



Report Information from ProQuest

April 29 2015 12:05

Table of contents

1. El Alto: Mobilizing Block by Block.....	1
--	---

El Alto: Mobilizing Block by Block

Author: Albó, Xavier

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: In a matter of days, a massive popular revolt in this unknown city forced President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, a darling of international lending organizations for his model structural adjustment program, to quickly tender his resignation and flee the country. If we should die, we'll die bravely: on our feet!9 LOOKING BACK ON THE CATHARSIS OF 2003, IT CAN be understood as a midlife crisis in the city's road to maturity. The events of that year mark a before and an after in the city's history and even its physical appearance, partly because the insurrection brought it and its immediate necessities into the eyes of national and international institutions.

Links: [Linking Service](#)

Full text: THE CITY OF EL ALTO, BOLIVIA, JUMPED TO international headlines with the outbreak of the "Red October" uprising of 2003. In a matter of days, a massive popular revolt in this unknown city forced President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, a darling of international lending organizations for his model structural adjustment program, to quickly tender his resignation and flee the country.

The first time I passed through El Alto was on a train from La Paz on a cold afternoon in August 1954. I barely noticed it. Back then the frigid and empty plain bordering La Paz was considered just the end of the vast highland plateau known as the altiplano. From the neighborhood of La Ceja, at more than 13,000 feet, I could see the abrupt drop into the craterlike depression inhabited by La Paz, the country's largest city at the time. Based on aerial photographs, it is estimated that El Alto then had 3,000 inhabitants.1 Barely 50 years later, its 870,000 residents make it more populous than La Paz, covering an area three times larger. La Ceja, a neighborhood spanning almost 13 miles, marks a clear border between La Paz and El Alto.

Although El Alto was incorporated as an independent municipality in 1985, it and La Paz remain a single metropolis, sharing a structural dependency. Every day more than 100,000 people move between the two cities on foot or crammed into thousands of minibuses, mainly for work. El Alto's gas and fuel refineries and, importantly, highways and international airport, breathe life into La Paz.

Parallel to the administrative division of the two cities is a growing social, cultural, and linguistic divide along criollo, or Hispanic and Aymara lines, reinforced by the greater concentration of poverty in El Alto. In the social imaginary, the dramatic topography of La Ceja, which also stands as an administrative boundary, starkly marks the difference between the two cities: Above live Aymarás, and down below, criollos. This construction is inverted, with the criollos on top, when viewed through an economic and social lens. Indeed, the most economically deprived continue expanding upward into the heights of the altiplano, while the most well-off burrow deeper into the depths of La Paz.

The Aymara of El Alto come to La Paz frequently, but only a few reach the most bourgeois redoubts in the south and lower parts of the city. Similarly, the richest paceños only pass through El Alto in transit to other parts of the country or perhaps the airport, mortified if they stumble upon El Alto's frequent popular protests. It is wrong, however, to differentiate one city as Aymara and the other criollo; both are multiethnic and pluricultural. According to the 2001 census, 74% of those older than 15 in El Alto identify as Aymara, 6% as Quechua, and 19% as belonging to no indigenous group. In La Paz 50% identified themselves as Aymara and 10% as Quechua.

Since most of El Alto's immigrants are from the Aymara altiplano, a significant but unknown number of áltenos maintain double rural-urban residency. Having land or at least the hope of inheriting some in their communities

of origin, they maintain a series of moral and in some cases legal obligations there by participating in meetings and assemblies, paying dues, and even taking on leadership roles. This reproduces, in effect, a rural-urban "ecological steppe," as in the ancestral Andean practice of securing access to food and other resources in varied ecological environments.

The 1994 Law of Popular Participation-which breathed new life into rural municipalities, directing about 20% of the national budget to municipalities, depending on their population and poverty level-strengthened rural-urban ties. Many rural municipalities of the altiplano have a second headquarters in El Alto, and mayors often live in El Alto, traveling to their community on weekends and holidays, and for special events. This phenomenon illustrates the idea of El Alto as the capital of the Aymara altiplano, though this does not impinge on El Alto's intimate ties with La Paz as part of the same metropolitan mass.

