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Overflow: The experience of an escalating chi'xi revolution in Bolivia

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ABSTRACT

The article describes the escalation of protests during the 2003 Gas War in El Alto, Bolivia, an event that led to the overthrow of a president and paved the road for the election of Evo Morales as Bolivia's first indigenous president. By means of the local idiom of 'overflow' it is sustained that while the Gas War grew out of the everyday it also exceeded this reality and it produced a qualitative new reality, namely the becoming of the urban indigenous as a relevant political subject. Further, the ethnography indicates how people's comprehension of past, present and future has been reconfigured in this new era, and it is argued that the Gas War and contemporary Bolivian politics, including the end of Morales' administration, can only partially be understood by means of conventional political theory because it simultaneously is and is not a revolution.

KEYWORDS

Revolution; Bolivia; overflow; El Alto; Indigeneity; urban

Introduction

One late evening in August 2007 my friend Tomás and I were walking in La Ceja, the buzzing city centre of El Alto, the poor and mainly indigenous highland city located at the outskirts of Bolivia's capital La Paz. Tomás was a proud Alteño and Aymara [highland indigenous people] in his early thirties, married, and the father of two sons. He was trained as an accountant and had previously worked at a bank but he had left this job so he could join a local NGO where I also participated. Tomás was happy with his job and believed that this work contributed to a positive transformation for the inhabitants of his city and Bolivia. This evening I had accompanied him to the premises of the municipality where we had showed a documentary film on Che Guevara in a solidarity act with Cuba and Venezuela. Discussing the documentary, our conversation soon turned to contemporary Bolivia and in particular the Constituent Assembly that at the time was taking place in the city of Sucre. Tomás followed the events closely. He was concerned but he also felt certain that the Constituent Assembly would become a success and that we were witnessing the birth of a New Bolivia. Like the great majority of the Alteños at the time, he was supporter of Evo Morales and the MAS government, but for him the revolution had not been initiated with Evo Morales' election in December 2005. Rather, the transformation of Bolivia had manifestly begun in El Alto during the so-called Gas War in October 2003 when the

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Alteños in coordination with peasant organizations and mine workers had risen up against then-president Sanchez de Lozada's plans to sell gas to the US through a Chilean port. He had been in the streets and he had felt fear and outrage when the government sent in troops to dissolve the road blockades and ended up killing people. He had also since felt the pride of belonging to a city that had overthrown the president, and in this sense paved the road to Evo Morales' historic 2005 election as the country's first indigenous president. As we walked Tomás made a gesture with his arms pointing towards the buzzing city with its extravagant 'cholets'¹ and halfway finished brick buildings, its chaotic traffic jam and many cholita street hawkers. He said: 'El Alto is the world's most revolutionary city. At any time we can make a revolution in Bolivia'.

Tomás has since passed away under tragic circumstances so our conversation can only continue in my head. I find his words intriguing because he combines the idea of revolution in terms of an urban immanence ('El Alto is the world's most *revolutionary city*') with the more common notion of revolution as an event ('at any time we can make *a revolution* in Bolivia'). In this way locus (El Alto) and temporality ('any time') are entangled. I think his understanding of revolution is representative of how much socio-political conceptualization sits awkwardly with Andean reality because while it applies, it only does so partially. In this case, his notion of revolution both relates to the Western event-based notion of revolution and exceeds this conception. With this point of departure, in this article I explore the complexity of defining and recognizing the revolution *a la Boliviana* in and from El Alto. In doing so I take a step back from Tomás post factum descriptions and situate the analysis in people's experiences of confusion and uncertainty during the events, here represented by the narratives of my friend Maria. In these narratives people repeatedly use a phrasing saying that 'las bases rebalsaron a los dirigentes' [the bases overflowed the leadership]. Overflow refers to the lived experience of the escalation of events in unpredicted ways, in this case when the number of people in the streets and events begin to take a course of its own without any clear leadership. In this article I use overflow in two interrelated senses, first, as a matter of acceleration of events, for instance so that violence generates more violence, and second, as a vernacular for what is termed escalation in the introduction to this special issue (see also Højer et al. 2018). According to this theory, accelerating quantitative growth of something (that is, protests or brick houses of poor urbanities) does not only imply that a process is speeded up and expanding but also that a qualitative transformation is generated, thus producing a change in the change and hence a new social scenario. In line with the escalation theory I argue that the overflow of the Gas War indeed produced a qualitative new reality, namely the becoming of the urban indigenous as relevant political subjects. Further, I sustain that this new social scenario has remained in place, even after the recent fall of president Morales and the, to many, disappointing outcome of his 'process of change'.

