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Neo-liberal ruptures: Local political entities and neighbourhood networks in El Alto, Bolivia

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Abstract

In October 2003, hundreds of thousands of Bolivians took to the streets demanding the resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. After 20 years of neo-liberal policies – and the failures to improve the living conditions of the majority – the proposal to export natural gas via Chile was taken by the population as yet another step to sustain an unjust political order. Facing a direct challenge by the population the Sánchez de Lozada administration responded with indiscriminate military force. The result was 63 dead and over 300 wounded, which deepened and extended the social rage and eventually forced the resignation of the President. The neo-liberal project – promoted and defended by Sánchez de Lozada – collapsed. The city of El Alto was the epicentre of the challenges to the legitimacy of this political order. This article focuses on the role of local political entities and neighbourhood networks from El Alto in articulating political spaces that challenged the legitimacy of the institutional infrastructure and led to the October 2003 ruptures in the neo-liberal project. Furthermore, I make the case that the particular histories and memories (of "relocalized" miners and indigenous/peasants) that converged in and defined this city were pivotal in the organization of a "political subsoil" that surged to the surface during the October 2003 events.
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1. Introduction

Latin America has been one of the regions where the neo-liberal project found its most fertile grounds and its most intense challenges. Fraught with a history of military dictatorships and economic crises, the region was an ideal territory for the promotion and imposition of these policies. However, because of the social failures of these policies and the long history of struggles by marginalized groups, the region is now an important site for the organization of anti-systemic social movements. Landless peasants in Brazil (Branford and Rocha, 2002), indigenous peoples in Mexico (Díaz-Polanco, 1997) and Ecuador (Yashar, 2005), piqueteros and factory take-overs in Argentina (Zibechi, 2003) are some of the most visible social movements in the region. Similarly, the widespread unpopularity of the neo-liberal project, has led to electoral success for a number of left-wing presidential candidates (including Evo Morales, previously the leader of the coca growers' federation in Bolivia). It is in this regional context that we can place Bolivia: "if Latin America has been the site of the most radical opposition to neo-liberal restructuring over the past five years, Bolivia has been its insurrectionary frontline" (Hylton and Thomson, 2005, p. 41).

In Bolivia, the neo-liberal project has reached its economic and political limits. The markets for goods and capital are wide open (Cariaga, 1997), the vast majority of state-owned enterprises (and vital natural resources) have been privatized (Kohl, 2002), the threat from traditional unions has been diffused or contained (García-Linera, 1999), and even some of the responsibility for social welfare has been transferred to the informal economy (Arbona,

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2001). Since 1985 Bolivia followed the neo-liberal recipes for development as few countries have done. Based on the implicit and explicit promises made for two decades for a more efficient economy that would attract more investments and generate more jobs, it would be expected that Bolivia should be a developmental success story.[1] While these policies gained international praise, they have also been widely unpopular in Bolivia. The popular uprisings of October of 2003, along with the more recent wave of mobilizations (January and May–June 2005) have forced two presidents from office and are a clear indication of the degree of unpopularity of the neo-liberal project in the country. In other words, from the perspective of the 64% of Bolivians living below the poverty line (INE, 2001b) the neo-liberal project has not delivered on its promises.[2] Furthermore, the historic election of Evo Morales as president in December 2005 signaled the desire of the majority of Bolivians to build an alternative to the current political order. One of the important sites in the process of challenging this political order has been the city of El Alto.

This paper builds on the premise that urban spaces are critical in the study of the neo-liberal project, both as sites required to promote and stabilize its policies, and as sites that concentrate its tensions and have the potential to generate political ruptures. Brenner argues that cities, in their articulation of multiple spaces "have become the central institutional, political, and geographical interface upon, within, and through which contradictory politics of capitalist restructuring are currently being fought out" (Brenner, 2000, p. 374). This suggests that while cities are pivotal in facilitating capital flows and accumulation regimes, those same processes generate tensions that require political management (Harvey, 2003). This is why the city of El Alto is a particularly important case study. While this city is one of the most important industrial centres in Bolivia, it also contains a large population of the (social and economic) outcasts of neo-liberal policies. This concentration of excluded and marginalized subjects (particularly former miners and rural indigenous migrants) that defined the formation of this city also served to articulate a variety of political identities that in turn were critical in pushing to the surface the demands for an alternative political order. It is in this context that local political entities and neigh-

bourhood networks were pivotal during the October 2003 events.

In this article aim to analyze the local outcomes of and responses to the neo-liberal project as seen through the organization and actions of local political entities and neighbourhood networks in El Alto. Local political entities are formal, hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations that in the Bolivian context articulate a powerful political front. However, they have also served as critical sites for the organization of stabilization (governance) strategies exploiting the precarious living conditions of residents in order to gain clientelistic consent (Arbona, 2005; Quisbert, 2003). Local political entities in El Alto bring together different sectors of the population and have a degree of representation vis-à-vis the institutional infrastructure of the state.[3] They include territorial and functional organizations such as neighbourhood organizations (Neighbourhoods' Federation or *Federación de Juntas Vecinales* – FEJUVE)[4] and trade unions (Regional Workers' Union or *Central Obrera Regional* – COR)[5] recognized by central and municipal governments as legitimate mediators with the residents of El Alto.

