

PM: Privatization: Even the Rain

by Polly Mann

A friend invited me to a movie, providing no details about it but assuring me that I would like it. Its quixotic name, *Even the Rain*,* was never explained, but as the plot evolved it became obvious. The film plays out against a background of two conflicts – one in the year 1524 during the conquest of Bolivia by the Spanish and the other in the year 2000, when the Bolivian people engaged in a bitter, and sometimes violent, struggle against their government over water, a natural resource that cycles from sky to earth.

The plot contrasts the two conflicts. A story within a story gives us a fictional character who, as a director, travels to Bolivia to shoot a film that combines the conflicts. Characters in one conflict are heavily armed conquistadores in search of gold and land occupied by indigenous Indians. The other conflict involves a group of characters who are actual present-day Bolivians, and their struggles with their government.

An early scene in the film is of a long line of Bolivians seeking jobs with the making of the film. The fictional director, Sebastian, announces that only a handful of people are needed and that the rest can go home. An unforeseen situation develops, adding another dimension to a film that is already about conflict. The crowd of extras turned away becomes angry. The director's attention is drawn to a short, gaunt Indian man who states in a loud and powerful voice that people have been standing and waiting for hours for employment. When some are selected to appear in the film, the troublemaker is among those hired. He becomes the protagonist of the movie—in both the 1524 and 2000 conflicts.

Most people I talked with about the film remembered the water crisis in Bolivia in 2000. It seems the government had dramatically increased the cost of drinking water. In the underdeveloped country of Bolivia, this had put a tremendous hardship upon the people, and they revolted.



Poster from the film, También la lluvia (Even the Rain).

I had learned in high school history classes of the Spanish conquest of South America and I vaguely recalled the conflict that occurred in 2000. But I needed details, so I looked into the issue further and found that the Bolivian government had sold the country's water rights to a private company that had increased water rates from an estimated 200 percent to 300 percent more than the people had been paying. The result was that thousands of residents poured into the streets of the city to protest these hefty price increases. Workers living on \$60 per month had to pay as much as \$15 just to keep the water running out of their own taps.

After clashes with soldiers firing tear gas and bullets, a 17-year-old protester was killed, hundreds were injured, and more than a dozen protest leaders were jailed. Within a week Bolivia's government suspended its 40-year lease with Aguas del Tunari, a subsidiary of Bechtel.

But there was so much more to the story. Why did the Bolivian government decide to privatize its water supply? It didn't happen in a vacuum. According to *The Ecologist* magazine in the year 2000, the World Bank declared it would not "renew" a \$25 million loan to Bolivia unless it privatized its water services. According to Jim Shultz, executive director of the Democracy Center in Cochabamba, the World Bank believed that "poor governments are often too plagued by local corruption and too ill equipped to run public water systems efficiently."

Protests of water privatization were not confined to Bolivia. In Washington, D.C., at the IMF and World Bank meetings on 16 April 2000, protesters attempted to blockade the streets to stop the meeting, citing the Water Wars in Bolivia as an example of corporate greed and a reason to resist globalization.

Six years later, on 19 January 2006, a settlement was reached between the government of Bolivia and the Bechtel subsidiary. It was agreed that "the concession was terminated only because of the civil unrest and the state of emergency in Cochabamba and not because of any act done or not done by the international shareholders of Aguas del Tunari." With this statement each party agreed to drop any financial claims against the other. But, most importantly, water was returned to state control and rates returned to previous affordable levels.

This attempted privatization illustrates how the capitalist system can work against the best interests of the people as a whole and how it can and does provoke violence.

In conclusion, getting back to the film, there is a happy ending: the fictional film director, the Indian protagonist of the film, and the latter's wife and daughter are together and safe amidst the violence of the city. When the two men part, they embrace as loving brothers. The real-life happy ending for the Bolivian population was that resistance to outside conquest and to theft of resources was successful.

* Gordon, Juan (producer), Bollaín, Icíar (director), Lavery, Paul (writer), 2011. *También la lluvia* [motion picture]. Spain: Moreno Films. Even the Rain USA release: Vitagraph Films.

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