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## Reading the City as (Social) Movement: El Alto, Bolivia – October 2003

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### Introduction

During the second week of October 2003, Bolivia experienced one of the most dramatic episodes of its history. Thousands of residents of Bolivia's metropolitan region of La Paz took to the streets to protest the repressive measures of the Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada administration and his gas exportation policies. The epicenter of the protests was the city of El Alto, where 65 civilians died and hundreds were wounded at the hands of the military. For three days the city was a militarized zone: soldiers shot indiscriminately, while protesters burned tires and blockaded roads in El Alto. While there have been a number of analyses of the October 2003 events in Bolivia, little has been written specifically about the relations between this city and the October events (Gomez, 2004; Mamani, 2004; Webber, 2005). These studies have tended to see urban spaces as containers for social mobilizations, as opposed to exploring the dialectical relationship between space and social processes (Lefebvre, 2003; Roy, 2003; Davis 2004).

The aim of this essay is to begin organizing the building blocks for an analysis of this urban space by relying on the social processes informing the growth of El Alto. In this sense, I see urban spaces as concrete points of intersection of global processes of capitalist accumulation, national attempts to negotiate and stabilize its contradictions, and local attempts to challenge the status quo and construct alternatives (Harvey, 2003; Garcia, et al, 2001). This essay focuses on a particular site (El Alto) at a particular time (October 2003) as a way to read the city as movement, and as a strategy to analyze the outcomes of and challenges to two decades of neo-liberalization in Bolivia. This strategy builds upon two basic premises. First, El Alto manifests the promises and expectations of the neo-liberal order established in the early 1980s in the implementation of structural adjustment programs to improve the living conditions of the population. Secondly, however, El Alto also represents the challenges to the institutional infrastructure required to sustain neo-liberalism's flexibility.

This essay is organized around three central sections. The first section presents a snapshot of El Alto and provides a basic description of the built environment and social conditions of the city. The following section frames the snapshot by presenting some of the literature discussing the role of cities in the neo-liberal project, conflict and crisis. The last section examines the movements within the snapshot of El Alto by focusing on tensions, ruptures, and stabilizations--three types of movements--that serve as a basis for presenting a more complex and dynamic picture of El Alto.

### Snapshot – El Alto

El Alto sits at 4,000 meters (13,200 feet) above sea level, in a wind-swept and cold *altiplano* (highland plateau), surrounded by the imposing Andes mountain range. The city grew from a rural area at the edge of La Paz, with a population of roughly 11,000, to one of the largest cities in Bolivia with a current population of over 650,000 (Sandoval and Sostres, 1989; INE, 2001). The heart of El Alto is La Ceja, where municipal government offices sit in the middle of a large number of offices, vendors and stores selling a wide variety of goods. During the day, the city is bursting with activity as hundreds of public transportation buses and vans congregate in La Ceja, heading to or from La Paz through one of dozens of neighborhoods in the city, while the driver's assistants repeatedly yell the route and fares of the buses. At night, La Ceja caters to the young population of the city: the area is home to hundreds of legal and illegal clubs selling cheap drinks and playing popular music. Beyond La Ceja there are many

residential and industrial neighborhoods, some dating back generations, while others are not more than five years old. Fifty four percent of the residents of El Alto rely on outdoor plumbing for access to water, compared to thirty five percent of the residents of La Paz. A similar disparity is evident in relation to access to sanitary services and quality of housing (Arbona and Kohl, 2004). El Alto's limited physical infrastructure reflects a city that grew so rapidly that its municipal government had little time or funds to provide basic public services.