On the other hand, neighbourhood networks represent specific forms of grassroots organization that often focus on localized issues such as the provision of basic services or the defence of neighbours against institutional abuses. It is in these sites where the daily tensions of the neo-liberal project are lived and negotiated. These processes of negotiation (and pressure) often require the support of local political entities, and serve as the point of encounter between these political actors. Furthermore, neighbourhood networks manifest the organization of localized political identities that serve to articulate a collective front against these policies. Rooted in the histories and memories of residents (miners and indigenous peoples) these identities inform the way they view and interpret the city and their situations, and articulate the imagination of a different future. Neighbourhood networks are often obscured by more institutionalized forms of political life (i.e. local political entities), as they have to negotiate to

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[1] It must also be noted that the conditions in Bolivia during the early 1980s were extremely precarious. In the early 1980s, the country was ending decades of military rule and was experiencing rampant hyper-inflation that created chaos in every aspect and sector of society (Dunkerley, 1990). Thus, the promises made in 1985 fell on fertile ground. In other words, the neo-liberal project was viewed positively because of the need for hope and the deep distrust in government institutions and officials (Malloy and Gamarra, 1988).

[2] Needless to say it has been a complete success for a very small minority. The 1997 Human Development Report (UNDP, 1997) provided evidence that shows the persistent and growing inequalities within and between countries. According to UDAPE (2003) the level of inequality in Bolivia is the highest in the region with a gini coefficient of 0.607. At a national scale, the richest quintile earn 63.5% more than the poorest quintile.

[3] By institutional infrastructure I am referring to the institutions that include not only official government institutions (ministries, secretariats, etc.) and sectors of civil society, but also political parties, both in power and in opposition. While I do not directly address the role of political parties in this paper, it is important to note that they represent a formal bureaucratic version of political life in El Alto and constitute the public face of the institutional infrastructure from which the government constructs a margin of legitimacy. These ideologically diverse parties constitute specific channels through which local political entities negotiate local demands. For more information about political parties in Bolivia see Albó (2002), van Cott (2000) and Yashar (2005).

[4] The FEJUVE is an umbrella organization for the more than 550 neighbourhood committees in El Alto. The FEJUVE represents these neighbourhood committees in the public political arena.

[5] The COR represents many of the workers in El Alto. The majority of these workers are in the informal economy and a few in the formal economy. The workers range from shoe-shiners and street vendors to public servants and journalists.

obtain or retain the limited benefits they have been able to secure. Furthermore, it is in moments of crisis that the political identities of these neighbourhood networks surge to the political surface articulating a powerful political force.

An examination of the roles played by these political actors in El Alto will shed light on the growing fissures from which progressive alternatives are being demanded. To analyze these dynamics the paper will highlight two interlocking processes: (1) the tensions stemming from the outcomes of the neo-liberalization process in El Alto, and consequently (2) the violent, social ruptures it generates – emphasizing the mobilizations of October 2003. The article begins with a conceptual discussion about the implications of, and local replies to, the neo-liberal project, with particular emphasis on urban spaces. Based on this framework, the following section will present a general description of El Alto with an emphasis on the ways this city concentrated and articulated social tensions. This will serve as the basis for an analysis of the October 2003 events, or the moments in which popular manifestations led to the most important neo-liberal rupture in Bolivia.

The main sources of information for this paper were open-ended interviews with participants and witnesses of the October 2003 events, which include men and women, members and leaders of neighbourhood networks and local political entities from El Alto. This is complemented with newspaper accounts and radio recordings during the days of crisis, in addition to materials and interviews from ongoing research in El Alto since 1997.

2. Hegemony and the organization of political spaces

The city can be understood as a historical effort to establish a political order geared towards facilitating the (re)production of social hierarchies. These social hierarchies are manifested in the access to, or exclusion from, urban spaces. Furthermore, these spatial manifestations tend to naturalize and legitimize historical constructions of the city. However, the historical construction of segregated and marginalized spaces also informs how and under what circumstances struggles for the right to the city take place (Mitchell, 2003; Goldstein, 2004). Thus, as Magnusson (2000) puts it, "the urban is both a spatial and temporal category – that is both geographical and historical" (296). This statement builds from the work of Harvey (1997) who states that "space and time are not simply constituted *by* but are also constitutive *of* social processes" (23, emphasis in original). On these grounds, it can be argued that neo-liberal restructurings have a profound impact not only the structure of cities and the living conditions of the majority of city dwellers, but also the formation of localized political spaces from where these processes are being challenged. This reading of the city, in the context of the neo-liberal project, calls for an analysis that integrates discursive/political and spatial dimensions.

2.1. Discursive/political dimensions

The discursive/political side of the neo-liberal project involves the diffusion of a particular way of interpreting and acting on economic and political matters (Escobar, 1995). In addition to promoting "efficient" market mechanisms, the politics of this "civilizing model" aims at naturalizing the processes that generate social inequalities. Central to this political order, is the creation and consolidation of an institutional infrastructure capable of promoting the principles of open markets and local responsibility as the only option to reduce poverty and improve welfare. Politically, this institutional infrastructure aims to rationalize the demands of the national population with the expectations of global markets. Pointing to the hegemonic role of the neo-liberal project, Lander (2005) argues that

> [The neo-liberal project has become] the hegemonic discourse of a civilizing model. This is, as an extraordinary synthesis of the basic values of a modern liberal society regarding human beings, wealth, nature, history, progress, knowledge and the good life (p. 11. Author's translation).