If community is the fundamental nucleus of expressing and reproducing Aymara life in the countryside, it also serves to explain why urban Aymara life in El Alto is organized by neighborhood, each with its respective organization or junta. Just as in rural communities, from which many *áltenos* hail, there is practically no sector of El Alto where residents do not belong to some kind of neighbors' association, even if attendance at meetings is infrequent. Paradoxically, forms of leadership from the countryside have been thoroughly applied in the city in the form of "street chiefs" (*jefes de calles*) or "block leaders" (*manzaneros*), and neighborhood assemblies have been organized through the powerful Federation of Neighborhood Assemblies (FEJUVE).

At the time of its founding in 1979, FEJUVE grouped together 44 neighborhood assemblies. Five years later it had 86, and by 2004 it had grown to 422 recognized neighborhood assemblies.² Other cities also have FEJUVEs, but none with the omnipresence of El Alto's.

In the early stages of every new neighborhood and its respective assembly, officially recognized by FEJUVE or not, residents' collective action is mobilized to ensure basic infrastructure, from designating land plots (where possible) to essential services like electricity and water. These basic improvements are carried out with the participation of all the neighbors through communal labor. Undeniable parallels exist between neighborhood assemblies and rural forms of communal organization, which since 1952 have used the borrowed name of "campesino unions."³ Even the motivation driving the fusion or subdivision of neighborhood assemblies in the city are similar to those found among campesino unions in the countryside. Since many *alíenos* are immigrants from the countryside, lessons learned in rural areas are naturally applied to city life.

But the other side of the paradox is that people who take up residence in the same neighborhood or even on the same street often barely know those living next door. Social networks are not necessarily territorially rooted; rather, they are based on other criteria and affinities, like kinship, geographic origin, age group, work, sports, fiestas and celebrations, or religion.

Few neighborhoods consisting of migrants from the same area still exist, since new arrivals from elsewhere quickly moved in. And unlike campesino unions, members of a neighborhood assembly normally do not personally know most other members. The assemblies' memberships are larger than their rural counterparts, and urban members have diverse occupations, making it hard for heads of households to regularly attend meetings. All this means that neighborhood organizations are less democratic than the rural unions, not only in selecting leaders but also in decision making. Assemblies in El Alto, for instance, commonly resort to fines and other sanctions to ensure attendance at mobilizations, though these are mostly hollow threats. As leaders climb the ranks of FEJUVE, they generally become more authoritarian. And it is not uncommon for individuals with particular political and economic interests to occupy high-ranking positions in the organization, using it for their own benefit.

Despite such deficiencies, the population undoubtedly regards the various levels of neighborhood assemblies as legitimately representative and adheres to their instructions and mobilizations. With their tremendous mobilizing capacity, the assemblies and their larger agglomerations catalyze all sorts of social protests. Depending on the issue and level of popular support, protests can be either consensual and mass-based or

sparked by high-ranking leaders' individual or political interests, resulting in suspicions and frictions among the grass roots.⁴ The assemblies also mobilize against thieves and criminal groups. It is not rare, for instance, to see dolls hung by their necks from posts throughout El Alto neighborhoods as a warning to thieves. But partly as a result of the strength and discipline of El Alto's assemblies, the city does not have as many reported mob lynchings as the cities of Cochabamba and Santa Cruz.⁵

WITH BOLIVIA'S NATIONAL REVOLUTION OF 1952, the emerging neighborhood movement established clientelist relations with the mling Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario, or MNR) to receive state funds and basic services. But during four years (1979-1982) of back-and-forth between elected governments and military coups, the assemblies became more combative. With the bloody coup of Colonel Alberto Natusch in 1979, for example, *áltenos* rose up against the military government, which responded by machine-gunning protesters from helicopters.

Beyond the FEJUVE, other organizational experiences accumulated in El Alto, involving guilds-of artisans, professionals, and informal laborers of all kinds-unions, and political parties. Many of these organizations made up part of the Regional Labor Confederation (COR) of El Alto. The COR was paradoxically a result of the neoliberal adjustment package implemented in 1985, because as more unemployed workers turned to the informal sector, guilds grew exponentially and founded the organization.

