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## El Alto, Ciudad Rebelde: Organisational Bases for Revolt

Sian Lazar

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

The events of October 2003 reveal something about how Bolivian democracy works under 'normal' circumstances because they built upon well-established patterns of political behaviour whereby corporate groupings have become used to direct negotiations with the government. It was the breakdown of these patterns that forced the resignation of the President in 2003. I detail here the collective identities that provide the foundations for mobilisational power in Bolivia and examine the organisation behind the uprising in El Alto and its roots in quotidian experiences of collective mobilisation. I conclude with a consideration of the relationship between social mobilisation, democracy and politics in contemporary Bolivia.

Keywords: Bolivia, democracy, social movements, the state, trade unions, collective organisation.

There are many different accounts of the events of October 2003, each privileging different parts of what is a complex story. It has become known as the guerra de gas, or Gas War, a name that very much describes the conflict as seen internationally. However, when I interviewed protagonists from the city of El Alto in the following December and January, a number of them called it 'Red October' – octubre rojo, a convention that I will follow here. Based on those interviews, as well as newspaper reports (especially editions of El Alteo from September and October 2003) and informal conversations, my own 'story' is that over September and the beginning of October, social tension in the city of El Alto and its surroundings increased exponentially, as different sectors of Andean society demonstrated against the government at the same time. The demands of the different groups were essentially sectoral, as Figure 1 shows, but they all included the question of gas. One of the most important groups was that of the La Paz sector of the principal peasant union of Bolivia, the CSUTCB (the Confederación Sindical Unica de los Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia), which was led by Rufo Calle at the time. The national CSUTCB was led by Felipe Quispe, known as the 'Mallku' (an Aymara term for an indigenous political authority, the word itself meaning 'condor'). One part of the La Paz sector of the CSUTCB blockaded the roads leading into the metropolitan area of El Alto and La Paz while 500–1000 peasants joined the Mallku in a hunger strike in the offices of a radio station in El Alto, which began on 10 September 2003 and lasted for over a month.

Parallel to this, in the first half of September, the residents of El Alto held demonstrations against

new house registration procedures proposed by the Mayor, which were then revoked on 16 September 2003. It was at that point that the government appeared to decide that it would no longer try to negotiate with the protestors. Its new resolve showed in the 'rescue mission' conducted on 20 September 2003, when the army moved in to free a group of tourists being 'held hostage' in the village of Sorata by blockading peasants. In informal conversations held at the end of 2003, several informants reported rumours that the Minister of Defence personally supervised the massacre in the nearby village of Warisata, from the vantage point of his helicopter. Whether these rumours were true or not, they are evidence of a serious lack of trust in the government of the time. What is the case is that six peasants and one soldier died (Ramos Andrade, 2004) (Fig. 1).

After the events at Warisata, some of the more radical peasant groups began to demand the President's resignation. The protest then spread, particularly assisted by the call for an indefinite 'paro cívico' (general civic strike) on 8 October 2003 by the main residents' association of El Alto. During the course of the following weekend, the army killed 38 people who were trying to stop them from escorting petrol tankers down from Senkata, El Alto to the adjacent city of La Paz. There were several other confrontations between residents and the army in El Alto and mass marches from El Alto down to La Paz in that week. During the week, increasing numbers of middle class people in La Paz itself held street demonstrations and hunger strikes. The protests also spread rapidly to other cities across the country, and finally a contingent of miners from Huanuni arrived in El Alto; all demanding Gonzalo Sa'nchez de Lozada's resignation. Some of my informants thought that if Sa'nchez de Lozada, or 'Goni', had held out for a few more days, the 'people' or 'social forces' would have taken over the Government Palace, resulting either in a revolution or a counter-revolutionary coup d'etat. Subsequent events, and particularly the threatened and actual resignation of Goni's successor, Carlos Mesa, in March and June 2005 respectively, indicate that the exceptional but not unprecedented events of October 2003 reveal something about how Bolivian democracy works under more 'normal' circumstances. Much of the literature on the democratic transitions in Latin America has focussed on institutional and electoral politics, making the assumption that political parties are the most appropriate means of representation in a democracy, and thus constitute the principal mediators between citizens and the state (e.g. O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, 1986; Diamond, Linz and Lipset, 1989; Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Mainwaring and Soberg Shugart, 1999). This follows the oft-quoted theorist Schattschneider (1942), who proclaimed that it is almost impossible to conceive of democracy without political parties (see also Gunther, Montero and Linz, 2002). In these analyses, problems do not lie with political parties as such but arise when they are not doing their job properly: there are too many (Gamarra, 1999, 2003), or they lack internal

democracy (Romero Ballivian, 1996). While I am not disputing the validity of this approach, I would argue that it is necessary to look at the other mediations in play, as in the case of octubre rojo. We need to take 'civil society' more seriously, as something more than simply a supportive (or not) foundation for or complement to party-based electoral democracy, as has been a tendency in many analyses of Latin American democracies (Salman in this volume; O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, 1986; Diamond, Linz and Lipset, 1989). Over the whole of Latin America, ordinary people are vociferously rejecting traditional party-political elites. In that sense, octubre rojo fits in with a regional, even global trend, one also recognised in much of the literature on party politics and democracy (e.g. Gunther, Montero and Linz, 2002). This rejection of 'politics as usual' is eloquently demonstrated in the following quote, from an interview with Don~a Roxana, a member of the El Alto FEJUVE executive committee:

As far as the political parties go, I, well the truth is I repudiate the political parties, because all of them, be they MIRistas, MNRistas, MASistas, and all those that have been invented are a blight on my country. They have destroyed this country of mine, they have humiliated it, they've done all they can to me and here are the consequences. That is to say that they will never help my country, save it, or move it forward, instead to the contrary they want to drown it more.

