WILEY

JSTOR

'Sangre de minero, semilla de guerrillero'[1]

Histories and Memories in the Organisation and Struggles of the Santiago II Neighbourhood of El Alto, Bolivia

JUAN MANUEL ARBONA

Bryn Mawr College USA, Universidad para la Investigación Estratégica en Bolivia, Bolivia

This article analyses how relocated miners in the Santiago II neighbourhood of El Alto reframed their histories and their memories of struggle and organisation in the mining camps. It focuses on the ways in which residents organised the neighbourhood and how these histories and memories rose to the political surface during the time of crisis in October 2003.

Keywords: El Alto, Bolivia, miners, October 2003, neoliberalism, political spaces.

Bolivia was one of the first countries in Latin America to implement neoliberal policies that restructured to restructure the national economy (Arze, 1993; Conaghan and Malloy, 1997; Thiele, 2003; Kohl and Farthing, 2006). Government reform programmes have met with varying degrees of popular rejection ever since Víctor Paz Estenssoro enacted Supreme Decree 21060 in 1985 (Crabtree, 2005). But the traditional structures that upheld protest movements in the past – particularly the miners' unions – collapsed when their workplaces were shut down (Gill, 1997; García-Linera, 1999). Consequently, it was not until the year 2000 that the localised movements that challenged, rejected and protested against the neoliberal project started to resonate in the country (Arbona, 2006). The promises of more and better jobs combined with the long

---

1 'Blood of a miner, seed of a warrior' – title of a song written by Horacio Guaraní, released in 1970 on the album *El Potro*.

history of exclusion and discrimination have acted as important factors in bringing the protest movements together. The uprisings in the highland provinces of La Paz and the 'water war' in Cochabamba in 2000, and the clashes between the military and police and the so-called 'gas war' in 2003 were the key events that laid the foundations for a process of historic change that culminated in the election of Evo Morales as president of Bolivia in 2005 (Stefanoni and Do Alto, 2006). Hylton and Thomson sum this up: 'If Latin America has been the site of the most radical opposition to neoliberal restructuring over the past five years, Bolivia has been its insurrectionary frontline' (Hylton and Thomson, 2005: 41).

The city of El Alto has played a key role in these processes of implementation and rejection of the neoliberal project. First, the growth and formation of this city is largely the result of the shutdown of the state-owned mines and the decline in agricultural productivity. The great waves of migration (from the mines and rural-indigenous communities) in the 1980s were signal events in the configuration of El Alto. At the same time, El Alto brought together different social groups, with historically little experience of common struggle in shared geographical and political spaces characterized by extremely precarious living conditions (Harris and Albó, 1984). It is in this context that new forms of organisation and struggle, histories and memories of marginalisation and exclusion, and visions of a different future emerged.

There are approximately 550 neighbourhoods[2] in El Alto, with a multiplicity of structures and forms of organisation that reflect the particular histories and memories of each neighbourhood's residents. All the neighbourhoods are organised under the institutional umbrella of the Federation of Neighborhood Associations (Federación de Juntas Vecinales – FEJUVE; Quisbert, 2003). The FEJUVE and the Regional Trade Union Federation (Central Obrera Regional – COR) were the two organisations that laid the foundations for the October 2003 protests.[3] It is worth pointing out that during the crisis itself, these grassroots political organisations played only a supporting part, as the leading role 'went down' to the grassroots themselves (Gómez, 2004; Arbona, 2005; Lazar, 2006). Analysis of the forms of organisation in one neighbourhood will therefore enable us to identify patterns that will lead to a better understanding of the roots of the processes of change taking place today in Bolivia (Arbona, 2007).

Santiago II was one of the El Alto neighbourhoods that experienced brutal military violence and was one of the main centres of neighbourhood resistance during the October 2003 protests. According to the neighbourhood association's records, military repression in the neighbourhood left one person dead and 18 wounded, out of a total of 63 dead (47 in El Alto) and 315 wounded (Auza, 2004). This neighbourhood is home to a large number of men and women miners who were 'relocated'. Their histories and

---

2   It is almost impossible to arrive at an exact number of neighbourhoods because, as new ones are set up and old ones divide, the number is constantly increasing.

3   The essential difference between the two is that the FEJUVE is organised on a territorial basis and the COR on a functional basis. While community and party-political (liberal democratic) forms of organisation converge in the FEJUVE, the COR is still strongly influenced by the trade-union congress style of organization. But despite these differences, they cannot be reduced to a simple FEJUVE = indigenous, COR = miners correlation.

memories of organisation and struggle against the military forces in the mines served as points of reference, not just during the October protests, but also in the construction and organisation of this neighbourhood.

The aim of this article is to unpack how histories and memories of organisation in/ of mining communities manifested themselves in the forms of organisation and struggle in/of Santiago II.[4] At the same time, it seeks to discuss the way in which these histories and memories were fundamental to the organisation of the city of El Alto. As Castells argues, cities are 'historical products, not only in their physical materiality, but also in their cultural meanings' (Castells, 1983: 302). The contestatory role played by the miners in Bolivia's history can therefore be seen as one of the cornerstones on which this city has been built, leading to the ties of solidarity and forms of resistance that took shape during the October protests.

This article's central argument is that relocated mining families have become one of the driving forces behind the formation of a contestatory political identity that defines the city of El Alto. Their histories and memories of organisation in the mining camps, and of struggle against the state, have been one of the resources people draw upon to organise political spaces and define political goals. This argument is based on the ways in which El Alto brings together and links two political-cultural currents that have informed the development of urban identities and the organisation of political spaces. On the one hand, the waves of migration from rural communities into the city have been a resource for the construction of an indigenous imaginary, representing a kind of 'communal indignation of the *ayllus*[5] mobilised against the white-mestizo State' (Mamani, 2005: 39). The other current – and the one that this article will focus on – is the wave of migration by miners that started at the end of the 1970s and reached its peak in the mid-1980s as a result of neoliberal restructuring. As Crabtree states, 'the mine closures led to the dispersal of mineworkers all over the country, and with them their political traditions and organisational experience' (Crabtree, 2005: xviii). It is their histories and memories that have informed how and under what conditions this city has been built and the political horizons of struggle have been constructed (Appadurai, 2001).