Gas War: the acceleration of protests

El Alto is situated in 4000 metres of altitude on the high plateau with a stunning view from above of Bolivia's capital La Paz. Its city centre is placed nearby the strategic site from where the 1781 indigenous siege of colonial La Paz led by Tupac Katari and Bartolina Sisa's took place. Katari and Sisa's revolt did not succeed and Katari was violently killed by dismemberment by the Spaniard, but before his death he famously announced that

he would 'return as millions'. More than two hundred years later this site has grown into the city of El Alto. Due to continuous migration from the mining areas and the indigenous countryside to the city El Alto has become Bolivia's second largest city and today it houses around one million people with an indigenous majority. Hence, when the *Alteños* rose in 2003 a sense that history was repeating itself in the form of yet another indigenous siege of La Paz did not go unnoticed. Unlike Tupac Katari the *Alteños* succeeded, insofar as then president Sanchez de Lozada resigned his presidency and fled to Miami after weeks of unrest, but during the Gas War, in and around El Alto 69 people were killed by the military and around 500 wounded. With the purpose of showing how this accelerating growth in protests eventually escalated into a qualitatively new reality I here present an abbreviated account of events:

When the protests began in September there was little to indicate that events would take such a dramatic turn. Initially the *marchas* and *bloqueos* formed part of the broader pattern of political unrest that had characterized Bolivia since the 2000 Cochabamba Water War. Most analysts seem to identify the violent confrontations between police and the military in the centre of La Paz on 12 and 13 February 2003 as a preamble to the events in October 2003 (Mamani Conde 2006; Hylton and Thompson 2007). The February protests were in reaction to the government's IMF-directed decision to impose a 12.5% tax on incomes greater than 110 USD a month in an attempt to reduce the national budget deficit (Hylton and Thompson 2007, 108). As a reaction to this measure, the police went on strike, and people supporting the strike stoned the now unprotected presidential palace. The event led to fights between the striking police against the military police and palace guards, resulting in the death of 10 policemen and four military men. The riots spread rapidly to El Alto where groups of neighbours set fire to the municipality, an event that journalist Mamani Conde has termed an expression of 'popular fury that overflowed into burnings and death' (Mamani Conde 2006, 11, my translation from Spanish and underscore). Finally, the salary tax was repealed but in August the law of 'Citizens Security', which penalized road blockades with up to eight years in jail, was issued. When protests and strikes broke out again in September 2003 the repeal of the citizens security law was among the many and varied demands including the annulment of the tax law, modification of the law providing for the autonomy of the University of El Alto (UPEA) and rejection of the government's plan to export gas to the USA. *Alteños* also demonstrated against the so-called *maya* and *paya* regulations, which they claimed, constituted an indirect form of taxation on private property. In other words, unrest and discomfort were generalized, but there was as yet no unified agenda among the many protestors.

On 9 September, negotiations between the rural indigenous organizations and the government failed and on 10 September, 1000 Aymara peasants initiated a hunger strike at the premises of the Radio Gabriel in El Alto. On 15 September, the FEJUVE (Federation of Neighbor Association, El Alto) initiated a general strike against the *maya* and *paya* plan, which was withdrawn by mayor Paredes the next day. But meanwhile peasants in the Omasuyo province of La Paz initiated a road blockade in 'defence of the gas' and with El Alto on strike all access in and out of the country's capital was de facto cut off. On 19 September, the 'Coordinadora for the Defence and Recuperation of Gas', led by MAS, Evo Morales and Cochabamba 'Water War' leader Oscar Olivera, staged a protest of 50,000 people in La Paz. However, the conflict only truly accelerated the following

day when the government decided to 'rescue' some 2000 people, among them 70 foreign tourists, whom due to the road blockades were stranded in the picturesque highland village of Sorata. In a spectacular military operation the tourists were rescued in helicopters, but three peasants were killed. As peasants and *Alteños* became aware of the killings, indignation grew and it was agreed to carry out a blockade that was supported by organizations nationwide and on 30th September the COB (Central Workers Union) announced a general strike. Only by then the principal demands were scrapping the plan to sell gas to the USA via Chile and removal of the president and the minister of defence due to his responsibility for the killings of the peasants.