### **Principal Social Sectors Protesting in El Alto and La Paz September and October 2003**

**Peasants of the department of La Paz** – blockading roads and hunger strike in a radio station in El Alto. Led by Felipe Quispe, the 'Mallku' **FEJUVE El Alto** (residents - vecinos) – marches, series of 'paros cívicos' ('civil stoppage', or general strike); indefinite paro cívico 8 October 2003 **COR El Alto** (workers) – march to La Paz from Caracollo, Oruro; marches in El Alto and La Paz, indefinite strike from end September **COB** (national trade union federation) – marches, indefinite general strike from end September. Radical sectors = street traders, teachers, cooperative miners from Huanuni (miners marched from Caracollo at the beginning of October) **Federation of Street Traders El Alto** – joined FEJUVE, COR and COB mobilisations (provided bulk of personnel for the COR and COB) **University Students of El Alto** – march, as well as presence at other mobilisations, particularly that of the COB. Other groups, such as retired people, indigenous authorities in the rural areas, drivers, student teachers.

#### **Principal Demands:**

- No to the **export of natural gas**
- No to the new **tax code**

- No to the **Law of Citizen Security**
- No to Bolivia's incorporation in the **Free Trade Area of the Americas**
- Fulfilment of **72 point** agreement between the government and the peasant union [*peasants*]
- Abrogation of new **house registration procedures** in El Alto [*FEJUVE, until 16 Sep*]
- **Compensation** for families of massacre victims from Warisata
- **Resignation** of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada

Figure 1. Principal Social Sectors Protesting in El Alto and La Paz September and October 2003

I contend that the Bolivian uprising was not a spontaneous upsurge of popular anger with government, politicians and political parties, but rather an event that built upon well-established patterns of political behaviour, where corporate groupings – the ‘social sectors’ – have become used to direct negotiations with the government. This created a ‘normal’ democratic cycle of protest–negotiation–agreement–government reneging on its promises–renewed protest, which broke down once the army started to kill demonstrators. In response, Bolivian citizens turned on their government, and forced the President and his chief ministers to resign. In the following section of this article, I explain the collective identities that provide the foundations for the mobilisational power that made these remarkable events possible. I then examine in more detail the organisation behind the uprising of October 2003 in El Alto, and its roots in more day-to-day experiences of collective mobilisation. I conclude with a consideration of the current relationship between social mobilisation, democracy and politics in Bolivia.

#### Corporate/Collective Political Identities in El Alto

Most of the 650,000 residents of El Alto (*alteños*) are first to third generation migrants from the surrounding countryside or from the mining areas on the high Andean plain. In the census of 2001, 74.25 per cent of *alteños* defined themselves as Aymara (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2003), making El Alto unique in Latin America for being an almost wholly indigenous city. El Alto is also a highly organised city, and for perhaps a majority of *alteños*, their political action and relationship with the state is shaped by their membership in different collectivities. Of these, I will first discuss here *vecindad*, which derives from residence; and secondly *sindicalismo*, or trade union membership. A third is a quasi-peasant identity based upon attachment to one's birth village, or *pueblo*.

## Vecindad

Alteños frequently described themselves to me as vecinos of the zone (neighbourhood) in which they live, particularly if they own their own house there. The term vecino means neighbour, so is a person-to-person relationship, but it is also a category that roots someone to a particular place, meaning resident or inhabitant. Vecino is in many ways the most important local term for citizens in El Alto today, and the corporate, rooted and physical form of belonging that it implies is central to local understandings of citizenship in the zone of Rosas Pampa, where I conducted my fieldwork. This is formalised and incorporated into state structures through the institution of the Junta Vecinal (neighbourhood council, also called Junta de Vecinos). In particular, the 1994 Popular Participation Law (Ley de Participación Popular, LPP) has given Juntas Vecinales an increased role in the way governments channel development money to urban zones. The 'popular participation' in the development of annual municipal plans is organised through the Juntas Vecinales, which are in the position of requesting public works for their zone from the municipality, and therefore operate at the interface between state and civil society.

In Rosas Pampa, participation in Junta Vecinal meetings is high. The Junta Vecinal there is led by an elected committee of fourteen who meet roughly every 2 weeks to a month. Every 2–3 months they hold a General Assembly for all the residents of the zone, attended by about 150 people. Given that there are 800 households in Rosas Pampa, not all of which are occupied, attendance is reasonably good. In a survey I organised in 2000, a remarkable 77 per cent of respondents said that they regularly attended some form of civic activity, and most of them went to the General Assemblies (Lazar, 2002). Usually the heads of households attend, and certainly the Jefes de Calle (lit. chiefs of the street), who are then supposed to inform the vecinos on their streets about the discussions during the meeting.