This article is based on the life histories of six residents of Santiago II (four men and two women), complemented by open interviews and secondary information from newspapers published in El Alto and La Paz. For the life histories, the selection criteria were that they should be people who had settled in the neighbourhood since the shutdown of the state-owned mines and had been active in the political life of the neighbourhood, while the open interviews focused on people who had witnessed and/or participated actively in the events of October 2003. After presenting a brief conceptual framework looking at the historical processes involved in the construction of urban and political spaces, the article

---

4   The reason I use both terms ('histories and memories') is to differentiate between individual experiences and how these are collectively reconstructed. The use of both terms therefore seeks to recognise the complex interaction between events in a specific time and space, and how these are collectively remembered and/or reconstructed. For a more in-depth discussion of this issue, see Abercrombie (1998), Jelin (2001) and Rappaport (1990).

5   The Andean form of kin and corporate forms of landownership and management that constituted the cell of pre-colonial Andean Societies.

goes on to discuss how the histories and memories of the 'relocated' miners who settled in Santiago II influenced both the ways in which they organised in response to state repression and how they have organised day-to-day life in the neighbourhood.

Urban and Political Spaces

The city can be interpreted as a specific and concrete way to (attempt to) establish a political order that will facilitate the reproduction of social hierarchies. These social hierarchies take shape in spatial terms in such a way that they naturalise and legitimise the historical processes that inform the construction of the city and the social inequalities defined in/by its spaces. It is precisely on the basis of the construction of these segregated and marginalised spaces that we can see how and where processes of struggle for the right to the city come together (Mitchell, 2003; Goldstein, 2004). It is in this sense that 'the urban is both a spatial and temporal category – that is both geographical and historical' (Magnusson, 2000: 296). This proposition builds on the work of Harvey (1997), who analyses urban spaces from a dialectical perspective in which social processes influence the formation of urban spaces and these in turn influence social processes. This is why the economic and institutional restructuring processes (such as the neoliberal project) have had such a profound impact, not just on the ways in which cities have been structured and the living conditions of the majority of their inhabitants, but also on how localised political identities are organised and become the basis for contesting such processes.

This proposition implies taking a more complex view of the neoliberal project that pays attention to its political/discursive and spatial dimensions. Both perspectives address the logic and implications of imposing a (neoliberal) political order and the responses to it that have arisen. On the one hand, the discursive/political dimension of the neoliberal project has been the dissemination of a certain reasoning process that interprets different economic and social situations and acts in response to them. This implied the introduction of a 'civilising model' that has attempted to naturalise those processes that, in turn, seek to naturalise neoliberalism and at the same time, neutralise contestatory discourses:

> The neoliberal project [has become] the hegemonic discourse of a civilising model – an extraordinary synthesis of modern liberal society's basic assumptions and values concerning human beings, wealth, nature, history, progress, knowledge and the good life (Lander, 2005: 11).

The discursive techniques used to naturalise and legitimate the neoliberal project arise from an institutional infrastructure[6] that attempts to negotiate contradictions and failures (Escobar, 1995). In their study of the construction and reconstruction of the

---

6 I understand this to include not just the state apparatus, but also political parties (in power and in opposition) and civil society organisations that represent specific economic and political interests. It is on the basis of this institutional infrastructure that the neoliberal project has been implemented and attempts are made to legitimise this political régime.

neoliberal project's institutional infrastructure, Peck and Tickell (2002) discuss these processes as part of a dual process of 'roll-back' and 'roll-out' of the state. The neoliberal roll-back process refers to the 'destruction and discrediting' of the state apparatus in favour of the 'objectivity and efficiency' of the market. This involves deregulating economic activities and the state's role with regard to these activities. But the failure of these policies in terms of their (explicit and implicit) promises to improve social well-being and reduce poverty – a failure that had become clear from society's increasingly vocal questioning and growing popular rebellion – has made it necessary to establish policy strategies to stabilise the political order (Green, 2003). In Bolivia, this process – which took concrete form with the enactment of Supreme Decree 21060 – involved the shutdown or restructuring of state-owned enterprises, the elimination of subsidies and other measures that attempted to modernise the Bolivian economy (Kohl and Farthing, 2006). Neoliberal roll-back reflects 'the purposeful construction and consolidation of neo-liberalised state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations' in response to economic failures and the need to stabilise economic policies (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 384). In Bolivia, this took place in 1992 and was expressed in the so-called 'Everybody's Plan', particularly through the implementation of the Popular Participation Law (PPL). This strategy took forward administrative decentralisation, whereby responsibilities that had historically fallen to central government were delegated to municipal governments. The intention of this strategy was to channel demands to these local levels, and thereby reduce the pressure on the state and break up the social and union organisations, such as the Bolivian Trade Union Confederation, which centralised and coordinated challenges to state policies in the past (Kohl, 2003). But as Yashar (2005) suggests, this decentralisation process also opened up spaces for the formation of localised social movements, which in the past had tended to be subsumed/co-opted by the state or the national-level unions. The decentralisation process thus had unintended consequences as it created relatively autonomous governance spaces that in turn facilitated the formation of social movements. These movements have come to express political discourses (and actions) that the state has found itself unable to neutralise.