On 8 October, the FEJUVE and the COR (Central Workers Regional) of El Alto called for a general halt to all activity in El Alto and 800 miners from the Huanuni mine marched in to support the cause. The presence of the miners was hugely symbolic, primarily because their participation evoked the memory of the 1952 National Revolution. On 9 October, the first two people died in El Alto as police fired at the striking miners. On 10 October, the *Alteños* took over a gas plant in El Alto with the purpose of cutting of the gas supply to the city of La Paz, and on 11 October, eleven more were killed in a military operation that attempted to bring 37 tanks of gas down to La Paz (Hylton and Thompson 2007, 114), an event that is known by the *Alteños* as the 'convoy of death'. But the bloodiest events of them all took place on 12 October, Columbus Day, so named after the discovery of America. During 12 and 13 October, yet another 54 people lost their lives in El Alto and by the 13th 100,000 protesters had taken the streets of La Paz and the police officers were now waving white flags in order to prevent further confrontations. On 16 October, and in an event that most of my interlocutors describe as a matter of 'overflow' where events simply took place without anyone be able to explain how, train carriages were dragged to block highway access between La Paz and El Alto (so that no tanks could pass through) and on that same day 300,000 people marched down to the city centre of La Paz to demand the resignation of Sanchez de Lozada. By then the military still had orders to prevent the arrival of more miners coming to the city but in the afternoon of 16 October it became known that the military had disobeyed these orders and that the rest of the miners had passed through (Hylton and Thompson 2007, 177). This moment constituted the symbolic end to Sanchez de Lozada's presidency (Dunkerley 2007) and on 17 October the president fled to the USA while vice president Garcia Mesa took over.

This account of events indicates that over a month's time protests grew and events accelerated leading to at least two violent tipping points, namely the killings of peasants on 20th September and the massacre in El Alto on 11–12 October. Only after these events of state violence people began to narrow down demands and assign a more unified and coherent meaning to the protests. Further, the description also indicates how the protests evoked collective memories of previous rebellions and the 1952 National Revolution. In the following ethnographic sections I expand on these points. I describe Maria's experiences during the Gas War and how she struggles to understand its implications while the accelerating events are still unfolding, and I relate this narrative to her reading of past revolutions and *Alteño* life at large in order to show how the Gas War both grew out of the complex everyday life in a city in accelerating growth and by far exceeded this reality and escalated, thus effectively turning El Alto into the revolutionary city Tomás was talking about.

Maria: a revolutionary life

Maria is one of the many anonymous Alteños who participated in the events detailed above and it is fair to say that her life has been radically changed by the revolutionary transformations that followed after 2003. When I first met her in 2007 she lived in the peri-urban northern periphery of El Alto as the oldest daughter of poor Aymara peasants who had migrated to the city. She had indentured 3-years to enter university, but she didn't succeed the test. Yet, Maria is a recognized local leader who participated in youth organizations and her urban Aymara identity had been awoken even before the events of October 2003. Due to her many activities Maria was well positioned to gain a job in the municipality or the MAS structure, and for a time around 2012 she worked in one of the 'sub-alcaldías' of El Alto. Yet she has never been a formal MAS militant and her, at times annoying, tendency to criticism and insistence to denounce corruption within the municipality has probably hampered her possibilities for gaining a stable job in this context. Finally, in 2013 she left El Alto for the Bolivian lowlands where the MAS government favoured the internal colonization by highland indigenous people (and Alteños in particular) because they believed that they could help bringing the revolution to less developed parts of the country. In the lowlands she studied at university and, among other successful professional activities, she since became a TV hostess. While she personally blossomed under the MAS government she was also highly critical of this administration. Today, after the fall of Morales, she declares no alliance neither with the left nor the right wing, but she remains a proud Aymara and Alteña (skype and email communication March 2020).