The other important local political body in Rosas Pampa is the Junta Escolar. Like the Junta Vecinal, they are responsible for organising the improvement of the local infrastructure, in their case for the school rather than the zone. The Juntas Vecinales and Juntas Escolares of each zone are affiliated to city-wide Federations, the FEJUVE and FEDEPAF respectively. This is illustrated in Fig. 2.

The Juntas are the organisational means by which governments channel resources down to local level (through the 1994 LPP) and citizens channel their demands up. The latter can be in an overtly confrontational way, for example through demonstrations. They are therefore mediators, placed

between citizens/vecinos and the state, and as such attempt to make the state pay attention to their zone, which they often complained was 'forgotten', 'marginalised' or simply ignored (cf. Gill, 2000).

But the Juntas also substitute for the state in local administration. For example in mid-2003, the Junta Vecinal organised the vecinos into groups to patrol Rosas Pampa at night in order to deter and/or catch thieves. A captured thief was even lynched in June, an event that is becoming increasingly common in contemporary Bolivia (Goldstein, 2003). The people of Rosas Pampa imagine and constitute themselves as a collective political subject, expressed as the zone, in part (although not exclusively) through this complex relation to the state (Lazar, 2002).

### Sindicalismo

Most adult Alteños will also be part of trade unions, the majority of which are in the informal sector of the economy. The most common jobs for men are as drivers of lorries, buses, minibuses or taxis, and artisans; while women are mostly housewives or work in commerce, selling on the streets, in markets or in their own shops. In the case of the predominantly male jobs, the collective organisations are called unions (sindicatos), and in the case of the predominantly female street traders, they are called associations (asociaciones or organizaciones).

For example, all the men who own a minib<sup>1</sup>us or trufi<sup>1</sup> and drive one particular set of routes are members of the same sindicato. Some men do not drive the minib<sup>1</sup>us they own, but hire a driver, who is also a member of the union. These sindicatos tend to control one or more routes and administer the rota that organises which routes different drivers will cover each day, and at what time they set off – so that minib<sup>1</sup>uses or trufi<sup>1</sup>s go at regular intervals throughout the day. Since some routes and times are more profitable than others, they are shared between all the drivers of the same sindicato equally, and non-members are not permitted to drive those routes. They thus regulate the activities of the drivers so that the service across the city is even. They also represent the drivers in negotiations with the authorities and the vecinos if they want to extend one of their routes, or if there are any complaints about the service.

An association consists of all the women (and men) who sell on the same street or the same part of a street in markets which are held weekly, twice weekly, or daily, depending on the zone. There is a distinction between these occasional street markets (ferias), and the daily markets (mercados) that take place on a fixed and permanent site in residential zones, rather than in the streets of market

districts, but the women who sell in both are organised into associations. Like the Juntas, associations are the means by which the state channels resources down to the local level, and individuals channel demands up to the municipal and national levels. Associations will also represent the traders in negotiations with the other civic bodies in the zone, resolve conflicts between individual affiliates, and regulate the local market. They apply for formal permission from the municipality to hold a feria and represent the vendors in negotiations or conflicts with the local vecinos (represented by the Junta Vecinal) and/or the municipal authorities. They also control how many traders can sell in their part of the street or permanent market and formalise the ownership of particular stalls: overseeing changes in ownership, defining and regulating the size of the stall and what products are sold. The leaders keep an eye to see if someone is not attending their stall regularly, keeping it orderly, or taking part in the cleaning of their area of the street, and will enforce sanctions in those instances. They also mediate conflicts between traders, between traders with stalls and those without, and between traders and other associations. Such conflicts principally involve encroachment on their territory, often exacerbated by defamation during the cruces de palabras (arguments) that may ensue.

As with the Juntas, the street traders (gremialistas) also have their local Federation, as illustrated in Fig. 2, which mediates any conflicts between two associations, or between an association and the authorities. In turn, that Federation is affiliated to the COR El Alto, the El Alto organisation of workers, which includes factory workers, teachers, journalists and artisans but is dominated by the gremialistas. The associations of women selling in mercados have a different Federation, which is directly affiliated to the COR (See Fig. 2). The COR is affiliated to the COB. The Federation of Gremialistas is also affiliated to the national Confederation of Small Traders, which itself is affiliated to the COB. Like the Juntas, the unions, associations, Federations, Centrales and Confederations both mediate between workers/citizens and the state and substitute for the state, doing the work of regulation in its place, a position they defend vigorously. Citizenship here is clearly multiscale or multi-tiered (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Isin, 2005).

If we take trade unions to refer to organised workplace groupings, then the associations of street traders are not trade unions in the classic sense but are more like guilds or professional associations. However, people at various levels of the guild structure refer to their organisational life as 'la vida sindical' and make a distinction between politics and sindicalismo. In mid-2003 the El Alto municipality pursued a criminal case against Braulio Rocha, the Executive Secretary of the Federation of Gremialistas, accusing him of leading the burning of the Town Hall in February. In reply



to these accusations the Executive Secretary and his fellow leaders frequently stressed the defence of the fuero sindical in the Bolivian Constitution (art. 159).<sup>2</sup> One of the most important initial demands of the peasants who went on hunger strike in September was freedom for a community leader who had been jailed for murder, arguing on the basis of fuero sindical. This is a kind of 'diplomatic immunity' for trade union leaders, which has its roots in the colonial system of different courts or fueros for different professions. The other frequent term used is vida orgánica, which refers to participation in meetings, demonstrations, civic parades and other events organised by the relevant body, which can be either the association in the case of individuals or the federation in the case of individual associations. Individuals or associations who hacen vida orgánica (i.e. fulfil all its requirements) have a greater call on the mediation or protection of the association or Federation respectively than those who do not.