The other dimension of the neoliberal project has been the way in which spaces of integration and segregation are defined, and in particular, the ways in which the promises and nightmares of neoliberalism converge in cities. Brenner suggests that, by linking multiple spaces, cities '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: 374). In other words, cities have become the pivots of capital flows – in which the neoliberal project places its faith – but they also highlight the failures and contradictions of that project at the same time. Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) discusses the city as a space of both integration and segregation, created by the (dis)connecting effects of capitalist accumulation processes. Thus, cities are not only the connecting hubs for capital flows that concentrate contradictions and conflicts in time and space; they also create (segregated) spaces where people on the margins of society converge. The histories and memories of those on the social margins are the local/subjective mechanisms used to interpret processes and to build the city and political spaces for action. Jelin (2001) makes the connection

between these histories and memories and spaces for political action: the struggle for the meaning of the past is acted out through the political struggles of the present and projects for the future. When it is posed collectively, as historical memory or as tradition, as a process of shaping culture and searching for the roots of identity, the space of memory becomes a space of political struggle. Collective memories take on political importance as ways to legitimise discourses, as tools for building communities of belonging and collective identities, and as justifications for the actions taken by social movements to promote and push forward different models for a collective future (Jelin, 2001: 99).

To complement Jelin's argument, the development of spaces for political action also corresponds to the local ways in which the negative effects of state policies are dealt with on a day-to-day basis (Scott, 1990). Building on Castells's proposition that cities are historical products, Magnusson (2000) argues that the 'spaces for political action' that define and are defined by the city also have to be understood as historical products. Thus, the histories and memories of the city's residents shape the formation of political identities. This implies, first, socially constructing and interpreting a locality in a specific way and, second, defining and mapping out specific political goals.

As mentioned above, historical processes simultaneously encourage both integration and segregation, and privileges and exclusion, expressed in (the urban) space. The conflicts that arise as a result of these inequalities reflect these tensions and lead to the re-formation of identities that converge in (excluded) urban spaces[7] and feed into the struggle for the right to the city. Through these historical processes and the way in which they are made manifested in a concrete form, spaces of privilege and exclusion are established, legitimised and naturalised, and local political spaces – seeking either to demand or to defend the provision of basic services and/or institutional recognition – are formed and consolidated.

It is in this context – of historical processes that inform and fashion the construction of subjects and spaces – that political identities take shape. Hale (1997) defines political identities as '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). It is in this way that restructuring processes are lived and fought against locally, inform the construction of spaces and connect with ways of building political identities that allow people to develop visions and actions around future possibilities. These political identities are nourished by the day-to-day practices of life in the local space – how people live and live with others, how they negotiate conflicts, and how histories and memories are brought into play when they interpret these practices. But it is also, at times of crisis and conflict, where day-to-day practices – invisible and obscured – rise to the surface to challenge the naturalness and legitimacy of the political order in which they are immersed (Tapia, 2002).

---

7   This is very different from the idea that these territories are simply containers of identities (Harvey, 1997).

29

If Hale (1997) presents a conceptualisation of how these processes are lived and fought against, based on the construction of local political identities, Appadurai (2001) analyses how these identities set goals for the future. He defines such political horizons as 'the outer limits of aspiration and inspiration within which concrete plans, strategies and hopes among the poor are nurtured' (Appadurai, 2001: 30). These political horizons are expressed through discourses and localised actions that attempt to build alternatives based on the concrete and day-to-day specificities of the locality and rise up to challenge the current political order. It is by framing these political horizons that people on the social and urban margins confront the political/discursive strategies of the neoliberal project.

Routledge (2003) takes the political horizons idea a step further when he analyses the ways in which these processes are reflected in collective actions and linked in time and space. According to Routledge, convergence spaces are created during times of crisis and conflict and 'comprise diverse social movements that articulate collective visions, to generate sufficient common ground to [promote] a politics of solidarity' (Routledge, 2003: 345). In other words, it is during times of crisis and conflict that people's histories and memories – which have perhaps been lying dormant or focused on local day-to-day issues – rise to the surface to create a common front against the political order. The city thus gathers the histories and memories of urban subjects who build and give meaning to the city, form and re-form identities and project these towards a future that – though uncertain – fulfils the historical desires and ambitions of the city's residents.

El Alto – Where Processes and Histories Converge

El Alto is a young city. It was not until 1988 that this city of 650,000 inhabitants gained autonomy from the city of La Paz and was recognised institutionally as a city in its own right (INE, 2001). Before that, the neighbourhoods that are today part of El Alto were the marginal fringes of the city of La Paz that connected it to the rural and mining communities in the department of La Paz. The waves of migrants who arrived in the mid-1980s turned these marginal fringes into an urban centre with its own problems (Sandoval and Sostres, 1989). El Alto is therefore seen as the poorest enclave of the metropolitan area of La Paz and as a racialised space (the ethnic, impoverished other), it is regarded as distant from the modern and more sophisticated city of La Paz.

In regional terms, El Alto functions both as a destination and as a transitional space. It has been the destination for thousands of women and men who – attracted by the city's promise of better services and economic opportunities – have come to settle there. It is also the destination for many of the agricultural (and industrial) products from rural areas, which are sold there and distributed to the various markets in La Paz. At the same time, El Alto is a transitory space where people and products circulate, where identities are taken up, reshaped and rejected, where visions of the future are anchored in multiple ways of defining a past based on collective memories,

30

and on histories of migration and settlement. In short, any discussion of El Alto invites us to address this city as part and product of the socio-economic processes people in Bolivia have lived through in the last few decades, and challenges us to analyse issues of (indigenous and mining) political identities not as isolated variables, but as processes entwined together in time and space.

El Alto is where these contradictions, promises and challenges converge, and where the local and the global meet in everyday life. Day-to-day activities are one of the important elements that inform the social relations and determine political actions in El Alto. On the one hand, these social relations and local political organisations are fused together with the histories and memories 'brought' by the migrants who make up this city (Albó, Sandoval and Greaves, 1981; Sandoval and Sostres, 1989). On the other, economic activities – in the way in which they entwine with the day-to-day – serve as a nexus between the state's requirements with regard to the global market economy, the institutional infrastructure that safeguards its stability and civil society's expectations of the state (Arbona, 2003). The difficult social situation is thus one of the main elements that inform how the people of El Alto build political spaces on which to organise and build the city. It is in this broad context of a city with multiple wellsprings of political identities, histories of settlement and collective memories that we can locate the neighbourhood of Santiago II and analyse its particular features.