Maria was just turning 20 years old during October 2003. Her father had been a migrant worker most of her life; first in Bolivia working in coca fields in the Chapare region and later in the textile industry in Argentina. When she was 12 her mother left her in charge of the household and her seven-year-old sister as she left to work in La Paz as a house maid cleaning and looking after other people's children from Monday morning to Saturday afternoon. When I first met the family in 2007 Maria's father had returned to El Alto and worked as tailor in La Paz and her mother remained working as a maid in La Paz and they had begun building a brick house on a plot they had finally been able to buy after years of renting rooms in different parts of the city. The house did still not have running water and it was situated in a poor and 'dangerous' area that taxi drivers would avoid at night. Not long ago the area had been considered indigenous rural land and sheep still grassed on the hill behind their house, but unavoidably urban constructions, minibuses and pipe lines had begun to dominate the area.

As a young girl Maria was a good and responsible student and she would get up every morning to cook soup for her and her sister. Always, 'soup with vegetables and a "white bone" that gives the taste of meat'. Meat was for Sundays only when her mother returned; sometimes with used clothes from the children she nursed that her '*patrona*' [lady of the house] would send for Maria. Maria hated the used clothes, and sometimes she also felt so much rage against her mother when she could not afford all the things she wished for. Her mother wears traditional *cholita* skirt but when Maria started school her parents cut her long braids off and she has since then dressed *pantalon* [jeans; Western style]. In school it was not allowed to speak Aymara and little by little she could no longer feel comfortable

seeing herself as a traditional Aymara. Yet, unlike some of the other girls she never felt embarrassed by her distinctively indigenous mother.

It was, however, not until she began participating in youth organizations that she began to situate her personal experiences and feelings in relation to broader social structures. At the time she participated in political theatre groups and as a representative of the newly established municipal youth council she had had the opportunity to travel the country meeting other young people from Bolivia and neighbouring countries. It was in this context that she regained confidence in herself as an Aymara subject; even when she considers herself to be an urban Aymara. When she tells me about the many activities she emphasizes the energy that characterized the movements of 2002–2003 and the subsequent period between 2003 and December 2005 when Evo Morales was elected, something that she terms as a matter of ‘excess’ from where many things and forms of change could emerge. In this sense, the events of October 2003 certainly grew out of the tensions entailed in everyday life in this poor and mainly indigenous city.

Experiencing overflow

Despite being politically awoken when the protests begin initially Maria does not think of them as more than mere protests and her memories first dwell on domestic concerns and fear she felt: what will happen? Will the offices at the NGO where she works be looted? Will her mother, be able to make it back home to El Alto? How to manage the household when gas and food run out? How long can we survive on potatoes? Eventually her mother manages to return home, and as the news spread that the army is in street, she sends her to hide money and jewellery so that the soldiers will not steal. ‘This is like state of exception’ [*estado de sitio*] her mother explains letting the daughter understand that although no formal state of siege has been declared events unfold as they did during the dictatorship.

The family is informed by radio and eventually the neighbours of Maria’s zone get out on the street to make bonfires and blockades and her father is the first to leave the house to join in and later the entire family participate until dawn. Being in the street the family not only risks confronting military on the ground. They also fear the helicopter circulating above them: ‘and the helicopter would not stop [circulating] and [my mother] said, you have to take care because they’ll shoot from the helicopter’.

