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'IN-BETWEENNESS' ON THE MARGINS: COLLECTIVE ORGANISATION, ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL AGENCY AMONG BOLIVIAN STREET TRADERS

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This chapter explores the relationship between commerce, ethnicity and political agency in a city that is both on the margins and increasingly at the centre of Bolivian political life. El Alto has around 700,000 inhabitants and lies on the Andean high plain at 4,100 metres above sea level.ⁱⁱ It began in the early 20th century as 'over-flow' from the city of La Paz, which is built in a crater, but grew to the point where it became a city in its own right in 1985. As a satellite of the capital city of Bolivia, El Alto can reasonably be called marginal. Certainly, its residents frequently complain about being forgotten by the central State authorities; and it is the poorest city in the poorest country in South America.ⁱⁱⁱ It is also a highly 'informal' city, with most of its inhabitants working in untaxed commerce, transport or production activities. Newspaper estimates speak of anything up to 200,000 informal street traders in the city. The leaders of the El Alto Federation of Street Traders estimate the number of their affiliates at around 160,000. Since people are often affiliated to more than one traders' association under the Federation's umbrella, the actual number of trading families is less. Yet even an estimate of 100,000 street traders would mean that at least one in seven of El Alto's entire population is involved in some way in street trading. Compare this with a 1998 estimate of 200,000 traders in Mexico City out of a population of around 20 million (Cross 1998).

On indicators of impoverishment and 'informality' then, El Alto is a city 'at the margins'. However, in other senses, El Alto and its street traders are squarely 'in the middle'. El Alto's inhabitants are mostly rural-urban migrants, which does not mean a linear progression from the countryside to the city, but means that they participate in a series of flows between city and countryside. Migrants come and settle in the city but tend to move backwards and forwards between there and their home villages in the rural provinces of the department of La Paz or further afield. In fact, the La Paz provinces have become increasingly urbanised in recent years, but they are usually talked of as rural by city-dwellers, of all classes.^{iv}

El Alto is also 'in the middle' of several sets of flows of objects, as goods produced in the provinces are brought to the city to sell, alongside contraband transported from the borders with Chile and Brazil. Linda Seligmann (1989) has highlighted the importance of the intermediary position of market traders, as they connect the rural economy with the national market. She argues that being 'in-between' in this sense gives them considerable political power, which is linked to their ethnicity. Traders in El Alto have a fluid and 'in-between' ethnicity: the archetypal market-woman is known as a '*chola*', which is an ethno-cultural category somewhere in between Indian and *mestizo*, that is, people of mixed Indian and Spanish background. Geographically also, El Alto lies in between La Paz and the rest of the country, as all the four or five roads out of the capital city go through El Alto. The main roads converge at the Ceja (lit. 'eyebrow'), which is the transport and commercial hub of El Alto. Thus, if *alteños* – those who live in El Alto – choose to blockade the few roads down to the city of La Paz, they can wield significant political power. This was demonstrated in October 2003, when a general strike called by the city's residents'

association combined with a series of other protests to force the President to resign. In this chapter, I discuss the role of the *chola* middle-woman in trade, focusing on the chain of 'production' and distribution of fish. I explore the fish sellers' relationship with the State and with a rival organisation, and consider the importance of the different kinds of 'in-betweenness' as experienced by the fish sellers for *alteño* and national political life.

Organising the informal economy in El Alto

El Alto can be called an informal city. This is a reasonably good description of its economy, albeit giving due recognition to the various academic debates over the definition of the informal sector, the impossibility of cleanly separating out formal and informal sectors, or of clearly distinguishing criminal from informal, and even the usefulness of the term (eg see Hart 1973; Peattie 1987; Portes, Castells *et al* 1989; Cross 1998). Despite (or because of) its imprecision, the term retains some descriptive power in a broad sense, and the informal economy in El Alto is characterised by small-scale production or vending, unregulated and untaxed by government, with people mostly self-employed rather than receiving a wage. According to the National Statistics Institute, 49.7% of the economically active population (EAP) of El Alto were 'self-employed' in November 1997. Seventy-three per cent of the EAP worked in establishments which employed 1-4 people. Most of the work in the informal sector is small-scale commerce on the streets or in markets held either daily or once or twice a week. About 30% of the EAP work in commerce, and in 1995, there were 150 associations of market traders, each with 200-1,000 members (Choque Mamani 1997). In 2003, there were nearly 200 associations of street traders who were politically active

in the El Alto Federation of Street Traders – The Federation of Organised Workers, Artisans, Small Traders and Food Sellers of the City of El Alto,^v to give its full title (hereafter 'the Federation of Street Traders' or 'the Federation'). Others had broken away from the Federation, whose leaders estimated that in total there were probably around 300 associations in El Alto.