### 'Mi Pueblo'

The third kind of identity is that of campesino, or peasant. For many of those who migrated from the countryside, and often for their children, their pueblo (village of birth) is felt as a stronger affiliation than that towards their place of residence in El Alto, even if in practice they spend more of their time as vecinos than as campesinos.<sup>3</sup> When I asked school children to talk about 'my pueblo' in group interviews, they generally agreed that it was one's place of birth. But in practice, children called their parents' village their pueblo even if they were born in El Alto, and no one I spoke to ever called El Alto or Rosas Pampa their pueblo. Pueblo is a very emotive term, which can also mean 'people' or 'nation', particularly when used by politicians or community leaders. First- and second-generation migrants in Rosas Pampa maintain very strong links with their pueblos. Around a quarter of those I surveyed in 2000 visited their pueblo between two and four times a year, and about a fifth more than once a month, or 'very frequently'. Only about a fifth said that they never visited. Others visit once a year for the anniversary fiesta. Women visit more often than men, usually to help with agricultural duties and/or to look after family members who still live in the countryside. Some go once or twice a month if their pueblos are nearby, while others go less often, but stay for a fortnight or a month or two, particularly at harvest time. They bring potatoes and other supplies back with them to the city, sometimes to sell but mostly as stocks for family consumption. A number of people still own land in their pueblo, and return to sow and harvest potatoes, quinoa (a grain), and other altiplano crops.

At the time of the earlier peasant blockades of April 2000, sympathy for the protesting campesinos

was widespread in Rosas Pampa, despite the fact that city-dwellers were the ones who suffered from the price rises that resulted. For some people it was definitely the campesinos who were protesting, that is to say people who were different from them. But a comment by Don Alberto, a long-time vecino, hinted at something more. He said once 'we have no other weapons with which to defend ourselves' ('no tenemos mas armas con que defendernos'). This 'we' and 'us' speaks of an identification with the peasants that goes beyond mere sympathy. On the whole, the vecinos of Rosas Pampa felt that they were different from the people who live in the campo, largely because they had become accustomed to city life. But, although the campesinos in their pueblos might be different – they might drink more, eat better food, be stronger or work harder – they are still kin.

This 'ethnic identification' with the campo was of particular salience in October 2003, as the most radical parts of El Alto were those in the northern part of the city which are some of its newest (and poorest) neighbourhoods. The vecinos of these zones tend to be people who have migrated to the city more recently, and who therefore have stronger ties to the campo. Villa Ingenio was one such flashpoint; in part because its residents mostly come from the province of Omasuyos, the province to which Warisata belongs. Rio Seco was another turbulent neighbourhood; something which was attributed by one of its residents to the fact that there are a lot of Achacachenños living there. Achacachi is the Mallku's territory, and Achacachenños are known for being warriors – even cannibals according to some myths. In the southern part of the city, the confrontations between police and demonstrators tended to follow the road to Oruro, from the more 'rural'/newer zone of Senkata through to Rosas Pampa and Santiago II, which is a neighbourhood populated by ex-miners. Many of the people I know in Rosas Pampa have houses in Senkata, and their pueblos are between La Paz and Oruro. Braulio Rocha (the Executive Secretary of the Federation of Gremialistas), described the reaction to Warisata as follows:

That was where the problem was born. The government sent military and police forces to Warisata, where ... they unleashed a great fury in order to save the tourists. There were deaths, injuries, and this problem affected (salpico', lit. 'spattered') El Alto; and in El Alto we organised support for our peasant brothers.

The decision that the CSUTCB took to begin a hunger strike in the buildings belonging to Radio San Gabriel in the geographical middle of El Alto highlighted the salience of the linkages between the rural parts of the department of La Paz and many of the residents of El Alto. I would suggest that it was this decision that meant that the peasant blockades in October 2003 had greater impact than those of 2000, even though in the earlier blockades more peasants had participated. And I suspect

that it was not a random decision: analysts and politicians (including the Mallku himself) explicitly debated the importance for the indianist movement of gaining a foothold in Bolivian cities – particularly El Alto – in public political meetings held in mid-2003 to discuss the riots of the previous February. In recent years there has been an increasing realisation by oppositional political movements of the strategic nature of El Alto, as well as a growing ability among intellectuals and community leaders to articulate its identity as an indigenous city, and to convert that into concrete and effective political action. As Braulio Rocha said of octubre rojo,

I think we've taken a very important step forward at the global level, because today the city of El Alto is recognised, and the foreign governments have recognised it because it has been at the vanguard [of political struggle]. Today the city of El Alto is the sentinel of [democracy in] Bolivia.<sup>4</sup>

What octubre rojo shows us is that such an indigenous identity is based upon the mixing of the rural and the urban, expressed in the creative blend of the three different kinds of collective identity that I have described thus far.