Aside from a percentage of the residents of the neighborhoods of Ciudad Satélite and Primero de Mayo, a large percentage of the population of El Alto are the working poor. Rojas and Guaygua (2002) estimate that 70.6% of the economically active population (EAP) in El Alto depends on the informal economy, as new residents create their own jobs. This estimate is not solely the result of an increase in migration, but also of a growing intensity in household participation in the labor market. As rural families send more family members to work in the city, lower wages and higher prices have required urban families to increase the number of workers to guarantee subsistence. In 2000, over 195,000 men and women depended on the informal economy, which represents an increase of 183.75% since 1989 (Rojas and Guaygua, 2002: 20). This trend parallels Orlando and Pollack's (2000) findings that three of four new jobs created in Latin American during the 1990s were in the informal economy.

In this context of social and economic insecurity, the political entities surrounding the official government structure become pivotal elements as they relate in direct ways to the class and indigenous identity positions of the population and establish political alliances to assemble and mobilize. Some of the political entities attempting to tap at this source of power come from established bureaucratic spaces. Others grew out of the rank of the informal (Trade Unions), and others represented territorial divisions of the city (Neighborhood Committees) that incorporated the informal economy by default. The result of this is overlapping forms of governance. This is critical because it informs how power relations and inequalities are negotiated and contested (Roy, 2003).

One of the most unique characteristics of El Alto is that 82% of its population self-identify as indigenous (INE, 2001). This demographic fact breaks with the classic (false) dichotomy of urban spaces as sites of modernity and rural spaces as sites of tradition, a dichotomy that contains a tacit assumption about indigenous people. Consequently, this fact about El Alto forces us to view indigenous peoples in a different way than is found in the literature thus far. The discussion about indigenous peoples and neo-liberal policies tend to emphasize natural resources and their relation to the land (Deere and Leon, 2002; Stavenhagen, 2002). These discussions suggest that the only legitimate spaces for action by indigenous peoples is in the local (rural) community, demanding their rights in the context of citizenship struggles (Yashar, 1999). Thus, the sites of indigenous struggles reflect a kind of identity-space essentialization, linking natural resources or land tenure issues in rural areas to the state and institutional reform (Cleary, 2000), political parties and electoral systems (Albo, 2002) and how they are being linked by transnational networks (Brysk, 2000).

By problematizing this essentialization we can view El Alto as a historical product of social tensions that manifest what Brenner and Theodore (2002) describe as "actually existing neo-liberalism". These tensions are fueled by a number of factors. On the one hand, it reflects the inherent promise of the city of better opportunities and access to services, and the promises of the promoters of the neo-liberal agenda for a better standard of living based on the virtues of the market and its requirements (Green, 2003). On the other, it also reflects the practices of the neoliberal project that have generated a vision in which the needs and interests of the population are trumped by the requirements of external agents and the practices of neighborhood residents who are developing political strategies through integrating political traditions of union organizing and indigenous forms of governance (Mamani, 2004).

Lastly, it manifests the outcomes of the implementation of the neo-liberal project in that it has increased the levels of poverty (evident from the size of the informal economy in this city) and marginalized its citizens who are increasingly concentrated in urban centers such as El Alto (INE, 2001).

In the following section, I will discuss a general framework for the analysis of the city of El Alto. How can we understand this city? In what ways has the neo-liberal project influenced the growth of this city? In what ways have indigenous and class identities (in their articulation) influenced how the city functions and how spaces (material, political and economic) are defined and contested? These answers will require us to place issues of conflict and crisis on center stage.

### **Frames – Conflict and Crisis**

As I mentioned in the opening paragraphs, the aim of this essay is to develop a strategy to analyze the city using the manifestation of crisis (specifically the October 2003 events). This strategy can then be used as a lens through which we can better understand El Alto. While the predominance of the informal economy and the marginal position of the majority indigenous population might be a sufficient condition to explain the increase in tensions, it does not explain completely the increase in strength, extent, and frequency of mobilizations. It is for this reason that we now turn to a discussion about conflict and crisis as a way to frame the snapshot of El Alto. We can begin by defining two principal categories: city and crisis. I build from Castells who argued that:

Cities [...] are historical products, not only in their physical materiality but in their cultural meaning, in the role they play in the social organization, and in peoples' lives. The basic dimension in urban change is the conflictive debate between social classes and historical actors over the meaning of urban, the significance of spatial forms in the social structures, and the content, hierarchy, and destiny of cities in relation to the entire social structure (Castells, 1983, 302).