Histories and Memories of the Santiago II Neighbourhood

Santiago II is one of the neighbourhoods in the south of the city where many of the relocated miners settled. Like other miners' neighbourhoods (Senkata, 21 de diciembre, Ciudad Satélite), Santiago II developed with minimal support from the municipal government and reflects the same lack of infrastructure and difficult social conditions as the rest of El Alto. The area that today includes the neighbourhood of Santiago II used to be known as Cupilupaca, a highland rural community. The availability of cheap land here and its location relatively close to the seat of government had aroused the interest of several miners' unions as far back as the 1960s. With the support of the National Council for Miners' Housing (Consejo Nacional de Vivienda Minera – COVIMIN), the unions bought up much of the rural community's land (about 87 hectares) when the miners' movement was at its peak at the end of the 1960s.[8] By 1972, Santiago II already had its first residents, although the neighbourhood was not recognised by the municipal government until 28 February 1979 (Municipal Resolution 374/79). Life in the area in those first few years was hard and people had to make many sacrifices, as there were no basic services whatsoever. One former miners' leader and ex-president of the neighbourhood association tells how the miners organised to obtain plots of land:

> The workers got organised in a cooperative with, let's say, about 50 people. These 50 people said, let's organise groups to buy ourselves plots of

8 To be eligible for the benefits of COVIMIN, the worker needed to have a good job and had to have been working for a certain number of years.

31

land somewhere in the country, some said in Cochabamba, others said in La Paz or El Alto. After that they appointed a committee, which had [the responsibility] of getting hold of the cheapest plots of land in a good location. [Once they had found the land] they informed the workers, we've got [this land] for so many bolivianos, we have to put in so much. [Then, if] the worker couldn't afford to pay the quota, they borrowed from COMIBOL [the Bolivian Mining Corporation], they borrowed [...] the money to buy. The council [COVIMIN] took charge of the land under a mortgage, and the worker would pay in money every month until they'd paid the whole cost of the land. [Once the mortgage was paid] the plot of land was put in the worker's name. (JM, October 2005)

JM account describes the key role played by the miners' organisations in buying plots of land in the main cities. The role of COVIMIN was crucial, although the account also reflects how the miners' organisations transcended the mining camps. But the living conditions they found in the places they migrated to did not necessarily match up to what they might have imagined the city to be like. This was certainly the case in Santiago II, as described by a woman who was one of the neighbourhood's first residents:

Most of us relocated mining families had no house, we had nothing, we were living in tents. All we had were our little plots of land. Then we got organised with other people, as a few more were arriving by then. We said, the first thing we need to get is water, and we brought in just one pipe, as far as where the market is now. That was the first standpipe in Santiago II, and we all took our water from there. The sad thing is that not much water came out – it was only at night that there was anything more than a trickle. So we had to go at night to collect water. We used to fill up a barrel, and that was our water supply. (NS, November 2005)

The harsh living conditions encountered by the first residents of Santiago II illustrate how Supreme Decree 21060 and 'relocation' caught many mining families unprepared. While some families had managed to obtain a plot of land and build their home, the vast majority of those who came to Santiago II had only the plot. This intensely difficult situation was the experience of the majority of new residents of El Alto. To some extent, they were able to deal with these adverse conditions thanks to the 'spirit of solidarity' they brought from the mining camps to the new locality. The way in which plots of land were obtained helped to maintain a certain social cohesion that enabled people to set up local organisations to address the day-to-day challenges. The fact that the mining families started their life in the city alongside people from other mines as well as companions from the same mining camp was an important factor in the organisation of this neighbourhood:

Here where I live in street number 9 where the people from the private companies, further down were our colleagues who used to work in Chojlla

[mine], then near the entrance were the colleagues from Pulacayo [mine], next to the people from Huanuni. The colleagues from Colquiri [mine] used to live up there, and further up were the colleagues from the South Central Council. Around here are those of us who came from Caracoles [mine]. (ML, November 2005)

The testimonies presented in this section reflect the processes of segregation and integration that have informed the construction of the city of El Alto. On the one hand, the construction and organisation of the city of El Alto took place in a context of segregation, as many of these local processes arose as a result of state roll-back. In other words, El Alto is the result of the restructuring policies that encouraged people who were segregated and discriminated against to gather together. On the other hand, the process of migration to and settlement in El Alto implies a certain degree of integration in a city where political spaces and identities were developed. This has been one area in which histories and memories of struggle in the mines and settlement in Santiago II have been critical in the processes of 'translating' miners' political identities and what it meant to live in a mining camp. It is in this sense that (miners') political identities had an influence when the time came to organise the neighbourhood and the political spaces that define it, while these spaces were pivotal in reframing what it means to be a miner. The next section will look at this in more depth as it analyses the mining legacy in the ways of organising Santiago II.

The Mining Camp Legacy in the Organisation of Santiago II

In Bolivia, the miners have traditionally been considered the vanguard of a national revolutionary class (Nash, 1992; García-Linera, 1999). It was in the mines that an ideological apparatus was constructed and used as the basis for attempts to organise the Bolivian state, with varying degrees of success and failure (Sanabria, 2000).[9] This leading role in Bolivian politics (post 1952) was attacked and eroded following the implementation of Supreme Decree 21060 (Dunkerley, 1990; García-Linera, 2000). But despite the attacks on the miners' union movement and its collapse, histories and

---

9 It is worth pointing out that the construction of the miners' ideological apparatus had a strong foreign influence that stressed the construction of a proletarian identity and disdained indigenous identities. In some ways, this tension still persists in El Alto. But other authors, such as Patzi, argue that 'a person was a worker because that person was indigenous' (Patzi, 2003: 258). This reveals how labour discrimination is concentrated upon indigenous people, although they do not enjoy the social/political benefits of the working class, and further, if they wanted to belong – in some way – to the working class, they had to disguise their indigenous roots. Living in El Alto therefore highlights the indigenous dimensions of identity, without necessarily leading people to relinquish class identity. For more information on this subject, see Nash (1979) and Quispe (2004).