Organisationally, all three identities also blend. There are similarities in the political practice of trade unions, juntas vecinales and communal organisations in rural areas. One practice common to all three is the public assembly, which has received a good deal of attention from theorists of Bolivian democracy in the contemporary context (Albro, n.d.; Garcia, Gutierrez, Prada and Tapia, 2000; Tapia, 2002). The high degree of participation from members and the combination of authoritarian measures with a sense of egalitarianism that I discuss below are also common to all three political spaces.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that relationships between the different groups are always easy. Civic organisations and trade unions are often highly suspicious of each other, especially at city level. Leaders frequently accuse important figures in rival Federations of being co-opted by the government, for example. This depends a lot on the individuals concerned, and one of the important elements in the strength of mobilisation in October 2003 which was unusual was precisely the fact that the principal civic groups in El Alto were able to work together, with the exception of the Federation of Parents (FEDEPAF). The President of the FEDEPAF was widely believed by leaders of other civic organisations in the city to be allied with the Mayor's political party, and they told me that he had to go to ground during the upheavals for his own safety.

Organising Rebellion

The mobilisations of September and October 2003 were of course unusual in their intensity, but had their roots in more day-to-day experiences of collective mobilisation. Indeed, demonstrations and social mobilisation are part of the normal cycle of Bolivian democracy, which relies upon the willingness (and perceived obligation) of government to listen to and negotiate with the 'social sectors'.

Leaders of the different Federations and Centrales involved in octubre rojo understandably wish to claim it for their sector, but the mobilisation that eventually provoked the crisis and Sa'nchez de Lozada's resignation was the paro cívico declared by the FEJUVE from 8 October onwards. It was, indeed, one of the preconditions for the mass demonstrations of 13–16 October. As shops, markets and businesses closed, and public transport came to a halt, people were freer to devote themselves to the struggle against the government. The gremialistas' solidarity was crucial to the effectiveness of the paro cívico of October as well as to the mobilisations of September, as they declared cierres de mercados (market closures) in concert with the three paros cívicos and provided the bulk of the protest marches organised throughout those weeks by the COR, the Federation of Gremialistas itself, the COB and the FEJUVE.

Paros are a relatively ordinary protest technology that is frequently used by public transport unions to protest against laws, taxes or regulations that adversely affect them. The paro cívico of October and those which preceded it in September in protest at the Maya and Paya registration measures were unusual in that they were enforced by the vecinos. Quite to what extent the FEJUVE itself was able to direct events is a matter of some disagreement. Mauricio Cori, the President of the FEJUVE maintained that they were always in control:

It was very well organised – the vecinos and the institutions. Mauricio Cori at FEJUVE, with all his leadership committee in its offices, and the bases (grassroots members) in the districts. So [we decided] to form the blockades' commission, the messengers' commission, who were called chasquis (Inka messengers) and also we organised a commission of the grass-roots at the barricades. So there was a structure that no one could break.

However, most people emphasised that it was the people – el pueblo – that revolted. They often used the phrase 'el pueblo rebaso' a los dirigentes', which is hard to translate directly, but means that quite quickly there came a point where the leaders had to follow the will of the grassroots

members of their organisation, since 'rebasar' is the Spanish verb used to indicate when water overflows its container. I translate it here as 'over-rule'. The following quotes illustrate this tendency:

We were no longer an Executive, the people didn't take any notice [of us]. The people rose up, until the point when 70 deaths accumulated, when therefore the alteño people and the peasants, we asked for – or that is to say the institutions, the people in general, the Bolivian people, asked for the resignation of Sa'nchez de Lozada. (Braulio Rocha, Executive Secretary of the Federation of Gremialistas)

We didn't get rid of him ourselves, the leaders, it was the Bolivian people that threw him out, because they're now tired – so, so, so many things that are happening, well, so the Bolivian people was no longer in a position to continue with him. . . . We were – as leaders, we had to obey, because we obey orders also, [orders] from the people. . . . The Gas War is not a triumph, it's not a triumph belonging to Mauricio Cori [President of the FEJUVE], it's not a triumph of the COR, of Roberto de la Cruz [a COR leader and member of MIP], it's the triumph of the Bolivian people, that's to say of the people from here. They triumphed, not us [the leaders]. We simply obeyed orders. (Doña Roxana, member of Executive Committee, FEJUVE).

This is of course necessary for the narrative of this kind of democracy, where leaders do not lead, but implement the decisions of their grassroots: Don Mauricio told me 'Mauricio Cori fulfils the demands of his base' ('Mauricio Cori cumple lo que dice la base').