The informal economy of El Alto is informal in the sense that it is more or less unregulated by government for taxation purposes.^{vi} However, it is neither clandestine nor is it entirely separate from the State. The relationship between those in the informal sector and the State is mediated by membership in collective organisations. Most adult *alteños* belong to trade unions within the informal sector. In the case of the predominantly male jobs (as drivers or artisans), the collective organisations are called unions (*sindicatos*), and in the case of the predominantly female street traders, they are called associations (*asociaciones*).

An association consists of all the women (and men) who sell in the same area in markets which are held weekly, twice weekly, or daily, depending on the neighbourhood. Associations mediate between individuals and the State and represent the traders in negotiations with the other civic bodies in the neighbourhood where they work, principally the local neighbourhood council (*Junta Vecinal*) and other associations of traders. The associations are affiliated to the city-wide Federation, which mediates any conflicts between two associations and assists associations when they must deal with the State authorities. The Federation is led by an executive committee, the head of which is the Executive Secretary, who in 2003 was Don Braulio Rocha Tapia.

These trade associations and the Federation fit into a highly organised structure of collective organisation that is parallel to the State, and which interacts with the State at multiple levels. Residents (*vecinos*) are organised through the neighbourhood councils, which also have a city-wide federation like the traders' associations do, called the FEJUVE (*Federación de Juntas Vecinales*, Federation of Neighbourhood Councils). The third main organisation at city level is the COR (*Central Obrera Regional*, Regional Worker's Centre), a coordinator of workers' trade unions including factory workers, teachers, journalists, artisans, and the federation of market traders.^{vii} There is a further layer of civic organisations at national level. At all levels, the organisations represent their affiliates in negotiations with each other and with different parts of the State.

As well as mediating between their members and the State, the civic organisations also often substitute for the State, doing regulatory work in its stead. Under everyday circumstances the street traders' associations control how many traders can sell in their part of the street or fixed market and formalise the ownership of particular stalls: overseeing changes in ownership, and defining and regulating the size of the stall and what products are sold. The leadership keeps an eye to see if someone is not attending their stall regularly, keeping it orderly, or taking part in the cleaning of their part of the street. In the last few years, they have also taken on the responsibility of organising the policing of their market through raising quotas to hire private security.

As in other parts of the world, the street trader associations seek to protect their ability to self-regulate as far as possible (Basile and Harris-White 2000). This is also compatible with the neoliberal 'solution' to the informal sector that has inspired Bolivian governments since the 1990s, namely deregulation as advocated in Hernando

de Soto's influential book *The Other Path* (1989). De Soto argued that the costs of being legal in developing countries were too high for poor traders, largely because of the bureaucracy involved in setting up a stall, getting a permit, and so on. His solution was to reduce State regulation in all sectors of the economy, which would have the effect of merging the informal with the formal. Governments have different options for dealing with the black market: either trying to instigate a clampdown in order to force people to formalise or legalise their businesses, or to allow (parts of) the informal sector to self-regulate, thus delegating the costs of regulation to entities such as the trade unions, who become *de facto* State agents. Bolivian national governments did not follow de Soto's advice in its entirety, but they did remove sales tax for those with small amounts of capital, and left the regulation of street trading in the hands of local governments and trade unions. The trade unions defend this situation fiercely, because it gives them influence with the State and access to State resources, which enables them to serve their members' interests and bolster their political power generally. However, it can lead to some insecurity for the unions, as what are *ad hoc* arrangements are vulnerable to conflicts with other unions. In a conflictual situation, there is always the danger that affiliates will choose to abandon the organisation they perceive to be on the losing side.

The fish sellers

The street traders' part in the parallel structure outlined above creates a relationship with the State that is not solely one of antagonism or resistance to State measures, as proposed by Clark (1988) but is one which allows the organisations considerable agency, as Cross has argued for Mexico City (1988). In El Alto, the collective

organisations can at times drive the strategic decisions of the State. This section discusses one of the associations which is affiliated to the Federation of Street Traders, an association of fish sellers (*pescaderas*) whose market is located at Final Los Andes in the northern part of the city. They have a history of problems with the municipal authorities, and in 2003 were embroiled in a particularly difficult conflict with a federation of fishermen from the provinces. Their story highlights the ways in which informal traders must interact with the State even if they do not pay sales tax or buy licences to sell; and how different organised groups interact with each other. Informality cannot be easily equated with marginality.

