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Rossana Barragán, CIDES-UMSA, La Paz, Bolivia

Denaturalizing the Mita: Indigenous Labor, Local Power, and the Global Economy

Abstract:

This book places Indigenous labor at the heart of global silver production. The early modern global economy (and not just the Spanish Empire) relied entirely on the labor power of one of the world's most resilient and resourceful populations: the Andean peoples, including women. The labor performed by coerced workers (*mitayos*) has been "naturalized" over the years, and my first aim is to "denaturalize" the mita system—that is, to analyze it as a complex system of task distribution and labor organization. The first argument is that mining in Potosí must be understood within the context of indirect colonial rule, in which caciques, captains, and authorities managed, with little cost, the complex mita system. This system, which was organized around family units, was part of collective units (communities of *markas* and *ayllus*) who had access to their own productive resources. They had therefore their lands and they had economic independence while the Spanish Crown was dependent on this coerced labour force. The second argument is that free and unfree labor were intertwined, and that the Indigenous labor agency succeeded in dismantling the "numbers of *mitayos*" (from approximately 12,000 to 4,000 *mitayos*) during the seventeenth century. This process revealed deep tensions and the dependence of the crown on Indigenous authorities. In the second half of the eighteenth century, and again through the entanglement of royal policies and private interests, mining in Potosí experienced a second boom. This was possible due to the "making" of independent laborers (including *k'ajchas* and *trapiches*), who succeeded to transform their labor conditions to avoid both proletarianization and dependency on mine and mill owners as part of their struggle to extract and refine ore for their own profit. They acquired a unique strength that became evident in a riot in 1752. From then on, they constituted a vibrant popular economy in which women played an important role. The result was that they were able to produce about 50% of the output of silver between 1754 and 1800.

Short Bio:

Rossana Barragán holds a PhD in history from the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS), Paris. She was a professor of history at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA) and the director of the La Paz Historical Archives. She also served as a senior researcher at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam (2011–2022). She is currently a professor at the Postgraduate Centre CIDES-UMSA, La Paz, and serves on the Advisory Board of the Cultural Foundation of the Central Bank of Bolivia, which oversees nine museums and cultural centers.

Dr. Barragán was on the editorial board of the *International Review of Social History*. At present, she is a co-director of the journal *Revista Trabajo y Trabajadores en América Latina* (REVLATT: <https://revista.redlatt.org>), as well as a member of the scientific committees of *Autoctonía*, *Revista de Historia* (<https://www.autoctonia.cl/index.php/autoc/about/editorialTeam>) and *Notas de Antropología de las Américas*, which are published by the University of Bonn. She is a member of the Bolivian Academy of History and the Association of Bolivian Studies (AEB). Together with colleagues from Latin America, Europe, and the United States, she is co-organizing the 2026 program of *Los viernes históricos* (*Historical Fridays*), a digital colloquium on Latin America and Global History. She has also recently been elected to the Board of Editors of the *Hispanic American Historical Review*.

Her publications include *Espacio Urbano y Dinámica Étnica en La Paz* (1990; new edition in 2024); *Indios, mujeres y ciudadanos en el siglo XIX*; *The Bolivia Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (with Sinclair Thomson and others); and *Trabajos y trabajadores en América Latina* (siglos XVI–XXI).

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Her most recent books are *Potosí in the Global Silver Age (16th–19th Centuries)* (with Paula Zagalsky); *Natural Resources and Political Struggles in Bolivia* (with Carmen Soliz); and *El Imperio del trabajo: Historia social de la producción de plata de Potosí para el mundo (siglos XVI–XVIII)* [*The Empire of Labour: A Social History of Potosí's Silver Production for the World (16th–18th Centuries)*] (2025).