Whatever the case, the paro and demonstrations were organised collectively by groups of vecinos and in the name of the Bolivian people. Individual Juntas Vecinales organised barricades, vigils, communal cooking as food shortages became more acute and confrontations with the army or police, as well as the marches that flowed down from El Alto to La Paz in the last few days before Goni's resignation. They negotiated with the local association of market women so that they only sold produce for two hours at dawn and then closed the market; and they prevented public transport drivers from working by throwing rocks at their vehicles. In some of the more radical zones, the vecinos worked out how many policemen/women they had living in their zone and threatened them and their families with violence. Some Juntas Vecinales kept records of attendance at the marches and barricades, while others organised defence committees to go round people's houses and make them join the demonstrations, telling them 'todos o nadies (sic) vamos a salir'

(‘either everyone or no-one goes out [to march]’). In Rosas Pampa rumours spread that if people did not go out on the marches their houses would be looted, because it would be assumed that they were pro-government. When talking to me about how the people from the wealthier zones of La Paz joined in the protests, one person even attributed this to the fact that something similar occurred there – i.e. they took to the streets because of such rumours of the potential looting of pro-government people’s houses. My more middle and upper class informants actually spoke to me either of their disgust at the actions of the government or their fear that the ‘indians’ would take over their property, depending on their political standpoint. Some organised their self-defence against this perceived threat from the ‘indians’ through their own Juntas Vecinales.

The form of democratic organisation that I am describing here does have its authoritarian side. My informants, especially the civic leaders (for obvious reasons), did not perceive this as incompatible with what they saw as the essentially democratic nature of such collectivities. Furthermore, Alteños often pointed out to me the authoritarianism of the supposedly democratic government at the time, which was killing protestors. They explained some of the more radical actions as responses to the fact that many of the vecinos felt that they needed to defend themselves against the army, alerted as they were by threatening phone calls to individual community leaders (of the FEJUVE, the Federation of Gremialistas and the COR). Some university students argued that they had feared a coup, and so blockaded the principal roads in the city to stop the army from invading the city; they said they even ‘had to deny’ passage to ambulances, because some of them were used to carry weapons.

The paro cívico was successful because people drew on their more day-to-day experiences of collective organisation in Juntas Vecinales and sindicatos, which involved similarly authoritarian practices. Under normal circumstances, people considered it an obligation to participate in demonstrations or strikes, and this is often enforced by the practice of taking attendance and fining those who are absent.<sup>6</sup> Some of my more upper class informants use this to argue that protesters are not participating of their free will, but are obliged to do so by the fines. In fact, there is a very delicate balance that goes on inside a social organisation which mobilises its members on demonstrations. Leaders are expected to fine those who do not participate in protest marches, but the fines should not be too heavy. For example, Don Antonio, a leader of the Federation of Gremialistas, disapproved of the 2003 President of the El Alto FEDEPAF in part because he fined his members about 30Bs (c. US\$ 4.50) if they didn’t participate in marches. This meant that people had no choice but to participate:

Yes, he has the power to decide, and it's not like he doesn't deserve it, he has it because he convenes marches that his bases attend. Because there we have to pay a fine of 30, 40 Bolivianos and in this last [economic] crisis, you just can't find (the money for) this fine, so we're forced to attend the march.

In other instances, the fine is not too heavy, so that people can decide whether they will go along, because their participation anyway will cost money – in lost income, for food, transport to the meeting point, etc. My interpretation is that some form of support is regarded as obligatory. That support could be either through the fine or through physical participation. What is important is that leaders know that they cannot ask their bases to demonstrate too often.

Furthermore, when the unions requested that their members go out on a demonstration, people were usually very willing to do so, because they agreed with its aims. The leaders generally do a good job of persuading their militants of the justness of their demands, for if they do not, they will not continue very long in their jobs as leaders. Demonstrations are rarely called without preliminary meetings to ratify them, and obligatory demonstrations require such ratification. In the last few days of Goni's presidency, the marches took on something of a life of their own, with some zones organising themselves without the leadership of their Junta Vecinal. This was the case for Rosas Pampa, where I was told that the President of the Junta Vecinal was absent for most of the demonstrations, so instead the vecinos heard about the marches on their radios, and went to join them. While the export of the gas might not have been the only demand of the demonstrators, it was an issue that resonated with *altenos*' political consciousness and nationalism. For them it was in many ways symbolic of the exploitation of Bolivia (and its natural resources) by foreigners that has occurred ever since the Spanish invasion. One *alteno* said of people's opinions of the gas that 'in it they saw their future'; while a leader of the Federation of Gremialistas called it 'the only patrimony we have left in Bolivia' ('el ú nico patrimonio que nos queda en Bolivia').

Apart from the issue of the gas, *altenos* were also greatly angered by Gonzalo Sa'nchez de Lozada's view of the demonstrators; my informants frequently described him to me as 'terco' (stubborn), and condemned his 'soberbia' (haughtiness) and 'prepotencia' (arrogance). Dona Roxana, for example, said 'Entonces el tipo se ponía muy terco, desafiante, dice "yo mando y punto", así.' ('So the guy became really stubborn, defiant, he said "I'm in charge and that's it", like that.') Mauricio Cori said

well, the days went by and the government went on promoting itself more (se va potenciando mas), with haughtiness, arrogance – he called us snipers (francotiradores), ‘snipers linked to drug traders’ (‘franconarcovinculos’), sniper-I-don’t-know-what (‘franco no se’ que’), all that.’

During my stay in El Alto in December 2003–January 2004, several alteños told me that his message to the nation on Monday 13 October really ‘heated up’ the people; because he said that there were only a few (8000) subversives demonstrating against him who were encouraged by external forces, and these few were not representative of the eight million Bolivians who were happy with his government. Mauricio Cori remarked on the arrogance of Goni. ‘He said 8000 Bolivians are bothering the eight million who voted for me, that’s what he said’. Goni had smiled, and said that they would not succeed. And one of my alteño informants said that his smile was what really made people angry: ‘his smile’, she said, ‘cost him the presidency’.