After the neoliberal privatization of the state mining sector, fired members of the militant miners' union arrived in El Alto and injected the assemblies with an ideological bent. When the "relocated" miners first arrived, they lived in simple tent settlements but soon gained proper homes by forming the Association of Relocated Homeless Miners, applying their long tradition of radical organizing. Unsurprisingly, the miners soon made themselves felt in the neighborhood assemblies.

Political and social jockeying always defines the relationship between El Alto's diverse groups and political parties. Rather than simple opportunism, this echoes the agricultural strategy prevalent in the altiplano of spreading risk by planting crops in a staggered manner over time and in different locations-not putting all their eggs in one basket, or as the Andean saying goes, "Laugh a little, cry a little."

Relations with political parties are also defined by ideology and the specific political affiliation of a group's leaders, as in the Trotskyism of the teachers, the Utopian socialism of the miners, or the indigenist dream of some leaders of the student and neighborhood assembly movements.

When push comes to shove, however, people make decisions with a pragmatic attitude, and ideology becomes a rhetorical ornament. This would explain why in the 15 elections since the onset of democracy, *álíenos* have opted for six different parties, zigzagging through the entire political spectmm. In the 2005 general elections they voted massively for Evo Morales of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party, but pragmatically voted for a governor allied with the new right-wing opposition.

The complexities of political dealings demonstrate the uncertainty and precariousness of surviving in El Alto, problems particularly acute among youth. With almost 70% of the workforce in the informal sector, youth suffer most in trying to enter the labor market. Young men from the countryside frequently become helpers on construction sites or public works projects, while young women are usually employed as household workers, mostly in La Paz. But many youth are now bom in the city, raised there, and count on family networks for jobs in the family's informal business. Instability and awful pay are the norm.

Those who pursue an education find only a temporary reprieve from the harshness of daily life, and even then on an annual basis only 2,000 of the 12,000 high school graduates in the city find jobs or go on to college.⁶ The fmstration of many young *álíenos* leads them to create their own marginal culture by joining gangs.

Emblematic of these tensions was the stmuggle to create the Public University of El Alto (UPEA) in 1998, when thousands of youth stormed and occupied a local branch of San Andrés University for several months.

Instability has racked the UPEA since it was created because of permanent internal struggles over resources and budget decisions, including violent changes of leadership over the embezzlement of monies, as well as the

social upheavals of recent years. Amid the turbulence, students are restlessly seeking a way forward with a strong dose of political action defined by indigenism, socialism, Trotskyism, and, depending on the circumstances, most closely with the MAS or the Pachakuti Indigenous Movement (Movimiento Indígena de Pachakuti, or MIP) of Felipe Quispe, also known as El Mallku.

Growing up Aymara in the city and not knowing the language implies other forms of perceiving and affirming indigenous identity in a syncretic, dynamic, and urban form. The powerful celebratory atmosphere of an expanding city more seamlessly inserts youth into society and culture through their neighborhoods and school groups, and the numerous social groupings they create in the process.

In the varied religious-folkloric festivals of El Alto, youth create their own ensembles, inventing their own syncretic styles and spaces, including techno and rap music, to which they add their homegrown modalities, adding Aymara as an adjective to these cultural forms. During the annual solstice of June 21, celebrated in recent years as the "Aymara New Year," youth groups have introduced the "Rock 'n' Rollstice of the Aymara New Year." The band Skoria sings in Aymara, "I will return and be millions," the famous quote attributed to the Aymara guerrilla leader Túpaj Katari before he was drawn and quartered by the Spaniards in 1781.

For this generation, the undeniable symbolic power invested in language to mark Aymara culture is being replaced with a creative combination of new celebratory symbols and a political militancy that simultaneously reflects the frustrations, hopes, and dreams of rising generations. This search and hectic activity reflects the vitality of the new city as distinct from La Paz.

It was this ascendant city and its social groups that made global headlines in 2003. It came as no surprise. Events like the takeover of the university in El Alto and the creation of the UPEA, and countless mobilizations with permanent and unfulfilled demands from the neighborhood assemblies and other social sectors, foretold *alteños'* growing protagonist role, first at the metropolitan level and from there into national political life.