Brenner takes this definition a step further by pointing to important nexus between cities and the neo-liberal project (that informs a considerable part of the situation in Bolivia today). He argues that cities, in their articulation of multiple spaces, "have become the central institutional, political, and geographical interface upon, within, and through which contradictory politics of capitalist restructuring are currently being fought out" (Brenner, 2000: 362).

Given the idea of cities as a historical product of social conflict, central in the deployment and contestation of politico-ideological project, we can then turn into a view of crisis arising out of unmanageable conflict. Zavaleta--building on the work of Gramsci and discussing the economic crisis in Bolivia in the 1980s--presents a very direct explanation:

[A] crisis is an anomalous instant in the life of a society, by this I mean [it is] the moment when issues/things are not presented as they are on an everyday basis and are presented as they truly are. [...] we can see the current crisis [1980s] not as a form of violence over daily life but as a pathetic apparition of boundaries of society that otherwise would remain submerged and gelatinous (Zavaleta, 1986: 21).

Zavaleta argued that a politico-economic structure that engenders social inequalities requires a political infrastructure supported by a system of coercion and consent that will organize a discourse, legitimize the actions, and justify the outcomes. According to Zavaleta, it is at moments of crisis when those not benefiting expose and openly challenge these structures in a way that undermine the political infrastructure. Cities are crucial in these dynamics not only because they house the nerve center of this political infrastructure, but also because they are a site of convergence, "incubators for many of the major political and ideological strategies though the dominance of neo-liberalism is being maintained" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 375).

These definitions point to a dialectical relation between crisis and urban spaces that are "not simply constituted by but are constitutive of social process" (Harvey, 1997: 23). In this sense, the October 2003 events provide an important window that will allow a better understanding of El Alto not only as defined by crisis and tensions, but also as how El Alto is a source for the articulation of those crises.

It is from these conflicts, rising out of the tensions generated by global processes of capitalist accumulation and by social marginality and exploitation, that urban spaces are being defined and transformed. Lefebvre (2003) captures these dynamics in a discussion about the role of urban spaces in the context of broader political and economic debates. According to him, urban space "constructs, identifies, and delivers the essence of social relationships: the reciprocal existence and manifestation of differences arising from or resulting in conflict" (Lefebvre, 2003: 118). In

this sense, urban spaces augment the experiences of inequality engendered by the neo-liberal project as they have the tendency to disproportionately concentrate the negative outcomes on certain social groups through the structuring of neighborhoods in a way that generates tensions.

The importance of these spaces of conflict relate to the ways they are critical sites to challenge the political margin of legitimacy required to stabilize the neo-liberal project. It is at these sites that the promises of neo-liberalization--channeled by national institutional infrastructure--have had to face their failures and have had to deploy strategies to manage crises. It is at these moments when the integrity of institutional legitimacy is compromised and the tensions generated transform into massive mobilizations. Similarly, the events of October 2003 unmasked this city



as a powerful and political force that could no longer be ignored or placed at the political margins until the next election cycle. In this sense, El Alto is a city whose residents are redefining political and material spaces based on their particular way of constructing a vision of the urban space. It is from these conflicts, rising out of the tensions generated by marginality and exploitation, and articulated by local political entities, that El Alto is being defined and transformed.

#### **Movement – Tensions, Ruptures and Stabilizations**

My proposal is to analyze how these forms of “actually existing neoliberalism” are articulated by a series of movements (I call them movements because of their fluid and contested nature, and because they are not necessarily exclusive of each other, nor sequential). I use these movements to analyze the

October events and as a strategy for reading El Alto. The rest of this essay addresses these movements that I refer to as tensions, ruptures, and stabilizations.

