NOTAS DE ANTROPOLOGÍA
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Mundos de plata: Potosí y la era global de la extracción

Potosí, too, is Worth its Song

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In the mid 1990s I took a tour of a Potosí mine with a small group of tourists. Our guide encouraged us to buy coca leaves, sold from enormous bags by Andean market women, to offer the miners we met. Used by miners for centuries to relieve hunger and exhaustion, we tourists chewed coca to help alleviate the altitude and claustrophobia of the mine. The entrance to the mine was icy but as we descended deeper with our open-flamed carbide lamps, we peeled off our coats in the heat. There were no guard rails or ropes or lights beyond our own helmet-lamps, or protection from the mineral dust produced by dynamite blasts. Deep in the mine, we came face to face with the "Tío", a devil like character to whom miners offer coca and alcohol for protection in the mine. As Thérèse Boysse-Cassange tells us in the first chapter of this collection of outstanding essays, in preinvasion times, the mountain of Potosí was a *waka*, a sacred place. It remains so today. Others described the preinvasion mountain as having human-like agency, it could roam the countryside to conquer and make alliances (Cruz 2013). But in the Early Modern era Potosí was truly agentive: it drove worldwide capitalism.

I recalled my brief, but harrowing experience in the mines as I read the essays in Rossana Barragán and Paula Zagalsky's new edited collection of essays *Potosí in the Global Silver Age* which brings together the most cutting edge research on the *Cerro Rico* for the Anglophone reader. Until now monolingual English readers were limited to a few key works such as Jane Mangan's *Trading Roles* (2005) or Kris Lane's *Potosí* (2019). English language readers are now finally grasping the massive, worldwide impact of Potosí silver, so widely recognized among Early Modern people that indigenous intellectual Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala could opine around 1615 that: "Thanks to [Potosí's] mines, Castile is Castile, Rome is Rome, the Pope is Pope and the [Spanish] king is monarch of the world" (cited in Lane 2019: 67). However important Potosí was to global capitalist expansion, as an ethnohistorian I am particularly concerned with human agency, the telling accounts of the men and women who called the Villa Imperial home, if only temporarily. The collection of articles here, though frequently more empirically than narratively driven, demonstrate how that human agency was thoroughly entwined with the global economic consequences of the "mountain that eats men".

Several of the articles challenge the traditional idea of mita as exclusively or primarily mining labor. Paula Zagalsky's in-depth explication of *minero* is a reminder that language is organic; depending on the context or time frame *minero* could be a poorly paid indigenous day laborer but could also refer to the mine owner. With a close examination of the distribution of mita labor, Zagalsky proves that a substantial number of mines were owned by women. Surprisingly enough, her analysis reveals that only about 30 per cent of indigenous *mitayos* labored in the mines, most (68 per cent) went to processing mills. In like fashion, Julio Aguilar points out that *mitayos* were the main workforce for the hydraulic infrastructure, the extensive network of water works that drove mine production. Aguilar argues that *mitayos* were not just a labor force, but purposefully recruited as part of an "exchange of technologies and environmental knowledge" (p. 204). This points to an exciting new avenue of research.

Indigenous people were not the only coerced labor force in Potosí. James Almeida takes us into the world of enslaved Africans in the first half of the 17th century to look at their "market of small freedoms". He makes a contrarian argument that in pre-Enlightenment times manumission was not usually the goal for enslaved people as it was nearly unattainable. Enslaved people in Potosí had few opportunities to rent out their labor and, if manumitted, still had obligations to the enslaver. Tellingly, he also analyzes how differently African and indigenous people were treated; indigenous laborers had greater access to the legal system with interpreters and public defenders.