memories persist in the (re)framing and (re)shaping of a political identity in the places where they relocated:[10]

> Here in Santiago II there are thousands of us mine workers who have come here and we still have that revolutionary essence, we still think about politics. Our children are the same. That is what enabled us to come from the mines to live in the city and put up with these material conditions we are living in while maintaining our revolutionary essence. [...] We got our best education in the plenary meetings and congresses – they were the university that trained us. To listen to the speeches by [Federico and Filemón] Escobar, [Simón] Reyes, and comrade [Juan] Lechín was to get an education there and then – they were our university professors. (JM, October 2005)

As this testimony indicates, the mining legacy – 'the revolutionary essence' – has one of its sources in the miners' assembly meetings and congresses where the issues of the day were analysed and political strategies were discussed. It was in these congresses that leaders and rank and file miners debated ideological lines and discussed the best ways to push forward the revolutionary struggle were discussed. But, as the following testimony indicates, the assemblies were just one of the political spaces in the mining camps where political identities were shaped:

> In the mines, we weren't given classes and we didn't study the practice and strategy of the struggle; instead, it was the workers' own lived experience and their spontaneity, their determination. We used to organise an assembly. We would get a whole range of ideas and the most feasible would be implemented. So it was nothing out of the ordinary. The most important thing was having the will and doing things in keeping with events, and we have implemented that here [in Santiago II] – people had to have the will to fight, the will to work, at the beginning. (JM, October 2005)

These testimonies suggest how the congresses and lived experiences in the mining camps became essential elements in the formation of miners' political identities. They also suggest where the ideological apparatus that informed struggles against the state came from and how it emerged. Thus, and as Hale (1997) suggests, these locations (congresses, assemblies and everyday life in the mining camps) became critical spaces for the development and convergence of political identities that, when the miners were

---

10 The position taken here differs from that of Gill (1997), who argued that these efforts to remember collectively are a way of evading the precarious circumstances of the re-located miners' lives. According to our interviews, memory for these relocated men and women is a way of dealing with this difficult situation and continuing their efforts – begun in the mining camps – to participate in political changes in the country.

dispersed, spread to the cities and communities where they and their families settled (Crabtree, 2005). These in turn became the social platform on which local organisation strategies were developed, drawing on the histories and memories of the relocated families who shared these histories and memories with new generations and people who came from other places.

Relocation served to inject (or form) local political entities with histories and memories of the miners' struggle. This does not mean that the places in El Alto where they settled were devoid of any sort of histories and memories of struggle of their own, or that the miners simply imposed their views of the world. The point is that the relocated miners had a great influence because of their political identities and experiences of organisation and struggle. In the particular case of Santiago II, the way in which the neighbourhood is organised is a strong reflection of how the mining camps were organised. The following testimonies reveal the connections and continuities between the forms of organisation in the mining camps and Santiago II:

> The council of delegates represented comrades who worked down the mine, first shift. What do I mean by first shift? Workers who went in at eleven at night and came out at eight in the morning. Each shift had a delegate. Inside the mine there weren't just the workers doing the actual mining or whatever, there was also the machinery section that was in charge of the maintenance of the machinery, compressors, winches and all that, and they also had their delegate. Then there were delegates from the supply store, the hospital, the school and everywhere else, so that everyone in the camp and the mine had their representative. (JM, October 2005)

The trade union not only covered the territory of the camp, but also brought together all the different functions inside it. This same process of functional and territorial agglutination under an assembly-style form of organisation is reflected in Santiago II:

> We've organised things in the same way here in Santiago II, but instead of sections, we said first of all we only have the Neighbourhood Association Committee here, nothing else. Then we introduced the system of street delegates. Our streets are 1 kilometre long, so we got two delegates for each street, one from the north side and the other from the south. There are more than 30 streets, so we have about 60 delegates. When there's no need to hold an assembly, we give them reports, we tell them what we have to do. When there's some danger, when there's some matter that has to be dealt with, we call them and we say we need to have an assembly. But it's not just that – they also become active leaders of the union organisation. That way of working has served us well in everything the neighbourhood association does, not just during the most difficult times, but also in demanding street paving, water, electricity and other basic needs. But also for standing up and protesting against the government, which is the most important thing. (JM, October 2005)

35

These processes of learning and organisation by miners found a particular location in Santiago II, where mining identities were reframed on the basis of their histories and memories (Jelin, 2001). The ways in which the residents of Santiago II translated and (to a certain extent) reproduced forms of organising spaces and functions in the neighbourhood highlight the implications of the neoliberal project at the local level. This took place at a time of the social cohesion the miners speak of when they describe how precarious employment challenged the political organisation of the neighbourhood encouraging individuals to look after their own welfare. Attempts to reproduce the forms of organisation used in the mining camps ran up against a 'wider radius of action that could not be controlled' in the same way as in the mining camps. Life in the city, particularly in the circumstances encountered by the relocated miners, carried the threat that the settlement's 'cultural meanings' would break down (Gill, 1997). It was not until the times of crisis that histories and memories rose to the surface to challenge neoliberal principles and the convergence spaces gained in substance.

Testimonies of Crisis and Struggle

The events of October 2003 were the culmination of several weeks of confrontations between various local political entities and elements of the institutional infrastructure. During the second week of September 2003, El Alto witnessed the first marches and blockades in reaction to a municipal government resolution to establish a land registry system to regulate transactions in real estate. Going by the name of Maya y Paya (one and two in Aymara), this municipal resolution (090/2003) met with rejection by the people of El Alto, under the leadership of FEJUVE. They argued that the proposed regulations were nothing but a strategy to 'take more money away from the poor' (*Prensa Alteña*, 2003a; *La Razón*, 2003a).[11] The protests took the form of blockades on El Alto's main roads and after 48 hours they achieved their objective: the municipal government revoked the resolution (*El Diario*, 2003a). This victory energised the FEJUVE (and the COR) and spurred its leaders on to make statements about other national issues, although it also highlighted a certain antagonism and estrangement between leaders and the grassroots, as some leaders were seen as complicit with the institutional infrastructure. This was a crucial moment in the formation of newly emerging political spaces, as social forces managed to unite around a common goal. These discourses and events also placed the military forces in a state of alert (*El Diario*, 2003b; *La Razón*, 2003b).