In other words, the neo-liberal project has been a "politically-managed and institutionally regulated process" under a regime of coercion and consent (Peck, 2004, p. 8). Gramsci (1971) discussed the concept of hegemony as a process that integrates coercion and consent, indispensable for the establishment of a margin of legitimacy and for the production and reproduction of a political order in favour of specific class interests (Anderson, 1976). The construction of these hegemonic processes requires an institutional infrastructure to shape and consolidate a political order and frame debates in a way that minimizes (or neutralizes) the challenges. Brenner (2000) suggests that hegemonic processes can never be complete due to the disjuncture between different institutional scales, producing a very unstable political order. Put differently, the hegemony of the neo-liberal project has been relatively effective at the level of institutional infrastructure, but as these processes get closer to localities, where the outcomes are directly lived and experienced, they loose efficacy and face their biggest challenges. On the one hand, this tension points to the importance of the institutional infrastructure in managing neo-liberal failures and particularly to the ways this infrastructure responds to the different types of actors in local political spaces. On the other hand, this also highlights the importance of local actors – grouped in this paper as both local political entities and neighbourhood networks – as the main source of challenges to the current political order.

Analyzing the construction and reconstruction of the institutional infrastructure of the neo-liberal project, Peck and Tickell (2002) discuss a double movement of roll back and roll out neo-liberalism. "Roll-back neo-liberalism" refers to the "active destruction and discreditation" of the state in economic activities in favour of market "objectivity and efficiency". Along these lines, the state is seen as an

obstacle in the promotion of "sound economic policies" that would lead to a better integration to the global economic system, "superior economic performance", and eventually less poverty (Williamson, 1993). In Bolivia this took shape with the promulgation of Decree 21060 (1985) that resulted in the closure or restructuring of state-owned enterprises and the elimination of subsidies, in addition to other measures that aimed to "modernize" the national economy (Kohl and Farthing, 2006). The failure of these policies – in terms of the implicit and explicit promises to generate employment, reduce poverty and improve social welfare– required the promotion of political and discursive strategies to stabilize this political order. These failures became the target of widespread challenges from the general population (Green, 2003). As Mittelman and Chin argue:

> [T]he driving force(s) of openly declared resistance against the state must be analysed within the larger framework. At issue are the contradictory ways in which state structures and policies assume 'educative' functions that nurture a new kind of citizenry and civilisation commensurate with the requirements of transnational capital, while trying to maintain the legitimacy with which to govern (2000, p. 169).

The resistance to roll-back neo-liberalism highlighted how the imposition of these policies required a different approach to foster a "new kind of citizenry". Such a requirement implied a tacit recognition of the political disjuncture generated by the neo-liberal project, and attempted to promote policies that would better lead to the formation of "governable subjects".

It is in this context that "roll-out neo-liberalism" takes place, for it "focuse[s] on the purposeful construction and consolidation of neo-liberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations" (Peck and Tickell, 2002, p. 384). This new political approach was manifested in Bolivia in 1992 with the *Plan de Todos* (Everybody's Plan), and in particular with the *Ley de Participación Popular* (People's Participation Law – LPP). This policy strategy promoted the administrative decentralization of the state, delegating most responsibilities to municipal governments (Kohl, 2003; Medeiros, 2001). The intent of this policy strategy was to channel social demands (and social challenges) away from the central government and towards municipal governments. In the process these policies aimed to promote governable citizens and fragment the social movements converging to challenge the central state. However, as Yashar (2005) indicates, the decentralization process also opened spaces for the articulation of localized social movements that in the past were centralized under the Bolivian Central Union (COB) and other national organizations. In this sense, in Bolivia roll-out neo-liberalism generated unintended consequences by facilitating the organization of relatively autonomous spaces of governance and the formation (or in some cases the re-birth) of localized social movements. These social movements – such

as local political entities and neighbourhood networks in El Alto – have been able to articulate multiple discourses and political positions to which the state does not have answers.

2.2. Spatial dimensions

The spatial dimensions of the neo-liberal project relate to the construction of spaces of integration and segregation. These spaces of privilege and exclusion facilitate the construction and reproduction of the political order promoted by the neo-liberal project. Thus, the promises and nightmares of the neo-liberal project converge in cities. In other words, cities are the key point in the axis of the global flow of capital – in which the neo-liberal project deposits its faith – but also the sites that most clearly reveal the failures and contradictions of this political order.

In practice the strategies to deploy and manage these processes concentrated poverty and social marginality in particular areas of the city. This is evident by the growing number of slums on a global scale (Davis, 2006). It was expected that by concentrating this "collateral damage", the potentials for political outbursts could be contained and neutralized.

> As long as collateral damage from [the neo-liberal project] breakdowns can be minimized, localized, or otherwise displaced across space or scale it can provide a positive spur to regulatory reinvention. One of neoliberalism's real strengths has been its capacity to capitalize on such conditions (Peck and Tickell, 2002, p. 392).