Not all labor in Potosí was coerced: Rossana Barragán demonstrates the importance of the *k'ajchas* (sometimes spelled *q'aqchas*), in the second half of the 18th century. *K'ajchas*, a multiethnic group of miners who worked for their own profit and, who were, depending on your perspective, either thieves or capitalists. Amazingly, Barragán shows *k'ajchas* produced half the silver in Potosí in 1754-1800. Little wonder then that rich azogueros proposed draconian measures to crush the *k'ajchas*: (re)enslave those *k'ajchas* of African descent; return indigenous people to their rural reducciones; or, if they were perceived to be European, force them to behave as "Spaniards" (Abercrombie 1996). An unworkable, drastic attempt to halt the mixtures of people that transgressed colonial categories. Like Zagalsky, Barragán brings women into the picture to show that up to one third of *trapiches* (rudimentary mills for silver) were run by women. Surprisingly, not all silver milled in Potosí was mined there. Much of the trapiche output was silver brought from other mining districts. All this complicates our vision of Potosí.

Heidi Scott convincingly reminds us that no knowledge is transparent, accounts of Potosí's geology were "inescapably political" (108) and "enmeshed within realms of moral debate" (p. 135). She reveals how Victorián de Villava, district attorney and public defender for indigenous people turned Pedro Vicente Cañete y Domínguez's pro-*mita* arguments on their head. Villava, a leading figure of the Enlightenment in the Audiencia of Charcas, countered that if, as Cañete argued, the mines are so depleted, how can the crown ask indigenous people to work them? Likewise, Renée Raphael shows us how administrative documents, in particular those testing methods for refining silver should not be read as a transparent "window into the scientific and technical culture of Potosí but as a performance of that culture made legible according to accepted legal and administrative practices intended for political ends" (p. 145). In the case of silver testing, it seems to have been mostly in the hands of royal notaries who at other times might just as easily be called upon to record a will or bill of sale.

Mariano Bonialian illustrates that this was indeed a "global silver age" as he traces the movement of *Peruleros*, agents who traveled Europe and Asia exchanging Potosí silver for luxury goods. In the last decade of the 16th century, 40 per cent of the silver that circulated worldwide was from Potosí, driven largely by Chinese law that required tax to be paid in silver. Tristan Platt brings the global movement of silver and mercury into the 19th century and questions whether floating cheap coins was in the new nation

of Bolivia's real interest. Turning to the great mint fraud, Masaki Sato demonstrates that the criminal behavior of the fraudsters was fundamentally socially acceptable. Far from being ostracized, the counterfeiters played cards with leading politicos of the Audiencia of Charcas, who were clearly aware of the fraud. Likewise, Kris Lane argues that merchants in Lima likely knew what was going on and chose not to act. Poetically, Lane uses the term "hangover" to describe the aftermath that was "suffered by ordinary working people, those stuck with money they could not easily 'pass on'". Restoring faith in Potosí currency took decades. In the meantime, commerce froze, food prices shot up and with failed harvests, people were literally starving in the aftermath of the fraudulent silver coinage.

These chapters go a long way to disrupt our usual understanding of Potosí and point to new, vibrant areas of research. While the empirical research is impeccable (and certainly necessary), if anything is missing from the volume it would be a more narrative history of the local or global impact of Potosí. A more literary history, one that can move the emotions as well as activate the intellect would be a welcome addition to the Potosí canon.[1] That type of history would make it easier to understand that even though *mita* was coerced, very poorly renumerated, and known to lead to an early death, colonial people sometimes took great pride, seeing *mita* service as both as a rite of passage into adulthood and as part of their pact with the king which guaranteed their land (Platt 1982). Even during the Great Rebellion of the 1780s, many indigenous communities continued to send *mita* workers to Potosí (Penry 2019). Today's miners, heirs of *k'ajchas*, or *mitayos*, or perhaps *trapicheros*, continue the dangerous work, apparently also with great pride in their achievements, even while acknowledging the dangers (Absi 2009). Paula Zagalsky and Rossana Barragán are to be commended for bringing these rich articles to publication that shed much light on the mountain and city that stood as such an avatar for global history for the last 500 years and that proudly proclaimed: "I am rich Potosí, the treasure of the world, the king of the mountains and the envy of kings."

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[1] Demos' (2023) attempt, based on English-language secondary sources, produced decided mixed results.

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