---

11 It is worth pointing out that this had its roots in the events of February 2003 when an attempt was made to introduce a system of income tax. At the same time, the police organised a revolt, demanding higher wages. The protests reached their peak with violent clashes between the police and military forces, and the burning down of several buildings belonging to political parties, central government and the municipal government of El Alto. For a good summary of the continuities and contrasts in the protests that have taken place in Bolivia since 2000, see Cajías (2004).

In parallel to the events of September in El Alto, a series of protests in Omasuyos province in the department of La Paz acted as the other spark that ignited the massive October protests. A series of road blockades in the town of Warisata in protest against the government resulted in a military offensive that left four people dead (*Pulso*, 2003b). They were killed in the course of a military operation that sought to rescue some tourists who had been trapped by the blockades in the town of Sorata (*Pulso*, 2003a). The news that the military had killed civilians while assisting foreign tourists reinforced the view that the Sánchez de Lozada administration did not put the interests of the Bolivian people first. The deaths revealed the government's inability to manage the failures of its policies without violence and the public's impatience with the fact that the government did not deliver on its promises to improve their difficult situation (Gómez, 2004).

The October protests made evident the spaces and moments in which the tensions generated by the neoliberal project started to create ruptures in society. These ruptures were not only evident in the collapse of the state's margin of legitimacy, but also in the sidelining of the local political entities in El Alto that had historically organised protests against the state (Arbona, 2005). By the time the marches, blockades and massacres began, the leaders of the main local political organisations – COR and FEJUVE – were no longer able to play their leadership role (*Prensa Alteña*, 2003b). As the violence and the number of people killed by the military forces increased, the different neighbourhoods themselves became centres of local leadership, each responding to the histories and memories of their residents. Together, these local areas formed the 'neighbourhood networks'. The neighbourhood networks in El Alto played a crucial role in connecting local tensions magnified by what the people of El Alto saw as a political regime committed to the reproduction of inequality (Mamani, 2005). The neighbourhood networks also drew attention to the high level of organisation of El Alto's residents, who were both focused on everyday lives in their neighbourhoods and immersed in the political life of the city (Tapia, 2001).

It was in this context – as people in the various neighbourhoods lived through these times of crisis – that the different histories and memories of the city's residents rose to the surface in the formation of political spaces for action. As the following testimonies show, the harsh lives led by miners and the forms of organisation in the mines created guidelines for what to do when the time came to confront the army:

> Inside the mine we never knew if it was day or night. Outside the mine we knew what it was like to be shot by military bullets. That's where we got our experience, where we lost our fear. We used to tell our children, our nephews and nieces, we told everyone in our family how we stood up to them. (ML, November 2005)

This testimony is vitally important, as it suggests how day-to-day life in the mines (with its multiple ways of learning and forming political identities) intertwines with the histories of struggle against the forces of the state. The brutal conditions the miners lived in down the mine, where they faced death every day, is used by ML as a point of reference to explain the connection between histories and memories of struggle and

the time of crisis and violence they lived through during the events of October 2003. These histories and memories of struggle (and the way they have been transmitted) are keys to understanding how the residents of Santiago II organised and confronted the military forces.

The forms of organisation and struggle during the October protests illustrate how political identities were reframed, as shown by the formation of convergence spaces. These spaces of solidarity were one of the forms of struggle that rose to the surface during the time of crisis, following the collapse of FEJUVE and other local political organisations. The neighbourhood association took on an autonomous local leadership role, forming what Mamani (2005) describes as neighbourhood micro-governments:

> People answered the Neighbourhood Association's call, which I hadn't really expected. We thought we had lost that fighting spirit we had in the mines. But the problem in October made people remember again. We had always said that one day we would re-enact our struggles in the mines. People responded well, without being pressured in any way – it was a voluntary, spontaneous action. It is worth remembering how people responded, not just by being physically present but with all the work they did. (JM, October 2005)

Grassroots control of the different spaces in Santiago II was the manifestation of how localised political identities were reframed, based on histories and memories of the mines.[12] As Hale (1997) points out, social organisation based on street delegates shows how these political identities take shape in a local space and emphasise 'memories, consciousness and practices'. But it also highlights how these political identities – and everything they bring with them – rise to the surface at times of crisis and conflict to challenge the institutional infrastructure. JM goes on to explain how people organised in Santiago II.

> The association controlled things through the street delegates and each street made sure that the trenches were dug, so it was like a decision taken by a local government. We took control in our neighbourhood, everything was under control. We shut all the shops, bars, drinking and gaming places, we dug trenches, we made bonfires, everything, all of it, controlled by the Neighbourhood Association. (JM, October 2005)

---

12 There is an implicit debate between those who argue that the actions taken during the October protests were based on 'authoritarian' methods of participation and those who maintain that these strategies were expressions of rural-indigenous forms of organisation in which the individual takes responsibility for the collective decision (Patzi, 2003; Lazar, 2006). Both generalisations are premature, and a rigorous empirical study of this particular issue is needed. Specific studies of this issue are required before a more evidence-based conclusion can be reached.