So far, the family acts according to their past experiences of accelerating protests and repression. Figuratively speaking, they (or at least the parents) think that they know the terrain and the possible outcomes of the events. Perhaps it is for this reason that Maria’s mother’s, at the midst of events, is very concerned that she will lose her job because it will be unsafe to return to La Paz Monday morning. Her mother insists that the *patrona* will not understand. How could she know, if everything works normally in La Paz? Maria, however, to her own surprise angrily gets on the phone with the *patrona* and she informs her that her mother will not attend her duties because the *Alteños* are risking their lives [for the sake of the Nation]. At this point of her narration she emphasizes how a collective feeling of pride and solidarity among *Alteños* rose during the siege, and these feelings of being a collective body hint at how the events are now beginning to escalate into a qualitatively new reality. The intense affect of being *Alteño* is, in Maria’s case, sparked by the anonymous voice from a pirate radio:

What I most remember from that day is that there was this radio, it was a pirate radio, and I never really knew how it worked and it didn't have a name. But it [the voice] said, 'neighbors of this district, if you live nearby ... that the military is now in San Roque, take care neighbours, and that people were picking up stones and picks [to defend themselves]. And people were listening to this radio [...] and then around 1 am the man on the radio gives his cell number and ask people to call him and let him know what is going on in their neighborhood [zona], right. And people start calling and telling that they are in this and that neighborhood making barricades and that they are still okay. [...] and then this lady [señora] calls and we come to know that the military is now in San Roque and then there is a little while, and then this voice comes in, who is probably a military man, and he says, 'hey, stop speaking bullshit [huevadas], shut this down', using really strong words, saying [to the commentator] 'why do you lie?', 'nothing is going on' and then ... 'biiip' ... and he hang up on the commentator and then he [the commentator] got scared and his voice started trembling and he said, 'we get this far today with the program, please take care, we'll move forward' and then the signal was off. We don't know which radio it was, who he was, where the signal came from. We don't know.

Next day, news on the deaths started spreading and Maria receives the sad news that an uncle of her has been killed. Protests are strong now and she explains this by saying that '*las bases rebalsaron a los dirigentes*' [the base members overflowed the leadership], meaning that no one is in charge but rather that events simply unfold. It was a moment of escalating overflow.

On 13 October, the family walks all the way to the zone of *Villa Ingenio*, their former zone of residence, where most of the dead had fallen:

We reached the church of Villa Ingenio and there they were [the dead], still without their coffins. They were wrapped, some with flags and people kept on arriving, and people were crying and I was there and my father found my aunt and I was surprised because I had never seen so many dead together. And then there was this lady [*señora*] with her baby all burnt to death [...] I had never imagined that I would see such things ... The pain of these people was my pain; even though you do not know them, the neighbors [el vecino, la vecina], it was painful that they had all died for the same cause. And people were shouting, 'the gringo [president Sanchez de Lozada] must pay for this'. [...]

Maria's more personal narrative contrasts Tomás' description. While he situates a clear revolutionary intention to the events of 2003 this is not the case in her more open-ended narration. Here the intensity of the pain and the final mourning of the many dead people spark the revolutionary meaning assigned to the events where the fallen become the martyrs upon whose sacrificial bodies the new Bolivian nation is to be founded. Further, the narrative also leads us to understand that the course of events were not in any way knowable beforehand to Maria and the family. She oscillates between two frameworks of interpretation, namely that of protests, repression and the 'state of exception' that her mother recalls from the dictatorship, and that of the mutation of reality so that El Alto is no longer just the poor, indigenous margin of La Paz but also the country's political centre stage. These realities coexist in tension in the narrative, and during October 2003 Maria is simultaneously a poor girl who worries about potatoes while she tries to avoid falling victim of state violence, *and* a confident urban indigenous young woman fully capable of speaking truth to her mother's mestizo 'patrona' and to overthrow a government when needed (for a similar account of incommensurable realities and interpretations see also Krøijer, this issue). This phenomenological account of the

uncertainty and contradictory experiences that Maria have in the midst of events also offers insight into how we might understand and analyse revolutions in terms of overflow or escalation: while the revolution might be highly performative and indeed a liminal experience (cf. Turner 1967, 1988; Thomassen 2012) it is not a scripted ritual. Rather, as suggested by Sewell (1996, 871) revolutions are composed by spontaneous events where people experience states of liminality and *communitas* that can lead them to appropriate and create new forms of political rituals of sovereignty. While Maria was familiar with protesting she initially feared possible looting and her mother associated the government's actions with the state of exceptions she had endured during the dictatorships of the past. In this sense, events did not only grow out of the everyday of the urban poor, they also by far exceeded it and created a qualitatively new reality that could not have been imagined beforehand. In order for this to occur, an escalating overflow was necessary.