Don Alberto Mamani, a member of the executive committee of the Federation, filled me in on the history of the fish sellers' association. The commercialisation of fish is relatively recent in Bolivia: about 20 years ago, fish was mostly only eaten by those who lived in the provinces around the banks of Lake Titicaca, to the north of La Paz. At that time, a few women travelled from the lake to the Ceja, to sell fish 'directly from the producer [the fishermen] to the consumer'. They founded an association in the Ceja, but were moved a few years later, to a site a bit further out from the centre of El Alto. Throughout this time, El Alto was growing at an average of 9.23% a year, and with it the market for fish.^{viii} By the late 1980s, a system of 'intermediaries' had developed. The women who went to the lake, bought fish from the fishermen there, and then transported the fish to El Alto became wholesalers. In the city, they sold the fish to a further level of intermediaries, that is women who sold small quantities in other markets in the city, called *detallistas*.

The fish sellers were then forced by the municipal authorities to leave their site, and so they relocated still further out from the centre. The site the fish sellers chose this

time was good for them, as it was at the entrance to the biggest street market in El Alto. However, it was also opposite the prestigious air force base, and despite support from the Federation, the authorities were reluctant to grant the fish sellers legal permission to sell in that area. So the fish sellers moved once more, to Final Los Andes, where they have stayed since, putting considerable energy into organising themselves as an association. Their association gradually grew, and by 2003 had around 200 members. While the association has its legal personhood they still do not have the municipal order recognising their right to sell on that site. This makes them vulnerable to harassment from municipal authorities who want them to move, harassment they have periodically suffered over the last few years.

The insecurity of their position became a particular problem when Don Roberto^{ix} Quispe, the Executive of the La Paz Departmental Federation of Fishermen, came on the scene. In early 2002 he led a protest march, demanding among other things a 'fish terminal' in El Alto, where fishermen from the provinces could sell directly to consumers. By mid 2003, the La Paz Departmental Prefect's office appeared to be taking this demand seriously. Don Roberto Quispe told me that the Final Los Andes fish sellers had not demanded anything like this from the Prefecture themselves, that only when it subsequently appeared that the Prefecture was responding to his demand did they want to be involved. He said that there was a large amount of money belonging to the Final Los Andes association which had just disappeared, and which could have bought a piece of land to be a commercial centre had they really wanted it, a thinly veiled accusation of corruption on the part of the Final Los Andes leaders. He also said that the fish sellers had intimidated women who occasionally came from Lake Titicaca to the city to sell fish. The middle-women of Final Los Andes prevented them from

selling directly to the consumers and furthermore demanded that even women who sold fish only occasionally should affiliate to their association, for substantial amounts of money. He argued that the middle-women earned a good profit, which was money that the fishermen and women should be earning. Both his affiliates and some *detallistas* wanted to bypass the Final Los Andes middle-women, hence the demand for a fish terminal.

Don Alberto Mamani (from the executive committee of the Federation) argued that many of the participants in the protest march of 2002 were fish sellers from Final Los Andes. The fish sellers were angry with Quispe for using photographs from Final Los Andes in his application to the Spanish Embassy for funds for the proposed fish terminal, as he pretended that it was his association. According to the fish sellers, Quispe had also begun to harass them. He told fishermen not to sell to those who belong to the Final Los Andes association; and 'his' people attacked 'their' people in one incident, physically attacking them and overturning and spoiling their merchandise. In a meeting of the fish sellers in early July, some also accused him of sexual harassment. Quispe had also encouraged the formation of a rival fish sellers' association, led by an ex-leader of the Final Los Andes group, who was keen to unify with Quispe's Federation. Both sides in the conflict accused the other of corruption and high-handedness; and both vigorously denied that they were either. This is quite common in conflicts of this kind, as accusations of corruption are one of the most important ways in which trade union and local politics are conducted – an issue I have discussed elsewhere (Lazar 2005).

In mid-2003, it looked as though the Prefecture was ready to find land for the fish terminal. The political context for this was the success of the Aymara peasant

mobilisations of 2000 and 2001 (Patzí Paco 2003; Lazar and McNeish 2006), one of the results of which was the Prefecture agreeing to grant the national peasant union control over land in El Alto for two 'peasant markets' where producers could sell directly to consumers. Since the Prefecture can only transfer land to other State bodies, and not private entities, the Prefecture had made an arrangement with the Mayor of El Alto to swap plots of land with the municipality so that a fish terminal could be built, with financial assistance from the Spanish Embassy. Because Don Roberto Quispe was friends with the people in the Fisheries department of the Prefecture, he was best placed to control the fish terminal. Rumours had it that he was proposing to charge an affiliation fee of US\$500 to each person who wanted to sell fish there, but he energetically denied this to me, saying it was 'calumny and lies'. The Final Los Andes association argued that they should be in charge of any terminal, which in their opinion should be a 'commercial centre of fish', because their association had supervised the sale of fish in the city for over 20 years. The difference in terminology is significant, because Quispe was arguing in favour of a direct producer-consumer relationship, while the fish sellers wished to preserve their position as intermediaries. They might have had a stronger case in the eyes of the State authorities if they had had full documentation, including the municipal order. However, their legal personhood helped, and the Federation was prepared to vouch for their antiquity.