> We had all sorts of committees, self-defence committees, supplies committees, strike committees too, all under the leadership of the neighbourhood association. The committees became like core groups who coordinated their work with the leaders of the Neighbourhood Association. The association gave instructions to each committee so that they could coordinate with the people and with the Neighbourhood Association at the same time. (JM, October 2005)

The delegation of responsibilities to various committees at a time of crisis shows how a neighbourhood network is organised. Other neighbourhoods – which had their own forms of organisation – interlocked to give the city and its citizens the strength they needed to confront the military forces. Several different committees were set up and run at the city block level, replicating the neighbourhood association structure. This reflects 'fundamental aspects such as assembly-type practices, the use of "trade union democracy", the search for consensus and internal cohesion' (Cajías, 2004: 22). The constant assembly meetings to reflect on the events reveal how these convergence spaces formed, based on the miners' histories and memories. As well as ways to defy and confront the military forces, one of the Santiago II residents' main concerns was how to meet their basic needs in a crisis situation:

> When we were in the gas war, we organised ourselves here so that we didn't run out of either bread or cooking gas, because we gave the bakeries set times to bake the bread and told them how much to bake – ten loaves per family, say. (NS, November 2005)

These testimonies of crisis, struggle and organisation demonstrate how political identities based on the miners' histories and memories were essential to the organisation of convergence spaces. At the same time, these convergence spaces became contestatory political spaces, which were the roots that nourished the October 2003 protests.

Conclusion

The histories and memories of the relocated miners in the Santiago II neighbourhood of El Alto were vitally important not only when the neighbourhood was organised and built, but also when the time came to confront the state. Drawing on testimonies, this article has unpacked the ways in which the relocated families built and organised their neighbourhood and how they reframed their identities of struggle in times of crisis. This reframing of identities served as the basis for developing spaces for political action and organising political goals.

In short, the organisation of these convergence spaces during times of crisis demonstrates the ways in which identities that are excluded and discriminated against come together in cities, and how they unite to challenge the political order. These testimonies also bring to light the role of the city in joining and connecting multiple identities that

have historically been excluded and discriminated against, and show how these (re-)encounters served to form contestatory political spaces. This is why there cannot be social change (revolution) without change in the city, and there cannot be change in the city without change in everyday life (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]). NS encapsulates the important role played by the miners in everyday struggles and in times of crisis:

> It's like when steel is tempered to make it more useful – those things have been useful. That's why I say they may have destroyed mining, they may have divided the people, but where there's the blood of a miner there's the seed of a warrior. Because at the end of the day the ones who understand things most clearly, the ones who have seen what things are really like with their own eyes, are the miners, the labourers, the factory workers, the proletariat. (NS, November 2005)

In part, the roots of Evo Morales's victory can be traced directly to the day-to-day struggles and the events of October 2003 in El Alto. Morales's electoral victory in 2005 was the result of a strategy that brings together the contestatory identities of indigenous and trade union groups. The testimonies of men and women who have built this neighbourhood and live there illustrate how the relocated miners have forged one important strand of this city's identity. Their histories and memories of organisation and struggle were crucial. The forms of organisation in the mining camps had a huge influence on the ways in which the neighbourhood association was organised, and particularly how the miners' strategies of struggle against the state were re-enacted and reframed.

Acknowledgements

References

Abercrombie, T. (1998) *Pathways of Memory and Power: Ethnography and History among an Andean People*. University of Wisconsin Press: Madison.

Albó, X., Sandoval, G. and Greaves, T. (1981) *Chukiyawu: la cara aymara de La Paz. Cabalgando entre dos mundos*. CIPCA: La Paz.

Appadurai, A. (2001) 'Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics'. *Environment & Urbanisation* 13(2): 23–43.

Arbona, J. (2003) *Ver y hacer política en El Alto: capacidades políticas y actividades económicas*. Documentos de Trabajo. PNUD/UNDP: La Paz.

Arbona, J. (2005) 'Los límites de los márgenes: organizaciones políticas locales y las jornadas de octubre de 2003 en El Alto, Bolivia'. *Nueva Sociedad* 197: 6–15.

Arbona, J. (2006) 'Fracasos y rupturas neo-liberales: El Alto – octubre 2003', in N. Robbins (ed.) *Conflictos Políticos y Movimientos Sociales en Bolivia*. La Paz: Plural, 47–60.

Arbona, J. (2007) 'Neo-liberal Ruptures: Local Political Entities and Neighbourhood Networks in El Alto, Bolivia'. *GeoForum* 38(1): 127–137.

Arze, C. (1993) *Políticas de estabilización y reformas del estado en el programa de ajuste boliviano*. CEDLA: La Paz.

Auza, V. (2004) *Memoria testimonial de la 'guerra del gas'*. Caritas: La Paz.

Brenner, N. (2000) 'The Urban Question as a Scale Question: Reflections on Henri Lefebvre, Urban Theory and the Politics of Scale'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24: 361–378.

Cajías, M. (2004) 'El poder de la memoria: articulaciones ideológico-culturales en los movimientos sociales bolivianos'. *Barataria* 1: 18–28.

Castells, M. (1983) *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*. University of California Press: Berkeley.

Conaghan, C. and Malloy, J. (1997) 'Democracia y neoliberalismo en Perú, Ecuador y Bolivia'. *Desarrollo Económico* 36(144): 867–890.

Crabtree, J. (2005) *Perfiles de la protesta: política y movimientos sociales en Bolivia*. PIEB: La Paz.

Dunkerley, J. (1990) Political Transition and Economic Stabilisation: Bolivia, 1982–1989. Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, Research Papers.

El Diario (2003a) 'El Alto acató paro cívico declarado por la Fejuve'. 16 September.

El Diario (2003b) 'Ciudad de El Alto paraliza actividades por paro cívico'. 2 October.

Escobar, A. (1995) *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.

García-Linera, A. (1999) *Reproletarización: nueva clase obrera y desarrollo del capital industrial en Bolivia (1952–1998)*. Muela del Diablo: La Paz.

García-Linera, A. (2000) 'La muerte de la condición obrera del Siglo XX. La marcha minera por la vida', in A. García Linera, R. Gutiérrez, R. Prada and L. Tapia (eds) *El retorno de la Bolivia plebeya*. Muela del Diablo: La Paz, 13–50.