For many people, the problem with Goni was that he refused to listen – he refused to ‘attend to’ the social sectors. Indeed, in December 2003, one alteño thought that if Goni had entered into genuine dialogue with the social sectors, he might still be President. These illustrative remarks point to the fact that people are willing to go on strike or to a march not simply because they are angry, or because they are obliged to. Indeed, a day’s strike represents a considerable loss of income, and had also become dangerous. It is also the case that marches and even more extreme mobilisations are often quite effective from the point of view of the protesters. Since 1997, successive Bolivian governments have failed to implement any coherent strategic plan of government. Instead of making policy, they became reactive, only able to respond to pressures from the IMF on the one side and increasing volumes of social mobilisation on the other. Governments would often give in to the demands of protesters, and renegotiate legislation – or make a show of so doing. Examples include the withdrawal of Aguas de Tunari from Cochabamba in April 2000 and the renegotiation of budget surplus requirements with the IMF after the February 2003 riots. On a more mundane level, one of the conflicts I followed in 2003 while I was working with the Federation of Gremialistas was that between fish traders in the provinces and in El Alto. The Prefecture was proceeding in favour of the provincial fish-trader federation because they were responding to the set of demands (called the pliego petitorio) presented by its members during a march held a few months previously. Clearly there are two interpretations possible here: on the one hand, protests can be effective, while on the other, people feel impotent with regard to institutional politics, such that only by taking to the streets will anything get done. Whichever the interpretation, protests are part of the normal cycle of



politics and democracy in Bolivia. This tendency has a considerable historical heritage<sup>7</sup> but has become significantly more acute since 1997.

## Conclusions

Some of the international reporting of octubre rojo made Evo Morales its chief protagonist, if not outright leader (Beaumont, 2003). While Evo is undoubtedly important to many as a figurehead for a certain political position, it would be inaccurate to see him or even his political party (the Movement for Socialism, MAS) as the instigators of the protests against Sa´nchez de Lozada and subsequently Carlos Mesa. The desire to avoid this trap runs the risk of pushing us into talking of these protests as anarchic mass revolts. Yet the explosion of popular anger in October 2003 came out of and was structured by a mode of relating to the state and government which is actually highly organised, even to the point of being quite authoritarian. Clearly, that anger arose for a wide range of reasons, but a necessary element in the success of the protests was the delicate but effective interpolation of *alteños* as part of collective entities in their relationship with the state.

While these collectivities can be the means by which Bolivian governments control their citizens, political participation (or even perhaps the flow of power) can be two-directional. There is no doubt that there are structures in place which allow citizens to contest policies and laws they consider to be against their interests. The normal balance of power between the two groups is greatly in favour of the political elites who govern; however, in the last few years, this has become slightly more fragile than usual, in Bolivia and throughout the region. When the Bolivian government appeared to decide that it would no longer negotiate with the ‘social forces’, and instead began to massacre them, they were able to force the President and his ministers out. In an interview in December 2003, the sociologist Silvia Rivera described the euphoria after Goni’s resignation to me as a ‘democratic euphoria’. October 2003 saw the operation of a kind of direct democracy that asserted the ‘common will’ against a government that was not only intractable and distant, but also murderous.

Collective organisations in El Alto both model and enact a type of democracy that looks very different to that assumed by Western liberal political traditions. The acceptance of the sometimes authoritarian methods of enforcing participation seems counterintuitive and undemocratic if we define democracy as essentially about preserving individual freedoms. This version of democracy is common to much liberal political thought, which, since Locke, has highlighted the state’s responsibility to protect the individual’s ability to pursue the good life. Democratic liberal traditions similarly focus on the individual and his (sic) freedoms, as communitarian (and feminist) critiques of

thinkers such as Rawls demonstrate (see Avineri and de-Shalit, 1992). In terms of practical politics, a stress on individual freedoms is also evident in the ways that American and Western European governments have historically privileged civil and political human rights since the enactment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) as two separate covenants: on civil and political rights on the one hand and social and economic ones on the other.<sup>8</sup> The latter have generally been understood to be of a more collective nature (Molyneux and Lazar, 2003).

However, if we view democracy more as ‘the will of the people’, this particular political conjuncture in Bolivia has created the conditions for the emergence of a particular model of democracy in the proposals and actions of these ‘social forces’. Regardless of actual practice, at the core of the model of democracy proclaimed as ideal is the notion that the leaders enact the will of the bases, and that frequently, although by no means always, the bases have the means of disciplining leaders who do not do this adequately. Indeed, this was precisely how one Treasurer of a Junta Escolar described Goni’s resignation in October 2003 to me – she said that she knows, as a leader, that if she acts inappropriately, her bases would ‘give her a thrashing’, and that was what had happened to him. His bases were in her view the social movements; and the interpretation of many of the people I spoke with at the beginning of 2004 was that Carlos Mesa’s longevity as President would turn on whether he could ‘attend to the social sectors’. His inability to navigate between their demands and those of the IMF and the commercial sector was eventually crucial to his downfall this year. In early 2004, Don Braulio warned,

If the new government [of] Carlos de Mesa (sic.) does not listen to the social organisations (instituciones vivas) of El Alto, who are the reason he is now seated on the presidential seat, then there will be chaos in Bolivia.