These strategies also "involve measures to displace or defer contradictions and conflicts beyond the spatio-temporal horizons of a given regime, as well as supplementary measures to flank, support, and sustain the continued dominance of the neo-liberal project within these horizons" (Jessop, 2002, p. 456). In short, the efforts – bridging the periods of roll-back and roll-out neoliberalism – to localize the collateral damage or defer the contradictions, demanded the deployment and sustainability of a discourse of prosperity as the only alternative to promote development (Green, 2003). However, they had to confront the stark reality of the current organization and composition of cities throughout the Third World. As the UN Report on Human Settlements highlights:

> Instead of being the focus for growth and prosperity, the cities have become a dumping ground for a surplus population working in unskilled, unprotected and low-wage informal service industries and trade. The slums of the developing world swell (UNCHS, 2003, p. 46).

It is no surprise that these attempts to localize the negative outcomes have had a profound effect on the physical and social organization of urban spaces. Indeed, urban spaces magnify the experiences of inequality as they have the tendency to concentrate negative outcomes disproportionately

on certain groups (women, children, elderly, indigenous peoples, etc.) and in certain spaces thereby generating tensions and conflict (Lefebvre, 2003). It is in this sense that cities are not only critical nodes in the flow of capital, but also articulators of conflict stemming from the spatial concentration of poverty and social marginality.

Furthermore, the concentration of marginalized and discriminated subjects creates fertile grounds for the organization of social movements. Jelin (2001) attributes this to the histories and memories that these subjects carry and the ways they are inscribed in space:

> The struggle for a sense of the past takes place in the context of the political struggles of the present and the projects for the future. When [subjects] collectively define the spaces of memory as historic memory or tradition, as processes for the conformation of culture, as the search for the roots of an identity, collective memories gain political importance as instruments to legitimize discourses, as tools to establish communities of belonging and collective identities, and as justifications for the actions of social movements to promote and push for a variety of models for a collective future (Jelin, 2001, p. 99. Author's translation)

Jelin's emphasis on collective histories and memories provides a significant nexus with the work of Castells (1983) who characterizes cities as "historical products, not only in physical materiality, but also in … cultural meanings" (p. 302). The construction and organization of cities respond to historical (economic and political) processes, that in turn are critical in the formation of political identities stemming from the multitude of histories and memories that shape the ways collective actors are affected by and interpret these processes. It is in this political/discursive and spatial context that the outcast subjects rearticulate political identities, responding to precarious situations, and begin to organize social movements to challenge the established political order.

Following this line of reflection, Hale (1997) focuses on the conformation of identity politics in the organization of social movements. He defines identity politics as the "collective sensibilities and actions that come from a particular location within society, in direct defiance of universal categories that tend to subsume, erase, or suppress this particularity" (p. 568). In this definition Hale clearly links the historical processes that shape a city and their localization in terms of the ways in which they are felt and interpreted, and how these subjects construct political spaces. It is in this sense that a place like El Alto is important in the articulation of collective memory as "social identity and the capacity to mobilize that identity into configurations of political solidarity are highly dependent upon the processes of place construction and sustenance" (Routledge, 2003, p. 336).

If one were to take into account the percentage of the total urban population that lives in poverty and in marginalized areas, one would expect cities to be sites of constant mobilizations and would be ungovernable (and some are). To address this paradox, Tapia (2003) – grafting on the work of Scott (1990) – uses the term "political subsoil" to explain "the processes and practices under conditions of marginalization and disarticulation [that] organize as critique, alternative, irony, negation of the political institutionality of the social order" (Tapia, 2003, p. 111. Author's translation). However, these are also the spaces where collective historical memories shape political struggles, and propel these political identities to the surface during times of crisis.

Obviously, these processes, these encounters, the organization of these political spaces do not take place naturally. Central in the negotiation and management of conflicts have been local political entities and neighbourhood networks. In the moments when these tensions can no longer be contained, when the attempts to contain begin to generate resistance, when the negotiations between local political entities and the state are seen as unproductive is when the political subsoil begins to surface giving public expression to political identities. Routledge (2003) refers to the moment when the political subsoil surfaces to the public political arena as the formation of "convergence spaces" that "generate sufficient common ground to generate a politics of solidarity" (Routledge, 2003, pp. 344–345). He follows this by arguing that,

> convergence spaces function within a penumbra of differences, conflicts and compromises. As negotiated spaces of multiplicity and difference, they can be conceived as dynamic systems, constructed out of a complexity of interrelations and interactions across all spatial scales (Routledge, 2003, p. 346).

Urban spaces constitute the context within which the promises of neo-liberalization – channeled by the institutional infrastructure- have to face their failures. It is at these moments when the legitimacy of the institutional infrastructure is compromised leading to social ruptures. It is from these conflicts, rising out of the tensions generated by poverty and social marginality, that urban spaces are being transformed. The dialectical relation of urban spaces, and local political entities and neighbourhood networks requires concrete exploration. El Alto offers a particular case study for the analysis of these processes. Specifically, how the residents of El Alto are not only challenging the political/discursive strategies of the institutional infrastructure but also are attempting to build a city in the process.