By August 2003, the fish sellers and Roberto Quispe had signed an agreement promising mutual respect. That meant that women from Don Roberto Quispe's Federation would not be prevented from selling their fish at Final Los Andes, although they would be expected to support the activities of the association with small financial contributions. In return, Roberto Quispe promised not to harass the fish sellers from

Final Los Andes. However, the dispute over who would control the commercialisation of fish in El Alto remained. When I interviewed Don Alberto Mamani (from the Federation), he said that the Mayor was more or less amenable to the creation of a commercial centre for fish supervised by the Final Los Andes association but accessible to members of Don Roberto Quispe's Federation. The Prefecture remained convinced that Quispe should run the terminal. However, both the Mayor and the Prefecture stressed that neither organisation could charge extortionate amounts to those who wanted to sell in areas they controlled, because that would go against the free trade provisions of the 21060 law. Their use of this law was rather ironic, since it is notorious in Bolivia as the structural adjustment decree of 1985, which led to the firing of thousands of miners and other workers. The 21060 decree is known as the 'ley maldita', or 'evil law'.

Ethnicity: the rural, the urban and the in-between

One of the key issues for all the bodies involved in the dispute was that of how to negotiate the rural-urban relationship. In their arguments on behalf of the Final Los Andes fish sellers, Federation leaders persisted in articulating this as a *split* between rural and urban. They argued that the Final Los Andes association had been selling fish in the city of El Alto for 20 years, and jurisdiction over any urban activities therefore belonged to them. One leader, for example, asked rhetorically in one of their meetings: 'they're two things – one is urban, another rural ... are we urban or are we rural?' He used the fact that their association 'belonged' to the urban Federation of Street Traders to underline this point. When Don Braulio (the Executive Secretary) met with the fish

sellers, he consistently emphasised that he did respect the fishermen and women, but in their place; that is, in the provinces.

It is certainly the case that both sides organised themselves in different spheres: one focused on the urban space where the fish was sold, while the other focused on the catching of the fish, mainly in Lake Titicaca. However, of necessity the two regions shaded into each other. The Final Los Andes women had to go and buy fish from fishermen at the lake, while Roberto Quispe's Federation wanted the right to bring fish from the lake into El Alto to sell there. The matter was further complicated by the fact that the women and men of the Final Los Andes association did not all live in El Alto. Some of them had dual residence, some lived in the provinces. The majority of those who lived mainly in the city had originally come from the lake area, and bought fish from their family members and *paisanos* (fellow countrymen) who still lived there. Quispe's affiliates were probably in a similar situation. Quispe himself certainly spent much of his time in the city, going through all the legal processes associated with the dispute. It is understandable that, according to one of those involved, the Mayor thought that Don Roberto Quispe's Federation and the Final Los Andes association were one and the same. Certainly it was easy for Quispe to convince the Spanish Embassy that they were.

The distinction was quite subtle, being focused on individual personalities within the different organisations, as well as on the site of the central locus of the legal personhood of each organisation. Legally and politically, however, the distinction was crucial, not least because the different areas fell largely under different State jurisdictions: the El Alto municipal government was responsible for the city, while the Prefecture was responsible for the provinces. The different trade unions attempted to

play one part of the State off against the other: the Final Los Andes fish sellers using the Federation and Don Alberto's personal connections to influence the Mayor, while Quispe used his friendship with the Fisheries' department functionaries to influence the Prefecture (cf Cross 1998). The Prefecture was particularly responsive to Don Roberto Quispe's demands because he had presented them during a protest march held in 2002. In the context of pressure from the national government to respond to the peasant union's list of demands around the same time, it was very important that the Prefecture respond as far as they could to a similar set of demands from Quispe. This illustrates one of the main ways in which collectively organised groups drive State decisions or policy. In this particular instance, different parts of the parallel structure are vying with each other to influence State institutions. The Prefecture was not overly concerned if their response to Quispe's protest meant that they went against the interests of another group of people, even if they had participated in the protest march. For the functionaries, it was most important to appear to respond to peasant demands.