Importantly, the outcomes were not only that the *Alteño* overflow led to the overthrow of the sitting president and that an indigenous candidate would subsequently win a national election. In this sense, the revolution was not the visible event of overthrowing the sitting president, nor 'just' about the subsequent formulation of a new constitution. It was the tangible emergence of a new subject, the (urban) indigenous citizen, and the ways in which this new presence pushed Bolivians (and scholars alike) to approach Bolivian reality and even past revolts and revolutions differently. The Gas War thus radically transformed Maria's perception of herself and she no longer felt limited to a life in the urban margins and a perpetual place at the periphery of the nation-state's political imaginaries. Not only did she, and other young persons like her, become encouraged to venture beyond, the Gas War also implied a geo-political transformation of El Alto into a national and regional reference of rebellion and resistance. In Tomás' words, *the most revolutionary city in the world*.

Recognizing revolutions past and present

The above descriptions underscore the importance of overflow and how the revolutionary events were assigned meaning *post factum*. Yet, the confusion about the meaning of the Gas War cannot be exclusively explained by people's experiences of uncertainty during the moments of overflow. The meaning of events was to an important degree assigned in relation to the fact that the Gas War bore – and was made to bear – symbolic resemblance to historic events and this resemblance arguably magnified its significance. First, the resemblance with the Katari-Sisa revolt appears to have been clear to everyone involved and combined with the *criollo* upper and middle classes historic fear of the *indio* this similarity has probably facilitated the resurgence of indigenous and specifically of Aymara identity at the centre of the political stage. Second, the participation of the Huanuni miners in the protests was highly symbolic because the miners embody the revolutionary figure of the 1952 National Revolution, which among other things had led to universal suffrage. Hence, when the military disobey the government and let the miners march they allow the presence of what was until that moment the paradigmatic revolutionary figure of modern Bolivia. The miners' presence in El Alto hence reaffirmed that the protests were no longer 'just' an Aymara uprising but a national demand for political change (cf. Postero 2007, 5). Further, the massive contemporary participation of peasant and

indigenous population in national politics is indeed also a long-term consequence of the 1952 National Revolution that formally included the indigenous into the polis and implemented land, educational and health reforms that have allowed for geographical and social mobility of the (former) rural indigenous. In this way, political change was made possible due the existence of a more well educated and increasingly urban subject who could effectively denounce the persisting inequality and demand change (cf. Klein 2011).

The Gas War thus brought about a qualitatively new reality, but this reality was as much a backward looking as it was forward looking and it worked to open a new framework for reinterpreting past events in this new light, and as noted by Hylton and Thompson (2007) the Gas War indeed evoked a sense of *pachakuti*, an Andean concept which refers to the overturning of time and space so that a new era can begin. It is my impression that at the time people felt that we were indeed living an era of not just structural political reforms but also of a cosmic reorganization that worked to restore historic injustice against the indigenous and the poor with the potential to even re-equilibrate global postcolonial order. Evidently, any simplistic analysis in this line leans itself to different kinds of ethnic essentialism and during his presidency Evo Morales certainly did not abstain himself for exploring this vein (see Postero 2007, 2017).