The tensions reveal the failure of the neo-liberal project in reducing poverty and social marginality. One source of the tensions has been the growing number of families living and working in poverty. This is a source of tension not only because of its material outcomes, but also because of the (implicit and explicit) promises made by the promoters of neoliberalism to improve basic living conditions.

As I mentioned in my opening snapshot of El Alto, the increasing tensions in this city stem not only from the increasing numbers of the working poor, or the decreasing possibilities to establish a stable source of income, but also from the continued discrimination and marginalization of the indigenous people of this city. These sources of tensions found a popular discursive outlet in a historical/ political context captured in the slogan “El Alto de pie, nunca de rodillas!” The slogan captures the way these tensions have been pivotal in informing how this city has been growing: as an economically integrated, yet socially marginalizes city. El Alto has grown due to the large waves of migrants who have been a critical source of informal labor, attempting to cash in on the promises of the neo-liberal project and the city. However, the outcomes have been different, and thus the slogan captures the struggle to live a life with dignity.

The ruptures occur when the tensions generated are politically unmanageable, leading to social mobilizations that could result in the destabilization of the political infrastructure required to sustain the neo-liberal project. The ruptures highlight the challenges to the state to manage its policy failures in a way that permits the maintenance of a margin of legitimacy. In this sense, the moments of rupture represent a specific instance of crisis in which the tensions boil over and expose the “submerged and gelatinous” social structures of coercion and consent required

to sustain the neo-liberal project. Simultaneously, it brings to the surface the social forces demanding access to a basic standard of living and challenging the margin of legitimacy of the political infrastructure.

The first sparks of the October mobilizations came to life during the second week of September in El Alto. At this moment appeared a localized series of mobilizations that did not necessarily focus on the broader issues of gas exportation, the FTAA, or the ouster of the president as it was presented in the international media. Instead, the September mobilizations in El Alto were a reaction to a municipal government proposal to implement a tax for real estate transactions. Leaders of the neighborhood committees argued that this was a government strategy to levy a tax on the residents of El Alto, as a way to “get more money from the poor”. The mobilizations in September took the shape of blockades of critical roadways in and out of El Alto. The 48-hour blockades achieved their stated goal by forcing the municipal government to shelve the proposal. This energized the leadership of local political entities to begin making statements about broader issues, such as the exportation of gas, the FTAA, the calling for the ouster of the president, etc.

As the Central Obrera Regional (COR-El Alto) and Federación de Juntas Vecinales (FEJUVE) attempted to gain an advantageous negotiating position with the government by calling for more mobilizations and blockades, *Comités de Huelga* (Strike Committees) were taking shape. These *comités* are critical in understanding the transformation of tensions into ruptures. It points to how waves of migrants from the mines who brought along trade union organizational strategies, along with indigenous peoples from rural areas who brought along forms of horizontal governance, influenced the ways political spaces were created. In other words, the ways in which union organizing strategies intersected with indigenous forms of governance were pivotal in the coordination and mobilization of thousands from around the city to face the repressive forces, to care for the wounded, and provide support during times of need. These intersections are crucial in an analysis of how residents negotiate multiple layers that define this city and conceive strategies for building its future. In short, these *Comités* were the social forces that surfaced in October and transformed tensions into ruptures. The October mobilizations were the culmination of a month of intermittent confrontations between government forces and multiple sectarian and territorial organizations.

In light of these and other potential sources of mobilizations and blockades that would disrupt the daily lives and business in La Paz, the reply by the government was to send in the military resulting in the death of many civilians and the convergence of a variety of political entities. The killings were a key event that erased the state's remaining margin of legitimacy and exposed its true intentions and its coercive tendencies. As repression and violence



escalated and government troops killed civilians on the streets, the *Comités de Huelga* became localized leadership posts, organizing responses and coordinating actions such as calling radios stations to share events with the rest of the population. A resident of Villa Ingenio commented that though the *Comités de Huelga* were a direct response to the killings, they were also about much more than the killings.