The conflict was essentially a dispute between rival associations of fish-sellers and organisations of fishermen, both of which spanned the rural and the urban. However, when it suited their purpose, members of the two different organisations did make a distinction between urban and rural, and they wanted it respected. One man said in a meeting at the Federation's office: 'As a migrant, I am a resident of the city of El Alto. I defend my province, of course, but over there. Here [in the city] I defend myself.' Others argued that the fishermen and women of the provinces had their own markets in the countryside where they could sell their produce; and that the urban area was properly under the Federation and Final Los Andes association's jurisdiction.

At the heart of the conflict then was a struggle over the position of commercial intermediaries. The Final Los Andes women were most aggrieved at the fact that Quispe was preventing people who lived by the lake and with whom they had a special trading relationship from selling fish to them, especially since their trading partners were in many cases also their kin. When fishermen and women did sell fish to the Final Los Andes fish sellers, Quispe's people apparently prevented them from going out on the lake to fish. By agreement with the Prefecture, his Federation was responsible for organising the environmental regulation of fishing in lake Titicaca, which meant that he could easily enforce his sanctions against those who sold to the Final Los Andes fish sellers instead of to their rivals. However, he was presenting his demands as the demand for the right to sell from (rural) producer direct to (urban) consumer, and the functionaries at the Prefecture considered this to be an important principle.

Florence Babb's work describes a similar case in Peru in the 1970s, when State agencies attempted to bypass the market women and create fairs where producers could sell directly to consumers. There, the campaigns were unsuccessful, as producers generally preferred to sell in bulk to sure buyers, rather than spending their time selling small quantities. They recognised the value that market women added to the products they sold, in the considerable work of packaging, transporting and building up a client base (Babb 1988). The Final Los Andes fish sellers pointed out that fishermen generally do not catch enough fish to warrant spending the time and money to travel to El Alto, whereas they join together small amounts of fish from different sources in order to make it worthwhile. As one would expect, Don Braulio and the Federation leaders were utterly opposed to the bypassing of commercial intermediaries. Don Braulio said in a meeting 'we can't defend the direct sale from the producer to the consumer; what a

disgrace when there are no jobs around'. His point reflects another argument made since Hart's seminal article (1973), which is that employment in the informal sector absorbs the surplus labour of the formal sector, a crucial function in the present economic crisis.

As many scholars have pointed out, commerce in Andean countries is ethnically marked (Seligmann 1989; Peredo Beltrán 1992; Seligmann 1993; Larson and Harris 1995; Weismantel 2001; Rivera Cusicanqui 2002). Market women are known as *cholas*, an ethnocultural category which has been used since colonial times to describe an Indian who has moved to the city, and who is therefore somewhere between Indian and *mestizo* (ie of mixed Spanish and indigenous background). *Cholo/a* is both a racial and a social category, signified by indigenous physical features plus particular clothes and economic activities, most especially commerce. *Cholos* are indelibly associated with the urban service sector and the informal economy: commerce, transport and, in earlier times, mining. Depending on who is using the word and whom they are addressing, *cholo/a* can be pejorative. However, people in El Alto do call young single women 'cholitas', the diminutive of *chola*, and the phrase 'gran chola Paceña' ('great *chola* from La Paz') is used admiringly about women who have been very successful in commerce. The most important signifier of being a *chola* or *cholita* is dress: that is layered gathered skirts, called a *pollera*, a shawl, specific shoes, and a bowler hat. Mary Wiesmantel (2001) notes the ways in which women make 'indexical statements' about themselves through their clothes and behaviour, even if they do not explicitly refer to themselves as *cholas*. Market women self-consciously assume what Lynn Sikkink (2001) calls an 'ethnicity for consumption' by the purchasers of their products.

Of course, ethnic identities are not stable. Susan Paulson illustrates this point with her discussion of a woman who is a peasant in her village, but puts on her *pollera*,

hat and shawl to go and sell her produce in the urban market. She thereby moves from Indian to *chola* during her travel to the city and back once she returns from the day's selling (Paulson 2002). Once in the market, women's ethnic positionings are constantly under negotiation, as sellers will insult market women by calling them Indian, while the market women will assert their superiority over the (Indian) peasants from whom they buy their products, or if they come to the city to buy items such as rice, sugar and kerosene (Seligmann 1993).