3. El Alto: concentrating and articulating neo-liberal tensions[6]

El Alto sits at 4000 m (13,200 ft.) above sea level, in a wind-swept and cold *altiplano* (highland plateau),

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[6] Portions of this section have been drawn from Arbona and Kohl (2004).

surrounded by the imposing Andes mountain range. The city grew from a rural area at the edge of the valley of La Paz, with a population of roughly 11,000 in the 1950s, to the third largest city in Bolivia with a current (official) population of just under 650,000 (Sandoval and Sostres, 1989; INE, 2001a). The first wave of population growth came as a result of the 1952 revolution when newly mobile *campesinos* (peasants) freed from the hacienda system of labour settled in El Alto (Grindle, 2003). The population grew steadily until the 1980s when two specific events – one natural and one economic – led to dramatic increases in migration. *El Niño* related droughts in 1982–1983 drove tens of thousands Aymara indigenous peoples from their subsistence plots into the city in search of some sort of income. Moreover, in 1985 a wave of miners arrived in El Alto after the Paz-Estenssoro administration (1985–1989) closed state-owned mines (Sandoval and Sostres, 1989; Rossell, 1999). It is in this sense that two sources of historically rebellious identities converge and are articulated in El Alto.

As the fastest growing and most dynamic area of the metropolitan region of La Paz, the city of El Alto represents a strategic political space in Bolivia. The city is at the crossroads connecting the city of La Paz to the rest of the country and the world. These factors amplify the effects of the mobilizations that take place in this city. The concentration of a diverse indigenous population dependent on the informal economy shapes the way El Alto articulates political processes of contestation (Arbona, 2003). This has an added historical significance as what is today El Alto was the epicentre of an indigenous uprising that brought the Spanish enclave of La Paz to its knees (Quispe, 1988; Thomson, 2003). The 1781 siege of La Paz continues to resonate with the indigenous population of El Alto as an episode in which they confronted and (for a period of time) defeated the current political order. It is within this context of spatial, temporal, and social dynamism that I will be able to analyze the roles played by local political entities and neighbourhood networks.

One common denominator in the neighbourhoods of this city is the predominance of the informal economy. Rojas and Guaygua (2002) estimate that 70.6% of the economically active population (EAP) in El Alto depends on the informal economy. This estimate is not solely the result of increased migration, but also of a growing intensity in household participation in the labour market. As rural families send more family members to work in the city, lower wages and higher prices have required urban families to increase the number of workers to guarantee subsistence. For example, in 2000 over 195,000 men and women depended on the informal economy, which represents an increase of 183.75% since 1989 compared to an increase of 60.3% in total population during a similar time period (Rojas and Guaygua, 2002, p. 20).

These precarious economic conditions are reflected in the quality and type of access to basic services and how social divisions are marked in space. Roughly 35% of the residents of El Alto have indoor plumbing, compared to

Table 1
Basic services in the metropolitan region of La Paz

	La Paz (%)	El Alto (%)
Houses made out of brick	53	22
Houses made out of adobe	46	77
Water service (in house)	65	35
Water service (out of house)	26	54
Households without access to basic services	16	37
Households with electricity	95	85
All basic service needs satisfied	37	7

Source: INE (2001a,c).

65% of the residents of La Paz. Another example of this is the percentage of paved roads in this city. According to the Municipal Government 94% of the roadways are not paved (GMEA, 2002). A similar disparity is evident in relation to access to sanitary services and quality of housing (Table 1). El Alto's limited physical infrastructure reflects a city where the residents live in precarious conditions, and a city that grew so rapidly that the municipal government had limited capacity and resources to provide basic public services.

Concomitant to the precarious living conditions, the re-articulation of indigenous (and miners') identities in this urban context played an important role in highlighting the localization of outcomes of, and challenges to, the neo-liberal project (Patzi, 2003). The 2001 census revealed that 81.3% of the population over 15 years old is of indigenous descent (INE, 2001a).[7] However, to be indigenous in El Alto (or in an urban context in general) implies multiple negotiations between historical collective memories, cultural expressions, and modes of construction of, or participation in, political spaces (Quispe, 2004). In short, El Alto is an important point at which Bolivia connects with the global economy, a site that simultaneously manifests the promises of urban living and the failures of the neo-liberal project. Residents experience this through a frame of economic hardship and social exclusion, which find an outlet in the formation of neighbourhood networks and the creation of political spaces in relation to local political entities.

All the neighbourhoods of El Alto (about 550) reflect the histories and memories of the residents of their places of origin, their multiple and fluid identities, and social conditions (Montoya and Rojas, 2004). These factors are critical in the formation of neighbourhood networks and the ways local political entities articulate these localized forms of organization. For example, neighbourhoods mostly made up of indigenous/*campesino* migrants maintain some of the forms of collective organization and territorial management found in the *ayllu* system (Albó et al., 1983). Quisbert (2005) explains some of the neighbourhood dynamics in El

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[7] It would be premature to assume any kind of indigenous purity, and much less in a city like El Alto that combines historical tradition with cultural dimensions of globalization; or as Calderón (1995) argued "being *indio* and post-modern at the same time".

Alto that demonstrate how residents re-articulate their histories and memories:

> The [residents] articulate themselves around their neighbourhood authority structure that promotes the participation of the residents. […] The neighbourhood authorities not only influence residents, but also the residents exert pressure over the authorities (Quisbert, 2005, p. 75. Author's translation).