The catharsis began in what is known as "Black February" of 2003, in La Paz and extending to El Alto. An income tax imposed by the International Monetary Fund triggered a rebellion, begun by high school students, that left 33 dead and hundreds wounded. It climaxed with a series of shootouts between striking police and the army in the central square of La Paz, while in El Alto the offices of political parties and the mayor's office were torched. The catharsis culminated eight months later with what has passed into history as Red October.⁷ The October protests erupted over a government plan to allow private companies to export Bolivia's natural gas resources to North America through a Chilean port. The government cited technical and cost advantages in choosing Chile as the transshipment point, with obvious economic benefits to the oil multinationals. Distrust of the government over the sale of natural resources is a deep-seated sentiment among Bolivians, particularly among leftists, considering the country's long history of pillage. But in this case the fires were stoked by nationalist anti-Chilean sentiment in light of Bolivia's defeat by its neighbor in 1879, in which Bolivia not only lost mineral resources but also its only access to the sea.

In a matter of days, individual protests with varied grievances throughout the altiplano, El Alto, and La Paz coalesced around the gas issue. If Black February demonstrated the links between La Paz and El Alto and the frustrations of youth, the October protests expressed the intimate ties between El Alto and the rural altiplano, radiating from there into a broad national political movement.

The protests might have ended like many before were it not for the government's unprecedented violent response. The military assault on unarmed civilians—at least 54 were killed and 411 injured—incited the middle classes to action and unleashed marches of hundreds of thousands into the heart of La Paz. In five days, on October 17, 2003, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada resigned and fled the country.

I was in El Alto in October and had the opportunity to see the face of a city in catharsis: A city in mourning, but also mobilized and in solidarity as never before. The neighborhood assemblies demonstrated a capacity to mobilize far superior to that exhibited in everyday life. During the first marches, neighbors would turn out only when prompted by fines or other sanctions. But later, people were decidedly active and dedicated to the point

that some leaders were replaced because they were seen as too passive. Other changes occurred at the start of the uprising under the influence of the MIP and the MAS, which were the parties with the most weight in the assemblies.

The assemblies' actions did not consist only of marching and blocking roads. In the most pivotal days of the rebellion, they organized nightly guard shifts and bonfires at important intersections to avoid being ambushed by the military or by gangs, while other neighbors dug trenches to prevent the entry of armored cars and tanks during the day. The principle avenues were literally carpeted with rocks and glass.

A network of woman leaders, called by a recent testimonial book "the backbone of the insurrection," played a notable role in the protests, despite that under normal circumstances they are relegated to a subordinate leadership role.⁸ Take the following testimony of a woman on the street given to a local radio station as a massacre unfolded before her:

We are not afraid of this brutal government. We women are going to die, not the men because they are mistreated and kicked [by the soldiers]. Our husbands are the breadwinners of our homes, despite the little they bring home. . . . That is why we women have said, "Tomorrow we women will be on the street. If we should die, we'll die bravely: on our feet!"⁹

LOOKING BACK ON THE CATHARSIS OF 2003, IT CAN be understood as a midlife crisis in the city's road to maturity. The events of that year mark a before and an after in the city's history and even its physical appearance, partly because the insurrection brought it and its immediate necessities into the eyes of national and international institutions. Indeed, since Red October, the pace of roads being paved and the delivery of other basic services has noticeably improved.

The young city's coming-of-age also demonstrated the unifying potential of the neighborhood assemblies, thanks to their roots in rural Andean communities and the injection (from miners) of working-class, urban sensibilities, which gave the assemblies greater political determination and militancy. The potential of women and youth in rising to action was also made visible, a potential that has exhibited itself only during extraordinary moments, as in 2003.

The uprising also plainly showed how El Alto and La Paz remain an articulated whole. It is patently clear that in this greater whole El Alto, the city of poor immigrants and Aymarás, acts as a hinge between urban La Paz and the rural periphery. The city also catalyzes the many problems and hopes of the poorest and most marginalized in Bolivia.

Was Red October an indigenous Aymara insurrection? Yes and no. Or better yet: yes, but not only. The most persistent motivation was perhaps the accumulated frustration and protest of that poor and marginalized multitude—the main reason why young people and women played such an important role. But the most explicit reason for rising up was an issue of national policy: recovering Bolivia's gas.