Gill, L. (1997) 'Relocating Class. Ex-miners and Neoliberalism in Bolivia'. *Critique of Anthropology* 17(3): 293–312.

Goldstein, D. (2004) *The Spectacular City: Violence and Performance in Urban Bolivia*. Duke University Press: Durham.

Gómez, L. (2004) *El Alto de pie: una insurrección aymara en Bolivia*. Comuna: La Paz.

Green, D. (2003) *Silent Revolution: The Rise and Crisis of Market Economics in Latin America*. Monthly Review: New York.

Hale, C. (1997) 'Cultural Politics of Identity in Latin America'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26: 567–590.

Harris, O. and Albó, X. (1984) *Montoneras y guardatojos: campesinos y mineros en el norte de Potosí*. CIPCA: La Paz.

Harvey, D. (1997) 'Social Process and Spatial Form', in N. Jewson and S. McGregor (eds) *Transforming Cities: Contested Governance and New Spatial Divisions*. Routledge: London, 19–27.

Hylton, F. and Thomson, S. (2005) 'The Checkered Rainbow'. *New Left Review* 35: 41–64.

Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE) (2001) *Bolivia: características de la población*. INE, La Paz.

Jelin, E. (2001) 'Exclusión, memorias y luchas políticas', in D. Mato (ed.) *Estudios latinoamericanos sobre cultura y transformaciones sociales en tiempos de globalización*. CLACSO: Buenos Aires, 91–110.

Kohl, B. (2003) 'Restructuring Citizenship in Bolivia: El Plan de Todos'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27(2): 337–351.

Kohl, B. and Farthing, L. (2006) *Impasse in Bolivia: Neo-liberal Hegemony and Popular Resistance*. Zed Press: London.

Lander, E. (2005) 'Ciencias sociales: saberes coloniales y eurocéntricos', in E. Lander (ed.) *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales, perspectivas latinoamericanas*. CLACSO: Buenos Aires, 11–40.

La Razón (2003a) 'Los vecinos de El Alto cercaron a La Paz por dos formularios'. 16 September.

La Razón (2003b) 'La Paz queda cada vez más aislada por el bloqueo de las carreteras'. 22 September.

Lazar, S. (2006) 'El Alto, Ciudad Rebelde: Organisational Bases for Revolt'. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 25(2): 183–199.

Lefebvre, H. (2003 [1970]) *The Urban Revolution*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

Magnusson, W. (2000) 'Politicising the Global City', in E. Isin (ed.) *Democracy, Citizenship, and the Global City*. Routledge: London, 289–306.

Mamani, P. (2005) *Microgobiernos barriales: levantamiento de la ciudad de El Alto (octubre 2003)*. CADES: El Alto.

Mitchell, D. (2003) *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. Guilford: New York.

Nash, J. (1979) *We Eat the Mines, and the Mines Eats Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines*. Columbia University Press: New York.

Nash, J. (1992) 'Interpreting Social Movements: Bolivian Resistance to Economic Conditions Imposed by the International Monetary Fund'. *American Ethnologist* 19(2): 275–293.

Patzi, F. (2003) Rebelión indígena contra la colonialidad y la transnacionalización de la economía: triunfos y vicisitudes del movimiento indígena desde 2000 a 2003. In F. Hylton, F. Patzi, S. Serulnikov, S. Thomson (eds) *Ya es otro tiempo el presente: cuatro momentos de insurgencia indígena*. Muela del Diablo: La Paz, 199–279.

Peck, J. and Tickell, A. (2002) Neoliberalising Space. *Antipode* 34(3): 380–404.

Prensa Alteña (2003a) 'Formularios maya y paya unió a todos los Alteños contra el MIR'. 2(14).

Prensa Alteña (2003b) 'La sombra de la guerra civil amenaza al país'. 2(10).

Pulso (2003a) '19 de septiembre ¿comienza otro ciclo? Los "cabreados" vuelven a las calles'. #2, 16 September.

Pulso (2003b) 'Insurgencia civil y ceguera "culpable" del poder'. #2, 20 October.

Quisbert, M. (2003) FEJUVE El Alto (1990–1998): Dilemas del Clientelismo Colectivo en un Mercado Politico en Expansion. THOA: La Paz.

Quispe, M. (2004) *De Ch'usa marka (pueblo vacio) a jach'a marka (pueblo grande): pequeñas historias contadas desde el alma misma de El Alto*. Plural: La Paz.

Rappaport, J. (1990) *The Politics of Memory: Native Historical Interpretation in the Colombian Andes*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Routledge, P. (2003) 'Convergence Spaces: Process Geographies of Grassroots Globalization Networks'. *Transactions: Institute of British Geographers* 28: 333–349.

Sanabria, H. (2000) 'Resistance and the Art of Domination: Miners and the Bolivian State'. *Latin American Perspectives* 27(1): 56–81.

Sandoval, G. and Sostres, M. (1989) *La cuidad prometida: pobladores y organizaciones sociales en El Alto*. ILDIS: La Paz.

Scott, J. (1990) *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Yale University Press: New Haven.

Stefanoni, P. and Do Alto, H. (2006) *Evo Morales, de la coca al Palacio: una oportunidad para la izquierda indígena*. Malatesta: Buenos Aires.

Tapia, L. (2001) 'Subsuelo político', in A. García-Linera, R. Gutiérrez, R. Prada and L. Tapia (eds.) *Pluriverso: teoría política Boliviana*. Muela del Diablo: La Paz, 111–146.

Tapia, L. (2002) 'Movimientos sociales, movimientos societales y los no lugares de la política', en R. Gutiérrez, A. García, R. Prada y L. Tapia (eds) *Democratizaciones plebeyas*. Muela del Diablo: La Paz, 25–72.

Thiele, R. (2003) 'The Social Impact of Structural Adjustment in Bolivia'. *Journal of International Development* 15: 299–319.

Yashar, D. (2005) *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Post-Liberal Challenge*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.