In every way, it is insufficient to exclusively analyse the Gas War in a linear time frame with clearly marked before and after the event. Its implications are multitemporal allowing for understanding Bolivia in ways that necessarily reorganize past, present and future into new possible scenarios. At stake are thus issues of continuity and change and of how we can understand the overflow of the Gas War as being both intimately related to the *Alteño* and Bolivian reality and as a radical rescaling of this reality. As indicated in the introduction to this special issue, thinking in terms of escalation allows us to reconsider the event-oriented approach to social transformation with its presupposition of a '... decisive distinction between rupture and structure, before and after' (Højer 2021, 11). My ethnographic material underscores how people engaged this reconfiguration of time and space as a matter of reestablishing what it implies to be Bolivian, also in a historical perspective. In Maria's case these concerns became evident to me one morning in 2008 when we met nearby the site where Tupac Katari's heart is allegedly buried. That day we were attending the inauguration of a 7-metre tall statue of Che Guevara made up of recycled metal scrap. The statue is fascinating because it effectively features Che Guevara yet his facial features strangely resemble those of the highland indigenous population. Maria's reflections however drifted in other directions as she started discussing the Bolivian's ambivalent relationship with the figure of Che given the fact that the *guerillero* was effectively killed in 1964 in Bolivia during an unsuccessful attempt to liberate the Bolivian peasants; a campaign that did not mobilize support from the Bolivian communist party or the peasants at large. She was uncomfortable with this fact, because if the Bolivians were naturally born revolutionaries then why had they not supported Che? Was it possible to think that it was not only the armed forces in coordination with CIA that were responsible for his death? She struggled to make sense of events according to the new official scripted versions of the Bolivians' revolutionary form of being. Her reflections were sparked by the fact that they took place soon after the 40th anniversary of Che's death when Evo Morales had been the first president to pay respects to Che.

Shortly after the inauguration of the statue Maria wrote me an email where she further elaborated on her concerns and told me about a conversation she had had with an old lady who had met Che in Bolivia when she was 16-years-old:

She told us that she had met Che [...] she looked at him and she tells that he looked like a homeless [*indigente*] with filthy clothes as if he was mechanics with long beard and she listened to his discourses about change, he talked about revolution, trying to enhance people's conscience [*concientizar a la gente*], but not many followed his advice [*no muchos le hacian caso*], and even so he never gave up. Until they killed him; she [the old lady] tells that when they killed him, only then people reacted and [realized] that he was right (email communication June 2008).

When I later asked her about this imagine of Che as a homeless filthy man she replied that people did not follow him because they did not know that he was Che. Had he presented himself as Che, people would have followed she reasoned. From this perspective the problem was not – at least exclusively – that the Bolivians were not revolutionary, but that the revolution (here in the form of Che) did not present itself in a recognizable form. In this way, she could explain past failures while maintaining the Bolivian popular subject as inherently revolutionary. From this perspective, the popular and indigenous subject is an atemporal figure that can return in recurrent moments of escalating overflow and it was possible to be immanently revolutionary without the revolution. In this spiral moving perception of history, characteristics of Andean temporality, the 2003 Gas War stood out as a possibility for restoring the historical injustice and violence committed against the indigenous subject and as an opportunity to fulfil the promises of former revolutions. In the early years of Evo Morales' government to most of my *Alteños* interlocutors this felt like a self-evident predicament, and even today many feel that a historic opportunity to 'restore' reality and set things straight has slipped their hands.

Conclusion: Bolivia's *chí'xi* revolution

Revolutions form part of people's imaginaries, desires and fears in Bolivia and elsewhere and the twenty-first century urban indigenous rise and the subsequent election of the continent's first indigenous president have understandably caught the attention. While it indeed *felt* like a revolution (Dunkerley 2007, 149) scholars understandably debated whether we were witnessing a rebellion, an incomplete revolution (Webber 2011) or a novel twenty-first century revolution (Gilly 2009). In this article I have adopted the local idiom of 'overflow' to indicate how the escalation of events into a qualitatively new reality on the one hand grew and accelerated out of the everyday and on the other exceeded this reality. Also, I have underscored how the amount of violence – at least in this case – plays an important part in generating tipping points of further escalation. I have used the notion of overflow as a native term for escalation first, because this is how my interlocutors refers to the turning point in escalating processes and second, because I find this term is fitting in a description of *Alteño* life, characterized by diverse and abundant socio-political practices and histories that can be actualized in many and surprising ways. In this way, El Alto is indeed a kind of socio-material overflow in its own right and it is probably for this reason that an analysis of the Gas War only fits partially the established criteria for a proper revolution. Following for example Arendt's ([1963]

