs. We are participating, we belong to a district so we are participating in the famous democracy that they are imposing on us at present, so we have an ex-miner in the vigilance committee.²⁵

However, I have heard ex-miners speak of their annual meetings, during which they commemorate the patron saint of the mine or the founding day of the province of their former workplace. They also meet in small groups of friends to *analyse the situation* (Alfredo Navarro). On these occasions, memory is important.

The future

In spite of their disillusionment given the lack of economic and political possibilities after 1985, the ex-miners I interviewed were not pessimistic about the future. They hoped that a more socially oriented political party would win the presidential elections in July 1997 and somehow improve the situation.²⁶

But most of all, they hoped for a better life for their children and that the young ones would be able to improve living conditions for themselves and for all workers in Bolivia. One positive sign, they agreed, was that many sons of miners were now union leaders,²⁷ or were creating unions in factories where previously there were none. In this way, they could see their own work continued by the younger generations:

Why look back? We should instead look towards the future to look for new perspectives and at least have the hope that our young comrades will achieve their goals, they must fight and I hope that they can fight better than we did in the past, I do hope that that will happen. I always said that the working classes are very intelligent, they have always known when to take the step that

was necessary, and I think all this is getting ripe, so that everybody will go out and claim their needs²⁸ (Alfredo Navarro).

Although Navarro thinks that one should not look back, he is still using the past to tell the younger generations to fight better than they did, and in this way he brings the past into play as an experience that could be of value to the present.

Final remarks

When the ex-miners I interviewed reflect on the past, they highlight the strength of the labour movement and the miners' unions, and their participation in the struggle for democracy. But most of all, they stress the social gains in working and living conditions. They also reflect on the mistakes and the weaknesses. The interviews I have analysed demonstrate a well-developed capacity for analysing social problems, a well-developed historical consciousness, and a clear vision of the ex-miners' role and position in society, as well as of their class, both in the past and in the present. They were coherent in their worldview when the enemy was the same: the Bolivian state, the government with its anti-social and unjust economic programmes, which was seen as direct continuity of the repressive governments of the past. The past is clearly envisioned as struggle and suffering – and so is the present!

According to Fentress and Wickham (1992), these are constitutive images of the mining community. Consequently, even though the mining community has disappeared in reality, we can say that it still exists as a reservoir of experiences, a source of knowledge that can be of use for understanding and constructing the meaning of the present. The miners' identity has not changed. What has changed are the structural circumstances and their participation in the labour market. They have had to adapt and learn new skills, and they reflect on the past from this new perspective.

The experiences that are highlighted are the ones that have proved most useful in the present day struggle for survival, i.e. their traditional solidarity and organising capacity, rather than the political and ideological fights. The past is thus re-constructed on the basis of the present, in order to give meaning to the present (see Halbwachs, 1992).

Therefore, if we wish to understand how people suffering the consequences of changes in working and living conditions construct their worldview in today's world of rapid change, we should devote more attention to memory and the way in which it is re-constructed, and not see it as an obstacle but, on the contrary, as a resource for the individual as well as for research on social identity.