This tense relationship between neighbourhood authorities and residents is what sustains and gives vitality to the neighbourhood networks: the ability of authorities to persuade and mobilize residents and the capacity of residents to pressure authorities at any moment. On their part, these neighbourhood authorities have to establish working relations with the municipal government in order to access the funds – that corresponds to them – from the LPP (Public Participation Law). They have to plan and prioritize neighbourhood needs and execute those plans, and carry out these functions in a highly politicized environment. It is in this relatively volatile and localized political context that neighbourhood networks relate with local political entities.

Local political entities articulate class and indigenous identities through the organization of political spaces. The organization of these spaces provides the substantive foundations for the organization of neighbourhood networks. Some of these local political entities deal with very concrete neighbourhood issues, others take a more prominent role mediating disputes or advocating for specific groups (Mamani, 2004; Patzi, 2003). FEJUVE represents an important local political entity in El Alto and a mechanism through which neighbourhoods channel their demands. FEJUVE formally consolidates all neighbourhood networks of El Alto, and because of the territorial nature of this entity there is a strong (and often tense) relationship within and between these neighbourhood organizations. Their strength lies in their capacity to coordinate mobilizations, which stems from their ability to articulate specific neighbourhood grievances, to stop a proposal or demand attention from government. On the other hand, the COR represents many of the workers in the informal economy, some government employees, and workers in the private sector (such as workers in the manufacturing industries). Their main activities focus on mediating disputes within economic organizations and representing them vis-à-vis government and employers.

Both of these local political entities have had a profound effect in the construction and organization of El Alto. While they emphasize territorial and functional issues, things which unite them include the histories and memories of exclusion and discrimination, which in turn influence the formation of political identities in El Alto. In other words, the condition of El Alto as a poor enclave, as a spatialized ethnic other created the conditions to formulate localized political identities and organize political space to challenge the established political order. The articulation of these local political entities and neighbourhood networks were the first steps in the neo-liberal ruptures of October 2003.

4. Ruptures: October 2003

The events of October 2003 reveal the times and spaces in which tensions stemming from policy failures (in terms of the roll-back and roll-out of neoliberalism) are so inadequately managed that they compromise the legitimacy of the institutional infrastructure. The events not only led to the loss of the margin of legitimacy, but also highlighted the power of neighbourhood networks and the limits of local political entities in El Alto as viable interlocutors during times of crisis (Arbona, 2005). In this context these small scale autonomous networks became the principal forces coordinating the mobilization.

The October mobilizations were the culmination of a month of intermittent confrontations between government forces and a variety of local political entities (including the COR and FEJUVE). On the 15th of September 2003, El Alto witnessed the first of a series of mobilizations that would eventually culminate in marches to La Paz and the resignation of President Sánchez de Lozada a month later. The September mobilizations in El Alto were a reaction to a municipal resolution (MR 090/2003) to regulate and tax real estate transactions. Leaders of the FEJUVE argued that this was a government strategy to levy a tax on the residents of El Alto in order to "get more money from the poor" (M. Cori, president of FEJUVE, quoted in Prensa Alteña, 2003d).[8] Columnists argued that the reason for the mobilizations was the failure of the municipal government to inform the population of the scope and purpose of the proposal (Prensa Alteña, 2003c; Pulso, 2003b). Other journalists argued that the mobilizations allowed the leaders of FEJUVE to gain some prominence in order to counter legal charges of corruption (El Diario, 2003b; La Razón, 2003c).

The mobilizations took the shape of blockades of critical roadways around El Alto. The 48 hour blockades achieved their stated goal by forcing the municipal government to shelve the project (El Diario, 2003a). This victory energized the leadership of FEJUVE to make statements about broader issues, such as the project for the exportation of natural gas via Chile, the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and the constitutional assembly. This was a critical moment in the organization and consolidation of political spaces in El Alto as it brought residents together and created a common horizon for action. These events, coupled with the statements by FEJUVE and COR, put the military in a state of high alert (El Diario, 2003c).

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[8] It should be noted that the roots of the rebellion come from the events of February 2003 when the central government attempted to impose an income tax (La Razón, 2003a,b; Prensa Alteña, 2003a,b). At the same time, the police went on strike demanding higher salaries and better working conditions. The events led to a violent confrontation between the police and the military leading to the burning of several government and political party premises. For a good review of the continuities and divergences of social mobilizations in Bolivia since 2000 see Cajias (2004).

Parallel to the September events in El Alto, a series of events in rural areas served to spark another round of mobilizations. On the 20th of September 2003, a small scale blockade in the town of Warisata protesting against government gas exportation policies and calling on the government to deliver on previous promises became another important source for the ruptures (La Razón, 2003d). The blockades stranded a number of foreign tourists in the town of Sorata, which led to the deployment of a military convoy to rescue them. According to witnesses, soldiers accompanying the bus carrying the tourists back to La Paz, opened fire on civilians throwing stones and left four dead (La Razón, 2003d; Pulso, 2003a). The news of the military killings of civilians in the name of safety for foreign tourists gave credence to the accusations by political leaders that the current administration was not working on behalf of Bolivian interests. The killings in Warisata exposed the government's inability to diffuse the mobilization by dialogue.[9] A resident of Villa Ingenio commented that the organization of neighbourhood networks were a direct response to the killings, but also it was about much more than the killings:

> The killings brought us together. I saw a young man die on a nearby street. We were angry, but the rage was not only because of the dead, but also because of our situation. We have been forgotten. This is what it means to be poor and *indio*, you know? (interview with O.H., July 2004. Author's translation).