The story of the fish sellers highlights one way in which ethnicity and commerce relate to each other in El Alto and the surrounding provinces. At first glance, it appears to be a conflict between the *chola* market women who are the classic intermediaries between the peasants of the provinces (the fishermen) and the *mestiza* (and *chola*) consumers in the urban sphere. However, look more closely and we see that in the first place, the Final Los Andes fish sellers are part of a rather longer chain of commerce in the urban sphere. They do sell to some consumers, but sell more to the *detallistas*, the women who go to markets in El Alto and La Paz and sell small quantities to consumers there, and who are also *cholitas*. Secondly, they buy their fish from fishermen in the provinces, but these are frequently their family members. Alternatively, they may actually base themselves in the provinces and come to sell at the market of Final Los Andes a few days a week, perhaps staying with relatives in El Alto, or owning one house in the city and one in the provinces. Their ethnic identity shifts as they move from the countryside to the city and back again; and the boundaries between the two spheres are blurred. Yet at the same time they make a distinction between the two spheres for political purposes in order to defend their right to work and to sell.

Political agency: rural and urban in the October 2003 upheavals

This dynamic of rhetorical separation between rural and urban and the practical porousness of the boundaries between the two is not confined to groups such as the fish sellers but is a key characteristic of El Alto in general, one that has important political implications. El Alto's position 'in the middle' of flows of objects between the rural provinces, the borders and the city of La Paz can be a source of political power. Linda Seligmann has argued, for the case of highland Peru, that this power drives from three different 'capacities' of the *cholas*:

The capacity ... to (a) speak and understand the language and behaviour of the peasants; (b) withdraw the services they provide to the *mestizos*; and (c) ally themselves with the indigenous peasantry increases their prospects for successful political resistance to the existing economic and social order. (1989: 717)

The urban *mestizos* and whites are dependent on the *cholas*, whose linking of the peasant economy and the national market make them 'crucial nodes of the national economy' (Seligmann 1989: 707). The combination of the *cholas*' broker position and El Alto's position as the linking point between the city of La Paz and the rest of the country means that concerted action to blockade the city of La Paz by well-organised groups can result in a situation where food supplies simply cannot enter the city, and people cannot get out. The siege tactic has a long historical pedigree, at least as far back as the indigenous revolt of 1780 led by Tupac Katari.

A siege or blockade affects different classes and ethnicities differently, because of the way that marketing and food provisioning is organised in La Paz and El Alto. People of all classes do the majority of their shopping in markets, even the very

wealthy, who tend to complement their market shopping with produce brought from the growing number of supermarkets. The price differentials are simply so great, and the food in the markets so fresh and flavourful that the supermarkets have not yet achieved complete hegemony, even though more people are deciding to sacrifice taste for (perceived) hygiene and buy products like meat from the supermarkets. However, those from the wealthier classes tend to buy fresher goods more frequently. Their diet is richer in vegetables and fruit, for example, which they buy on a weekly basis, whereas ordinary residents of El Alto often buy staples like potatoes, *chuño* (freeze-dried potatoes), rice and pasta in bulk, or bring potatoes and other vegetables from their fields in the countryside. Between 2000 and 2003, families I knew in El Alto increased the proportion of these kinds of staple foods in their diet and reduced their meat consumption, because their economic situation became more difficult. So when there is a blockade, although poorer *alteños* suffer more from price increases for food and do not have refrigerators to preserve goods, they do have greater stocks of food available to rely upon, and their diet changes relatively less than that of those residents of the wealthy parts of La Paz. During the blockades of April 2000, my landlady said to me:

As far as I'm concerned, it's fine. That way, perhaps the government will think a little bit. We're fine here – we have potato, *chuño*, meat. It's the people who live in Obrajes and Calacoto [ie the rich areas of La Paz] who will suffer, because they buy their food each week, don't they?

Furthermore, ordinary *alteños* mobilise their relationships with the countryside to bring back vegetables for family consumption; groups such as the fish-sellers can use the commercial relationships with kin and those from their *pueblos* that they have developed over the years. Those who are from the areas where the peasants are protesting are frequently let through the blockades because they know the protestors, and can therefore bring back provisions for their families, whereas trucks transporting supermarket goods are prevented from proceeding along the main roads, and the supermarkets have to shut.

Seligmann assumes that *cholos* will identify with the peasants in any political struggles between whites and Indians. In fact, in Bolivia, '*cholo* politics' has tended to favour urban populist leaders more than indigenous and/or peasant movements (Lazar 2002), although this may be changing. *Alteños'* relationship with the peasants and the countryside is not quite as straightforward as an automatic identification. Many do strongly support the peasants when it comes to political mobilization, yet on the whole, they feel that they are different from the people who live in the countryside, largely because they have become accustomed to city life. Nevertheless, although the peasants from their birth villages might be different – they might drink more, eat better food, be stronger or work harder – they are still kin, both figuratively and literally. This can be compared with the strong kin relations that even the most 'urban' fish sellers had with the fishermen and women of Lake Titicaca.