2006) seminal work on political revolutions the Gas War did indeed work to include the formerly excluded (in this case the urban indigenous) as proper citizens into the polis. However, in this liberal account the political realm is perceived as a site of freedom uncontaminated from the social realm. This separation of the social and the political realms is unsustainable in the *Alteño* context where citizenship is predominately exercised through people's collective engagement in social organizations such as Neighbor Committees and trade unions (see for example Lazar 2008; Arbona 2008; Risør 2013, 2016). The Gas War, in other words, did not so much work to include the formerly excluded. Rather it set in motion a rescalation of the very definition of citizenship so that the collectives of (urban) indigenous organizations, neighbourhood associations, etc. could be legitimized as a political locus (and not just the individual liberal subject). This allowed for the positioning of the Andean indigenous subject as the paradigmatic citizen figure under Evo Morales' government. On the other hand, the Gas War undoubtedly also speaks to a Marxist understanding of a socio-political revolution in the sense that the conflicts embedded in the poor urban infrastructures of El Alto unavoidably led to a revolutionary event; something that political theorist Skocpol (1979) defines as social revolution because changes in social and political structure occur in a mutually reinforcing fashion (see also Webber 2011). However, as Maria's narrative indicates, the outcomes of the events were to an important degree unpredictable, and in this sense the Gas War can be understood following the escalation framework rather than the more deterministic marxist framework. Also, my interlocutors' comprehension of revolutionary spatiotemporal immanence in which the past continually 'speaks back' to the present and the future does not easily find room in a Marxist lineal time frame.

It is indeed challenging to theorize profound socio-political transformations in and from a Bolivian perspective because of the country's many intersecting political traditions, spanning from Nationalism, Marxism, Trotskyian inspired syndicalism (cf. Sándor John 2009), guerrillas and indigenous-peasant katarista movements (to mention but the most important influences), diverse socioeconomic forms of subsistence and indigenous and non-indigenous people. In this sense, it is unproductive to simply replace 'revolution' with 'pachakuti' that, as described above, is a cosmological notion that refers to the overturning of time and space. One way to think about the overflow of the Gas War is to consider it simultaneously as a revolution (in liberal and Marxist terms) and as not a revolution in the sense that events, and socio-political practices in Bolivia in general, continually become something else. This argument is inspired by the escalation theory and by my reading of the Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's (2010, 53–76) eloquent elaboration of the Aymara concept of *ch'ixi*. Rivera Cusicanqui uses this concept to describe the Andean mestizo reality in a non-syncretist manner. This concept recognizes that something can be simultaneously black and not black, white and not white, but without being considered grey either. Different realities do in other words coexist and tangle but they do not necessarily become an amalgam. Rather they co-exist, possibly in antagonist mode and possibly in complementary mode.

Rivera Cusicanqui uses the term to characterize Bolivian society but she does not engage in an analysis of processes of social transformation. Yet, it can be productive to adopt a *ch'ixi* inspired heuristics on the Gas War and the MAS government's subsequent 'process of change' as well as the, to many surprising, fact that the MAS government opted to continue a neoliberal extractive economy that seems at odds with the popular demands

that led it into power in the first place. From this perspective, the primary focus would not be on whether an event counts as a revolution or not, or whether it effectively failed or not. Rather the analysis is centred on which elements are foregrounded when and how this occurs, for instance through escalating overflow. This is not a way to say that it is irrelevant whether things are black or white or to simply sustain that eventually things change back and forth. It is an optic that can allow us to grasp the complexity of processes of profound socio-political transformation because it impels us to consider the flip-side and the 'extras' of each situation and epoch. While it is too early to tell how the current crisis of governance in Bolivia post Evo Morales will unfold, it does appear that the figure of the indigenous citizen as a relevant political actor has remained in place. However, so does the notion of indigenous versus non-indigenous criollo or mestizo population, and in this sense the MAS' project of constructing a truly plurinational state (if we by that understand intercultural relations rather than multicultural recognition) has apparently not gained sufficient ground. Hence, analysing processes of profound socio-political transformation with an eye for the presence of their negative (that is, contrarevolutionary aspects of the revolution) and the surplus they produce (that is, mestizo subjects in an increasingly indigenized reality) can also help us comprehending what will be left from revolutions in Bolivia and elsewhere once they cease to exist as such.

Note

1. 'Cholet' is a compound word that out together 'chalet' with Cholo. It refers to the expensive, colorful and extravagant houses built in El Alto (and elsewhere) by Aymara urbanites.

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