

Envisioning an Orderly Altiplano: Middle Class Discourses of Moral Geography on El Alto, Bolivia

Imaginando un Altiplano ordenado: discursos de geografía moral de la clase media en El Alto, Bolivia

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 2000s, Bolivia has undergone extensive social and economic shifts. This is in part tied to the presidency of Evo Morales, the country's first Indigenous-identified head of state. The city of El Alto, often considered an «Indigenous city,» may be understood as a microcosm for understanding these larger shifts. Residents of the capital city of La Paz, which sits in the valley just below El Alto, have long thought of the neighboring area as a place of danger, filth, crime, and chaos. But as political, economic, and identity dynamics have changed throughout Bolivia, discourses about El Alto shifted to highlight the ways El Alto is «progressing» socially and economically. This paper concentrates on discourses about El Alto that middle-class residents of La Paz (called Paceños) circulate on a daily basis, and through which they actively produce understandings of the intimate connections between city center and periphery. This makes clear how aesthetic, affective, and corporeal valuations of space are implicated in economic and social development, both producing new forms of identity and reconfiguring others. Based on ethnographic research from the 2010s, I use the concept of moral geography to understand the valuing of space and how notions of «modernity», «development», and

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«orderliness» become positively assessed in the context of Bolivian middle-class identity. Yet, in 2019, in the wake of a contested finish to the country's presidential election, violence occurred in the streets in cities across Bolivia. In La Paz, middle class residents contributed to discourses that blamed this violence on El Alto residents, reinscribing notions of danger and chaos. Thus, this article traces the ways discourses on El Alto reflect shifting ideologies of class in Bolivia, within global notions of progress. As middle class Bolivians express desires for their country to more closely reflect global indicators of development, they repeatedly come back to the notion that as goes El Alto, so goes Bolivia.

KEYWORDS

Bolivia, Moral Geography, Social Class, Middle Class, Race, Indigeneity

RESUMEN

Desde principios de la década de 2000, Bolivia ha experimentado grandes cambios sociales y económicos, en parte relacionados con la presidencia de Evo Morales, el primer jefe de Estado del país que se identifica como indígena. La ciudad de El Alto, a menudo considerada una «ciudad indígena», puede entenderse como un microcosmos para comprender estos cambios más amplios. Los residentes de la ciudad capital de La Paz, que se encuentra en el valle justo debajo de El Alto, han pensado durante mucho tiempo que la zona vecina es un lugar de peligro, suciedad, delincuencia y caos. Pero a medida que la dinámica política, económica y de identidad cambió en toda Bolivia, los discursos sobre El Alto cambiaron para destacar las formas en que El Alto está «progresando» social y económicamente. Este artículo se concentra en los discursos sobre El Alto que los residentes de clase media de La Paz (llamados paceños) circulan a diario y a través de los cuales producen activamente interpretaciones de las conexiones íntimas entre el centro de la ciudad y la periferia. Esto deja en claro cómo las valoraciones estéticas, afectivas y corporales del espacio están implicadas en el desarrollo económico y social, tanto produciendo nuevas formas de identidad como reconfigurando otras. Basándome en una investigación etnográfica de la década de 2010, utilizo

nociones de geografía moral para comprender la valoración del espacio y cómo las nociones de «modernidad», «desarrollo» y «orden» se evalúan positivamente en el contexto de la identidad de clase media boliviana. Sin embargo, en 2019, a raíz de un final disputado de las elecciones presidenciales del país, la violencia se produjo en las calles de ciudades de toda Bolivia. En La Paz, los residentes de clase media contribuyeron a los discursos que culpaban de esta violencia a los residentes de El Alto, reinscribiendo nociones de peligro y caos. Por lo tanto, este artículo rastrea las formas en que los discursos sobre El Alto reflejan ideologías cambiantes de clase en Bolivia, dentro de las nociones globales de progreso. A medida que los bolivianos de clase media expresan deseos de que su país refleje más de cerca los indicadores globales de desarrollo, vuelven repetidamente a la noción de que como va El Alto, así va Bolivia.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Bolivia, geografía moral, clase social, clase media, raza, indigeneidad