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 city-dwellers than as peasants. When I asked school children from Rosas Pampa 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. Many *alteños* have strong emotional attachments to their *pueblos*, and to the countryside in general.

The peasants themselves have an ambiguous relationship with those who have migrated from their village, as the conflict between the provincial fishermen and - women's association and the urban fish sellers also illustrates. David Llanos Layme (1998) has studied the effects of return migration on the rural community of Chari. While many return migrants reintegrate into the community well, some create resentment, as they express attitudes of superiority and individuality, and try to enjoy all the rights accorded to community members without being prepared to fulfil their responsibilities. These tensions occur also when migrants visit their *pueblos*, but equally, migrants can be seen as members of the community even if they spend relatively little time in the pueblo, as long as they attend the important fiestas and are present for planting and harvesting (Canessa 1998).

Few political movements have effectively capitalised on the links between *alteños* and their *pueblos*. The most important Aymara movement in Bolivia, Katarismo, has in the past not directed its appeal to ordinary urban Aymaras in El Alto or La Paz. Katarismo has targeted its political efforts at rural areas since its inception in the late 1960s. Despite the fact that many of its leaders were educated urban Aymaras, its rhetoric appealed to indigenous peoples as noble peasants with an alternative social, political and economic logic based upon either the ayllu (the 'traditional' indigenous

community of the Andes) or the peasant union (eg see Untoja 2000; Quispe 2001).

There is a sense in which the rural-urban migrants are seen as already assimilated into Hispanic society, by virtue simply of having moved to the city; at best a sort of bastardised category of Aymara, lying outside of the essentialised scheme of identification that is perhaps necessary for indigenous politics. Katarismo has found it difficult to deal with the ordinary people like the fish-sellers who are both rural and urban, and who move between the two spheres with relative facility.

However, an 'ethnic identification' between *alteños* and the countryside was of particular salience in October 2003.^x Then, a coalition of Aymara peasants from the department of La Paz and the El Alto Federations of residents (FEJUVE), workers (COR) and street traders gradually came together, and led a series of protests and blockades over September and October. The protests incorporated multiple sectoral demands but coalesced around opposition to the export of Bolivian natural gas. The heavy-handed government response, which eventually led to over 80 deaths, was felt first in Warisata, a village in the department of La Paz. On the 21 September, the army killed six people there in a 'rescue mission' to release tourists trapped by peasant blockades in the nearby town of Sorata. Thereafter, as the protests escalated and confrontations between *alteños* and the army took an increasingly heavy toll on *alteño* lives, the clamour for the President's resignation grew. He eventually resigned and fled the country on 17 October, leaving his Vice-President to take over.

El Alto was the epicentre of the protests, which spread down to La Paz and to other parts of the country in the few days prior to the President's resignation. 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 residents of these zones tend to be people

who have migrated more recently, and who therefore have very strong ties to the provinces. Villa Ingenio was one such flashpoint; in part because its residents mostly come from the province of Omasuyos, the province to which Warisata belongs.^{xi} Rio Seco was another turbulent neighbourhood; something which was attributed by one of its residents to the fact that there are a lot of '*Achacacheños*' living there. Achacachi is the territory of the main peasant leader of the blockades, Felipe Quispe. Furthermore, *Achacacheños* are known for being warriors, even cannibals according to some stories. Don Braulio Rocha 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 El Alto; and in El Alto we organised support for our peasant brothers.

Alteños also objected strongly to the government's plans for exporting the gas with terms that they considered extremely unfavourable to Bolivia. The gas was the latest in a long line of natural resources to leave the country since colonialism – principally silver, tin and oil. For many it came to symbolise the fact that Bolivian governments were more concerned about appeasing the IMF and the US Embassy and serving their own personal interests than about looking after the Bolivian people who were (and still are) suffering a severe economic crisis. The deaths at Warisata and increasingly in El Alto meant that the leaders of the different civic organisations had little difficulty in persuading their members to unite against the government. Indeed, the most common

phrase I heard when I asked leaders about the upheavals was that 'the people over-ruled [*rebasó*] the leaders'.