The testimony reveals how the killings – coupled with the victory weeks before – were the spark that channelled the mounting historical tensions into massive mobilizations. The underlying causes for the mobilization were the tensions generated by years of living under precarious conditions and the fact that the (urban) promises for a better life (education, jobs, basic infrastructure, etc) had not materialized. Furthermore, the arrogance of the Sánchez de Lozada administration in imposing unpopular policies was seen by the population of El Alto as the continuation and exacerbation of the colonial legacy that excluded and discriminated against the majority of the impoverished indigenous population. The concentration of poverty and socially discriminated population in El Alto reflected the spatial dimensions of the neo-liberal project and also served to articulate a political subsoil. This force surfaced in reaction to the coercive measures of the state and long history of exclusion and discrimination. In other words, the hegemony of the neo-liberal project reached its limits with the open challenge to the institutional infrastructure, leading to the use of violence.

As violence escalated and government troops killed civilians on the streets of El Alto the neighbourhood networks became localized leadership posts. These new entities bypassed the COR and FEJUVE and ignored attempts by political parties to join or absorb them (Prensa Alteña, 2003f). During the times of crisis, neighbourhood networks represented a more direct expression of demands for a new political order that would not be negotiated behind close doors by the leaders of local political entities. The political force of neighbourhood networks, fed by the histories and memories of indigenous and miner immigrants, had distinct expressions throughout the city.

> After the killings began [in Villa Ingenio] we named a Mallku [community leaders in rural areas]. He was in charge and coordinated defence patrols and brought together the zone. He would send youngsters to relay messages to the Mallkus in other neighbourhood. That is how we communicated and organized (interview with O.H., July 2004. Author's translation).

The testimony illustrates some of the ways in which indigenous identities – specifically the ways they are reconstituted in urban spaces – were pivotal in creating political spaces, actors and interrelations that under other circumstances might not have been possible. These neighbourhoods organized and expressed the collective control of their territory on the principles of "communitarian democracy" where the will of the collective is the responsibility of the individual (Patzi, 2004). On the other hand, neighbourhoods where the residents were mostly immigrants from mining centres, like Santiago II, privileged mining-syndicalist forms of organization. This entailed "fundamental practices like assemblies, the reliance on 'syndicalist democracy', the search for consensus and internal cohesion" (Cajias, 2004, p. 22. Author's translation). The following testimony demonstrates this form of neighbourhood organization:

> We had assemblies everyday to evaluate our actions, our failures, what should we do, and how should we continue our struggle, how should we attend the needs of the people. [...] We had all kinds of committees: self-defence committee, [food] provision committee, strike committee... all led by the neighbourhood organization. These committees practically became action coordination centres that, jointly with the neighbourhood organization, organized strategies during the crisis. The fact that only one person was killed [given that the neighbourhood endured one of the fiercest military offensives] and we did not lack food is testament to our mining legacy (interview with J.M., October 2005. Author's translation).

These differences were also expressed in the use of symbols and the ways they confronted military forces. In this sense the use of k'orawas (slings used to throw stones) and

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[9] The Sánchez de Lozada administration sought to quell the mounting pressures from a variety of groups, by redefining the legal parameters of citizen's right to assemble. Law 2449 criminalized social protest by sanctioning up to eight years in jail for those held responsible for obstructing public transport. On October 11th 2003, with increasingly loud and diverse voices calling for the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada, he signed Decree 27209. The Decree declared a national emergency and gave military forces the responsibility to "guarantee the normal distribution of and access to fuels for the residents of the Department of La Paz" (Art. 2. Author's translation). Soon after its signature, military forces launched attacks resulting in most of the deaths associated with these events.

sticks of dynamite; wiphalas (symbol that represents the indigenous people of the Americas) and mining helmets reflected the multiple sources of identities which surged to the surface in the process of organizing political spaces.

The multiplicity of histories and memories that informed the organization of these neighbourhood networks during times of crisis – such as miners and indigenous peoples – were pivotal in informing the surge of these forms of localized organizations as a powerful political force. These forms of identity and organization did not disappear in the new neighbourhoods in El Alto. They served to feed a collective sense of exclusion that in turn propelled the organization of a political subsoil. This facilitated the organization of "convergence spaces" of solidarity during the times of crisis.

"They are killing us like animals!" cried a woman "they [the military] are shooting indiscriminately at anything that moves. There is no reason to fire at civilians who are throwing stones" (recording Radio Pachamama, 15 October 2003). The Sánchez de Lozada administration also sent troops to the processing plants and refineries in Senkata, in order to secure the delivery of gasoline and cooking gas to the residents of La Paz. The troops fired on civilians in an attempt to gain access to and from the processing plant, killing and wounding dozens of civilians. By the time information began to reach the public about the military offensive in Senkata, Santiago II, Villa Ingenio and other neighbourhoods of El Alto, the city was a militarized zone (Prensa Alteña, 2003c). The events incited fury and indignation in the population and represented the pivotal moments for transforming long-standing tensions into ruptures. It was through the construction of these political spaces that neighbourhood networks were able to establish concrete and localized challenges to the institutional infrastructure. These challenges came through the active resistance of neighbourhood networks that highlighted the dividing lines between the institutional infrastructure and the majority of the population. Neighbourhood networks manifested this resistance through blockades, massive marches, in short by de-legitimizing the power of the state. In addition to active confrontation with military forces – construction of barricades, organization of look-out posts –, neighbourhood networks organized a series of plenary sessions where they debated demands and tactics (Prensa Alteña, 2003e). The final resolution was the organization of massive marches to La Paz.