Doña Roxana had this suggestion for Carlos Mesa, advice which current and future presidents of Bolivia would perhaps also be wise to heed:

And to the central government, to Carlos de Mesa (sic), [I say] he should be a bit more conscious, he should take off his tie, take off his luxury shoes, he should put on peasant sandals (abarcas), perhaps put on a poncho, and well, he should also come to work with a shovel, with a pick, like that. Because it’s easy to sit in the palace and simply give orders, but that’s without knowing the reality, walking in mud, walking in earth, eating only potato and chun~o (freeze-dried potato), no, because that’s what we eat every day, only potato and chun~o.

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## Notes

- 1 A trufi is a privately run form of public transport, where drivers cover set routes in ordinary cars.
- 2 [http://www.presidencia.gov.bo/leyes\\_decretos/constitucion\\_estado.php](http://www.presidencia.gov.bo/leyes_decretos/constitucion_estado.php) [accessed 15 March 2005].
- 3 Some anthropologists have used vecino as an ethnic or class-based category of mestizos or local notables, although I have been unable to find a sustained anthropological discussion of the

term (Abercrombie, 1991; Weismantel, 2001). The common factor has been that of *vecinos* dwelling in a town. I aim to avoid simplistic dichotomies between Indian/rural and mestizo/town; and I deliberately focus more on the territoriality of *vecino*, because this seems to me to be more faithful to the local uses of language. *Vecino* may become ethnicised when it is a category applied to others rather than being a self-definition, if ethnic categories are defined at the boundaries between self and other.

4 This refers to something said by Carlos Mesa, that El Alto was the ‘centinela’ of Bolivian democracy.

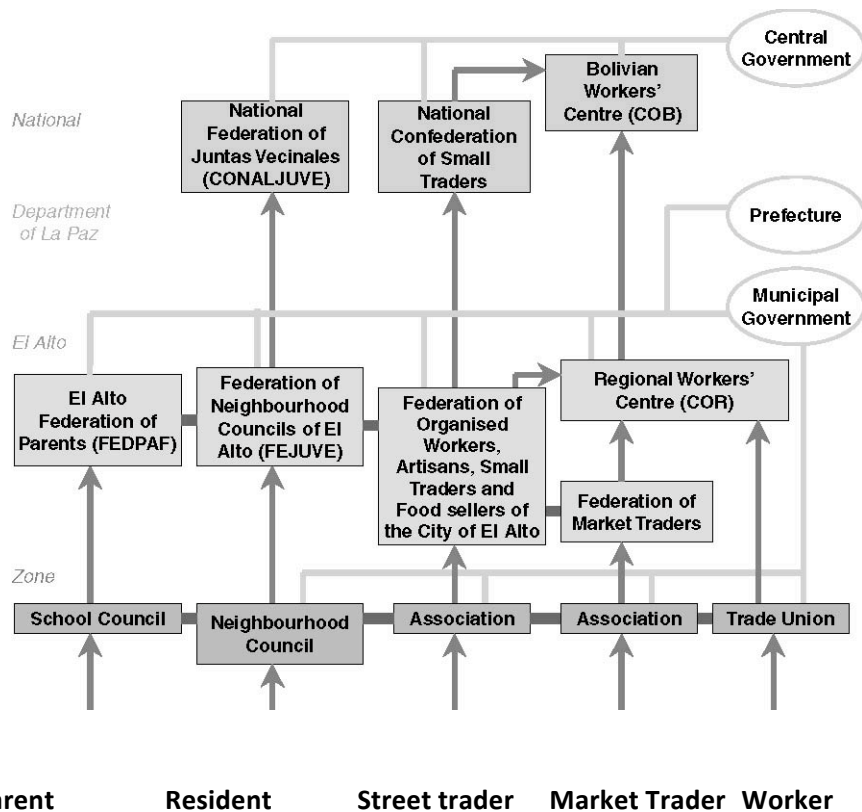
5 I am grateful to the anonymous BLAR reader for pointing out the similarities between *juntas vecinales* in El Alto and organisations in rural areas. For ethnographies of the latter, see McEwen (1975), Isbell (1978), Skar (1982) and Klemola (1997).

6 The taxi drivers have more vigorous means of enforcing strike compliance, as they will puncture the tyres of strike-breaking taxis, and sometimes whip (‘huascear’) the drivers. Usually the whipping is symbolic, but it is still very effective.

7 On the history of protests, see Irurozqui (2000). At the time, Bolivian media frequently made reference to historical precedents for October 2003, such as Tupac Katari’s siege of La Paz, or the actions of the military governments of the 1960s and 1970s (I am grateful to the BLAR reader for pointing this out). When talking about October 2003, my informants did at times mention such precedents, in particular the revolution of 1952 and the hanging of Gualberto Villarroel in the main square of La Paz in 1946. However, I have not explored these in detail here, because the twin themes of death (of the protestors) and sovereignty over natural resources were very much more prominent in their discourse.

8 See <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/index.htm> [accessed 16 November 2005].

Figure 2. Civic Organisations and the State in El Alto



Parent      Resident      Street trader      Market Trader      Worker