However, this was not an automatic unification of *cholos* and peasants as Seligmann proposes, and there is a gap between the rhetoric and the actual ability of these groups to unify. As the fish-sellers' story shows, the high degree of civic and trade union organisation in El Alto can lead to fractious and conflictive relationships as well as to strong and unified action. The potential for confrontation over who controls the market for different products in the city is as great (if not greater) as the potential for unification and thus political power. In October 2003, a number of factors came together to mean that the political power correctly identified by Seligmann was realised at that particular time. For example, the decision that the peasant union took in early September to begin a hunger strike in a radio station's buildings in El Alto took advantage of the linkages between the rural provinces of the department of La Paz and many of the residents of El Alto. Local residents mobilised themselves to hold bonfire-lit vigils outside the buildings in order to protect the peasants from rumoured army interventions; and the peasants' protest was brought firmly into the middle of the city. It was this decision that meant that the peasant blockade had so much more impact in October 2003 than those of 2000 and 2001, even though in the earlier blockades more peasants had participated, and even though there was widespread sympathy in El Alto for the peasants at that time too. And I suspect that it was not a random decision: in political meetings during mid-2003 which evaluated the riots of February 2003, analysts and politicians debated the importance for the Indianist movement of gaining a foothold in the cities, particularly El Alto.

In recent years there has been an increasing realization 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. What October 2003 illustrates is the fact that such an indigenous identity is based upon the mixing of the rural and the urban; and the state of being 'in between' the two. When leaders in El Alto talk of 'our peasant brothers', they are making use of a rhetorical distinction between urban and rural which enables them to make claims upon an indigenous authenticity in opposition to the (white) governing elites. Indigeneity is linked to a rural identity in the Bolivian imagination. So, for inhabitants of El Alto, the peasants are *and* aren't 'us' – they are our kin, but not us. El Alto is really 'in the middle', between the provinces and the city, even if it is also usually on the margins of national Bolivian political life. Nevertheless, as October 2003 showed, its strategic location in both a geographical and ethnocultural sense makes the city a force to be reckoned with when it does irrupt into national political life. Terms like 'informal' and 'marginal' describe one set of aspects of El Alto, politically and economically. However, it would be wrong to imagine those who revolted in October as entirely marginal and outside of the State. Even if 'the people' did over-rule their leaders, they organised themselves through neighbourhood level associations (of residents and of street and market traders), which are part of a structure that interacts with the State on a day-to-day basis and which even at times drives State policy in Bolivia. 'In-betweenness' can be a significant source of power if the political conditions are right.

Notes

ⁱ I am very grateful to John Gledhill and Barbara Harriss-White for comments on an early draft of this paper.

ⁱⁱ El Alto's population according to the 2001 Census was 649,958. Between 1992 and 2001, its population increased at a rate of 5.1% per year.

ⁱⁱⁱ The UN Human Poverty Index for 2003 puts Bolivia behind Haiti, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in terms of Latin American countries. See <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2003/indicator/indic_16_2_2.html>
The 2001 Census found that 66.9% of the population of El Alto is 'poor', which is calculated on the basis of housing conditions, sewage and water services, use of 'inadequate fuels', education levels and access to health services. Specifically, the Census calculated that only 7.5% of the population of the city had their 'basic necessities satisfied'; 25.6% were 'on the verge' of poverty; 49.3% in moderate poverty; 17.1% in conditions of 'indigence'; and 0.5% in conditions of 'marginality'. Source: 2001 National Census, Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, Bolivia. Available at: <http://www.ine.gov.bo/PDF/PUBLICACIONES/Censo_2001/Pobreza/PBolivia.pdf>

^{iv} I am grateful to Andrew Canessa for pointing this out.

^v The Federación de Trabajadores Gremiales, Artesanos, Comerciantes Minoristas y Vivanderos de la Ciudad de El Alto.

^{vi} Street traders are in theory liable for a series of municipal taxes, which used to be collected by municipal agents who visited the street markets each day. However, the Federation reached an agreement with the Mayor in 2000 that traders would stop paying these taxes. The municipality would prefer traders to pay once a year, but the Federation

was not happy with the amount the municipality proposes, and decided to negotiate after the municipal elections of December 2004. Trader organisations can also get a series of legal documents which give them some formality – the most important being legal personhood for their association and a municipal order recognising their right to sell where they have set their stalls up. Not all associations have this documentation.

^{vii} There is a distinction between those traders who sell at street markets and those who sell every day on a fixed and permanent site in residential zones. The latter are organised into their own federation, which is affiliated to the COR.

^{viii} El Alto's population increased by an average of 9.23% a year between the Censuses of 1976 and 1992. (Information retrieved from Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, <<http://www.ine.gov.bo>>). The influx of migrants to the city during this time is usually attributed to the structural adjustment measures of the mid 1980s, which meant that thousands of miners lost their jobs. Some went to the Chapare region to grow coca leaves; others migrated to El Alto.

^{ix} This is a pseudonym.

^x Bruno Rojas, personal communication.

^{xi} Silvia Rivera, personal communication.

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