The repression united us and left our [internal] fights aside. I saw how a young man [was] killed just on the other side of the street. We were very angry, but not only because of the dead, but also because of our situation. Nobody remembers us... they only come prior to the elections. That is what being poor and indigenous in this country means (personal interview NG; 10 January 2004).

The results of the October mobilizations were the ouster of President Sánchez de Lozada, 65 dead, hundreds wounded, and the positioning of El Alto at the center of increasingly powerful movements challenging the institutional infrastructure of the neo-liberal project in Bolivia. The new president, Mesa, called for a referendum to decide what to do with natural gas reserves and to institute changes to the constitution, but new waves of mobilizations were still emerging from political entities in El Alto as recently as May 2005.<sup>1</sup> The call for the referendum could be seen as a strategy to address the demands of the population without compromising Bolivia's social structures or political infrastructure.

Stabilizations simultaneously represent the strategies deployed by the state to sustain the neo-liberal project (legal maneuvers, cooptation, or outright repression) as well as the limits of social mobilizations in promoting deep structural changes (Arbona, 2005a). The way political entities in El Alto engage issues of marginalization is crucial in the ability of government institutions to stabilize the neo-liberal project. The tensions generated by the outcomes of the neo-liberal project required governmental actions to ensure that those tensions would be spatially and politically contained. In short, the aim of stabilization strategies is to fragment by creating internal tensions within the organizations.

Previous attempts to dilute the power of social mobilizations have been organized by an immediate call for a social pact, dialogue, and national unity, but they are becoming an ineffective means to stabilize local neo-liberalisms. However, the same situations and institutions that serve to transform tensions into ruptures also limit the ability to mobilize. The members of the *Comités de Huelga* continue to live in the same precarious conditions they lived in before. The dependence of the residents of El Alto on the informal economy generates tensions that could lead to ruptures, yet they also establish the parameters limiting its possibilities, and make the promotion of stabilization strategies plausible. Living in precarious and marginalized conditions is simultaneously the motivating factor for, and obstacle to, organizing effective challenges to the political and economic status quo (Arbona, 2005b).

One concrete example of how the precarious living conditions place important limits on the abilities to organize and mobilize is reflected in the following testimony.

We are street vendors and we also march, protest and participate in blockades. However, for us, a day of work is a day we can feed our family. We lose that day [of income] when we have to go down to La Paz. On those days we can not go out to sell our goods and we do not have food to give our children. But we are obligated. If we do not go, we will be fined (Loayza and Suarez, 2002: 58)



The testimony makes very clear that protesting and challenging the political infrastructure has an impact on the

precarious living conditions of many households in El Alto. In other words, political action comes at a cost that not all can afford.

In summary, it is through these movements (the tensions generated, the ruptures in challenging the legitimacy of the political infrastructure, and the strategies to stabilize the challenges) that we can better read a city like El Alto. Reading the city as a historical product informed by social conflict and political crisis permits us to localize and territorialize broad (neo-liberal) processes of political and economic transformation, and, most importantly, to see the outcomes of and challenges to these processes. In the case of El Alto, by focusing on the October 2003 events as a lens through which we can analyze specific situations, we are able to go beyond the concrete specificities of the city (infrastructure and social conditions) and point to some of the dynamics that shape and are shaped by this city. However, it is important to note that poverty and marginality are important, albeit not sufficient, to ignite a crisis. In the case of El Alto, the role of (mining) trade union organizational strategies and indigenous forms of governance was pivotal. In this sense, a reading of El Alto through its movements invite us to use a much more dynamic lens that integrates the material elements that compose this city, with--as Castells (1983), Harvey (1997), and Zavaleta (1986) remind us--the historical products of social conflict.

### Notes

1 As I am completing this essay, hundreds of thousands from El Alto and surrounding provinces have gathered in the historic center of La Paz demanding the nationalization of gas reserves, and the resignation of President Mesa and most of the members of Congress. While no ruptures have taken place, the legacy of October 2003 is very clear. [Return to reading](#)

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