During the first days of the crisis, the goal of the march fluctuated and included the following demands at different moments: the resignation and trial of Sánchez de Lozada and members of his cabinet, abrogation of law that launched the structural adjustment programme in 1985 (DS 21060), a new constitution, a referendum to decide what to do with the reserves of natural gas, and more support for the public University of El Alto (Prensa Alteña, 2003g). Observers estimated that between 300,000 and 500,000 people marched on La Paz on 15 October (La Razón, 2003f; El Diario, 2003d). Furthermore, a growing number of political

and social figures joined hunger strikes (45 nationally) and middle class residents of La Paz joined the marches (Montoya and Rojas, 2004, p. 101). Even the mayor of El Alto and members of the municipal council joined the marches and hunger strikes, partly out of fear of being associated with the Sánchez de Lozada administration. By this time, however, the groups had one immediate irreducible demand: the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada.

With hundreds of thousands of people conducting silent vigils, merchants closing their stores in protest, and even Catholic Church officials calling for the resignation of the president, it was clear that the ruptures were beyond the control of the government. Faced with a complete lack of support from civil society, political parties in the governing coalition, a number of cabinet members, and even the vice-president, began distancing themselves from Sánchez de Lozada. They saw that the institutional infrastructure of the country, and their own political aspirations, would be compromised if he remained in power (La Razón, 2003e).

By October 17th 2003, 5 days after the killings began in El Alto, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada was on a commercial flight to Miami only hours after the President of Congress read his resignation letter. In his letter of resignation, Sánchez de Lozada placed responsibility for the events on a "narco-syndicalists" organization with "external financing and organization that attempted to destroy Bolivia's democracy" (Pulso, 2003c). This statement represents Sánchez de Lozada's last effort to stabilize the country by presenting himself as a victim and constitutes the last strategy used when legal manoeuvring, cooptation or repression are no longer a viable option.

"El Alto on its feet, never on its knees!" became the rallying cry of the residents and signalled the transformation of ongoing tensions into a rupture that threatened to unravel the institutional infrastructure by generating the biggest challenge to the reproduction of the neo-liberal project: political instability (La Razón, 2003g). The ousting of President Sánchez de Lozada was the only viable strategy to restore stability. It became the common denominator of all the sectors that gathered in the streets of La Paz and an acceptable compromise that would result in some changes in the form but not the substance of the neo-liberal project. At the end of a month of mobilizations and confrontations the results were 63 dead (47 in El Alto) and over 315 wounded (Auza, 2004).

5. Conclusion

An analysis of the relationship between local political entities and neighbourhood networks, and the strategies to sustain the margin of legitimacy of the institutional infrastructure revealed some of the failures of, and challenges to, the neo-liberal project. Specifically, the paper revealed how the tensions in El Alto – exemplified by the concentration in space of economic exclusion and social discrimination-eventually became important components informing the massive mobilizations of October 2003. However, neither

informality nor indigenous social marginalization alone can account for the magnitude, outlook, or organization of the mobilizations. Local political entities were instrumental in channeling these tensions from the neighbourhood networks and were pivotal factors informing the grassroots uprising of October 2003. Moreover, the spontaneous and decentralized forms of mobilization of these neighbourhood networks represent a real challenge for governments aiming at finding ways to sustain the stability of the neo-liberal project. In short, the long running resistance to 20 years of neo-liberalization in Bolivia found a public (collective) outlet with the killings and the consolidation of political spaces generated in neighbourhood networks.

Underneath these local political entities and neighbourhood networks a powerful force was taking shape as El Alto formed as a city. The convergence of the histories and memories of migrants (miners and indigenous peoples) fuelled the constitution of political identities in this city. These subjects – excluded and discriminated as a result of the neo-liberal project – organized political spaces that surged to the surface on October 2003.

The events of May and June 2005 – that forced the resignation of President Carlos Mesa – reinforced the idea of the delicate nature of the margin of legitimacy, and consolidated a deeper commitment by a wide range of local political entities (from around Bolivia) to establish an alternative to the current political order. The leader of the COR and FEJUVE recognized the centrality of neighbourhood networks and learned the importance of internal democracy and to listen to their constituencies. These events also support the argument that the main challenges to neo-liberal hegemony are at the sites where its negative outcomes are directly lived. The question remains whether alternatives to this political order can be organized in these sites or at the state level.

The landslide victory of Evo Morales and his party Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) reflects a desire and willingness to establish a new political order. The October 2003 events directly influenced this victory, by highlighting how the institutional infrastructure was willing to justify the use of force to maintain a political order. In this sense El Alto – by concentrating the failures of the neo-liberal project and converging identities that shaped political spaces – was a pivotal site in this democratic revolution. The expectations of the majority of Bolivians are nothing short of the promotion of a new political order.

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