NOTES

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1. On the labour movement see, for example, the various publications of ILDIS/Nueva Sociedad.
2. One very important contribution about Bolivia is the work of Leslie Gill (1997, 2000).
3. The following is based on qualitative research interviews (see Kvale, 1996 for a discussion of the methodological problems involved in this) with ex-miners, most of them union leaders, made in 1996 and 1997 in Cochabamba, El Alto and La Paz. I have also interviewed ex-miners in Chapare (Ejdesgaard Jeppesen, 1997) and miners' grown children, now schoolteachers, also in Chapare. The primary sources for this article are three interviews from Cochabamba with Juan Hoyos, former union leader and member of the COB from Huanuni, Simón Ramírez, former union leader from Catavi, Alfredo Navarro, former union leader from Huanuni. In Cochabamba I also interviewed Filemón Escobar and Domitila de Chungara. The viewpoints are mostly male, i.e. from the workplace. All interview excerpts have been translated from Spanish by the author.
4. *Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia*.
5. Huanuni was one of the richest mines in Bolivia, at that moment owned by Simón Patiño.
6. The single mine is organised as one union. At the national level, all the unions join the federation, FSTMB, *Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia*. When I did some fieldwork in Bolivia, in 1996 and 1997, the FSTMB had about 10,000 active members, according to the general secretary, Milton Gómez.
7. A very personal description and analysis of Juan Lechín and his leadership can be found in Lupe Cajías' book, *Juan Lechín. La Historia de una Leyenda*. La Paz, 1995.
8. 'Relocalizado' was the term invented by the government for the miners who lost their jobs and were supposed to be 'relocalised' to another job by the government. Usually no other job was found and 'relocalizado' became a synonym for unemployed.
9. In Chapare, where I interviewed ex-miners who had become coca leaf growers, the situation was different. The present, a situation of constant repression because of the military campaign in the area, was apparently so overwhelming that the past seemed long gone and it was difficult to make people remember. See Ejdesgaard Jeppesen, 1997.
10. Illiteracy is still widespread. In rural areas where the mining centres are mostly located, it is estimated to be 49.9 % among peasant women and 23.1 % among men (República de Bolivia, 1994, 45).
11. The *perforista*, the driller, broke the rock in the mine and enjoyed a high status among the workers.
12. The government officially recognised the death of 27 people, but the press and the mineworkers quoted higher numbers.
13. If the worker is fired, the family loses not only their income but also their home, since it belongs to the mining company. A letter of retirement, therefore, means that the whole family has to leave the mining encampment.

14. See Moema Viezzer's interview with Domitila de Chungara and June Nash (1969) for a description of this period.
15. From 1970 to 1971 Bolivia was governed by a left-wing general, Juan José Torres, who accepted Russian and Eastern European financial aid for COMIBOL (Klein, 1992) and created a 'Popular Assembly' in the Congress building. Juan José Torres was finally overthrown in a bloody coup by general Banzer in 1971, supported by the strong bourgeoisie of Santa Cruz. The 1980-1981 García Mesa military government was an extremely anti-union regime that imprisoned, tortured and exiled political leaders, journalists and union leaders. De Mesa describes it as 'uno de los gobiernos más nefastos que ha tenido el país en su historia' (1997, 670). As a symbolic act, the building of the COB in the centre of La Paz was destroyed completely, so that not a single brick was left.
16. Hernán Siles Zuazo was the leader of a coalition between the MBRI (the left-wing branch of the old MNR) and the two left-wing parties, the Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) and the communist party (PCB).
17. In 1984, exports of minerals had fallen but still constituted 46% of all Bolivian exports. In 1987, this had fallen to 36% (Arce, 1990, 269).
18. *...se ha adelantado mucho...*
19. Also in El Alto, miners from different mines joined together to solve the most immediate housing problems that confronted them when they left the mining centres with their families (Ejdesgaard Jeppesen, forthcoming).
20. This is illustrated by women's participation in the economically active population: from 1985 to 1995, women's participation in the labour force rose from 30.9% to 54%. In Bolivia most people think that the man is the breadwinner and that women's labour is only a supplement. The reality is different, although women mostly work only when their husband is unable to support the family. In 1995, in the major cities 63% of the entire workforce was employed in the informal sector. The poorest 50% of the population received 16.37% of all income, while the richest 10% received 30% of all income (all numbers are from CEDLA/ILDIS, 1995).
21. See Gill, 2000, for a description of this.
22. See Mansilla, 1996, about the informal sector and Gill, 2000, for a good analysis of the labour market and the informal sector in El Alto.
23. From my interview with Domitila de Chungara.
24. See A.M. Ejdesgaard Jeppesen, 2000, for an analysis of the Popular Participation Act.
25. The municipal government, according to the Popular Participation Act of 1994, must plan in cooperation with the Vigilance Committee. The committee consists of one representative from each district, where people are organised in OTBs, *organizaciones territoriales de base*, i.e. peasant communities, indigenous groups or neighbourhood committees. See Ejdesgaard Jeppesen, 2002, for an analysis. Whereas the municipality council is elected from the political parties that participate in the elections, the OTBs and the Vigilance Committee are parallel organisations, but not political parties, and they are supposed to represent the 'people', 'the subjects of popular participation'.
26. The situation of the workers did not improve in Bolivia, neither during the Banzer government (1997-2001), nor during the present administration.

27. I visited several schools in the Chapare province and found that, very often, the union leader at the local level was the son or daughter of a miner.
28. This wish has almost been confirmed by the uprisings of August and September 2003.

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