The most visceral component to the insurrection was that the multitude was, and believed itself to be, Aymara, keeping alive the memory of rebels Túpaj Katari and Bartolina Sisa, who 222 years before had cordoned off La Paz with a military blockade on the very spot where El Alto stands today

Sidebar

El Alto, Bolivia, Latin America's fastest-growing city

Sidebar

There is practically no sector of El Alto where residents do not belong to some kind of neighbors' association.

Sidebar

With almost 70% of the workforce in the informal sector, youth suffer most in trying to enter the labor market where instability and awful pay are the norm.

Sidebar

An effigy serves as a warning to thieves in El Alto.

Footnote

1. Rafael Indaburu Quintana, "Evaluación rápida de El Alto," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Agency for International Development, 2004), www.usaidbolivia.org.be/StudiesandReports/InformeFinalElAlto.pdf.
2. Ibid.; Godofredo Sandoval and Fernanda Sostres, *La ciudad prometida. Pobladores y organizaciones sociales en El Alto* (La Paz: Systema e ILDIS, 1989); Máximo Quisbert, *FEJUVE El Alto 1990-1998: Dilemmas del clientélisme colectivo en mercado en expansión* (La Paz/Chukiyawu: Aruwiyiri and THOA, 2003).
3. The so-called union arrived to the countryside with the National Revolution of 1952, inspired by the miners' unions. But once created the objective of eradicating the hacienda, the "campesino unions" went back to being the same community-based organization of yore, albeit with a more political perspective and a national dimension.
4. The USAID report insists on repeatedly mentioning the twisted and sordid intentions of what it calls anti-systemic "indigenists" and "professional leaders." Undoubtedly, there are some, but from the areas I know best the negative image is exaggerated by the USAID authors.
5. Based on preliminary results on a study by Juan Yhonny Mollericona for the Program for Strategic Research in Bolivia (El Programa de Investigación Estratégica en Bolivia).
6. Quintana, "Evaluación rápida de El Alto," p. 19.
7. See, among others, Hugo José Suárez, *Una semana fundamental. 10-18 de octubre 2003* (La Paz: Muela del Diablo, 2003); Luis A. Gómez, *El Alto de pie: Una insurrección aymara en Bolivia* (La Paz: Comuna, Indymedia, 2004); and the Alvaro Garda Linera, Raúl Prada y Luis Tapia, *Memorias de octubre* (La Paz: Comuna y Muela del Diablo, 2004).
8. Lucila Choque, Lina Britto and Forrest Hylton, *La guerra del gas contada desde las mujeres* (El Alto: Centro de Promoción de la Mujer, Gregoria Apaza, 2005). Cecilia Salazar de la Torre, *Mujeres alienas. Espejismo y simulación de la modernidad* (El Alto: Centro de Promoción de la Mujer Gregoria Apaza, 1999).
9. Radio Pachamama, *Para que el tiempo no borre la memoria . . . No a la impunidad* (El Alto, 2004), track 5.

Author Affiliation

Xavier Albó is a researcher at the Center for the Research and Promotion of the Campesinado in La Paz, Bolivia. This is an excerpt from an article that appeared in Spanish in the November 2006 issue of the journal of Latin American Anthropology. Reproduced courtesy of the American Anthropological Association. Translation by NACLA.

Subject: Leadership; Radio stations; Municipalities; International lending; Immigration; Demonstrations & protests; Urban areas;

Publication title: NACLA Report on the Americas

Volume: 40

Issue: 4

Pages: 34-38,47

Number of pages: 6

Publication year: 2007

Publication date: Jul/Aug 2007

Year: 2007

Section: REPORT: URBAN LATIN AMERICA

Publisher: North American Congress on Latin America

Place of publication: New York

Country of publication: United States

Publication subject: Business And Economics--International Commerce, Sociology, Political Science--International Relations

ISSN: 10714839

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: Commentary

Document feature: Photographs

ProQuest document ID: 202675619

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/202675619?accountid=13626>

Copyright: Copyright North American Congress on Latin America Jul/Aug 2007

Last updated: 2013-04-03

Database: ProQuest Social Sciences Premium Collection

Contact ProQuest

Copyright © 2015 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. - [Terms and Conditions](#)