Introduction

El Alto, Bolivia has long been considered a marginal space, disparaged, neglected, and abandoned by the middle-class residents of La Paz, in the valley below (Bjork-James, 2020b; Gill, 2000; Lazar, 2008; McNelly, 2019). In the late 2010s, however, there emerged a trend among La Paz residents (called Paceños) who for various reasons might be considered «middle class», in shifting their ways of speaking about El Alto. This was related to the election of Bolivia's first Indigenous-identified president, Evo Morales, and his government's investment in infrastructure projects and poverty alleviation efforts, which Angus McNelly describes as driving a construction boom that «transformed the face of El Alto», as well as contributing to an emergent «Indigenous bourgeoisie» (2019, pp. 338–339). Middle class Paceños moved from framing El Alto as a continuance of the past toward discourses related to El Alto as an indication of the future. In essence, middle class people began to recognize and incorporate the space of El Alto into their repertoires, reflecting a new interest and vision of El Alto as a place of modernity, orderliness, and development. However, this took a turn in late 2019 when controversy about results of the presidential election split alliances and reawakened discourses among some middle class Paceños about the unruliness and violence of El Alto. This

article begins by concentrating on discourses about El Alto through which middle class Paceños actively produced understandings of it as a space of development, tying this to notions of national progress. It then considers how Paceños, in the wake of crisis surrounding the 2019 presidential election, returned to discourses of violence and disorderliness. By looking at these two moments/modes of discourse together, it becomes clear that that the increased presence of middle class Paceños into El Alto is viewed positively, while the incursion of Alteños (residents of El Alto) into middle class spaces of La Paz is seen as dangerous. Through the construction of a moral geography tied to spatial and temporal valuations, Paceños position both El Alto and themselves through notions of belonging.

Mapping El Alto

In 2009, when I first arrived in La Paz, one of my interlocutors drew a map of the city for me (see Figure 1). Raul was in his mid-twenties, and was studying to gain entrance to a business school in the Netherlands. He had grown up in El Alto, and had only recently begun renting an apartment in central La Paz, as he started a small business. By most accounts he would not have been considered by others in La Paz to be middle class, nor would he have considered himself such. Yet, perhaps because he was interacting with me—a Ph.D. student from the U.S.—his map reflected what I came to understand as a middle class Paceño view of the city. Raul drew the places I would likely encounter in my daily activities: Plaza Estudiantes, and la Universidad Mayor San Andrés (UMSA), El Prado, Plaza San Francisco, Sopocachi, Miraflores, Calle Sagarnaga, Calle Jaen, and Plaza Murillo. He added San Miguel and Calacoto in the affluent Zona Sur. And then he drew places he called «dangerous». First, J. J. Perez, an area of town known for both the sale of cheap stolen goods, as well as a good place to get your own possessions stolen. He added, in El Alto, la Ceja, 16 de Julio, and Ciudad Satellite. He circled each of these places to remind me not to go alone.

These discourses of danger and threat associated with El Alto reflect the ways many marginalized areas are understood in Latin America and elsewhere. Amidst the neoliberal reforms and crop failures of the early 1980s, unprecedented numbers of rural Bolivians migrated to urban areas, including the area surrounding La Paz. The population of El Alto, situated on a high plateau overlooking the valley where La Paz rests, grew from about 350,000 in 1980, to almost 500,000 by the end of the decade (a 43% increase). As McNelly writes, «Intense processes of class formation and urbanization ensued as new arrivals joined the swelling ranks of the informalized labor force and built their own city» (2019, p. 334). Sian Lazar suggested in her book, *El Alto, Rebel City* (2008) that crime is frequent

and the neoliberal state is perceived as failing in obligations to protect citizens. A local union leader told her after a demonstration in 2000 that El Alto is an «angry city» and its people are «vigorous, and always prepared to fight, sometimes without measuring the consequences» (2008, p. 53).

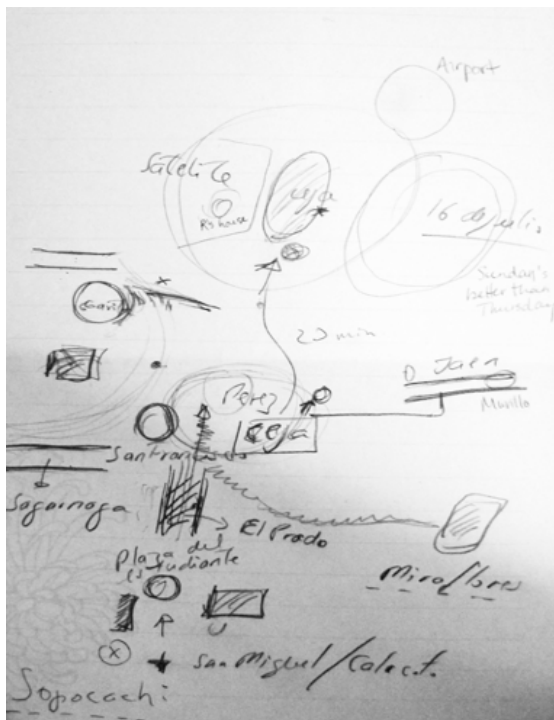


FIGURE 1. Raul's Map of «safe» and «dangerous» areas of La Paz and El Alto

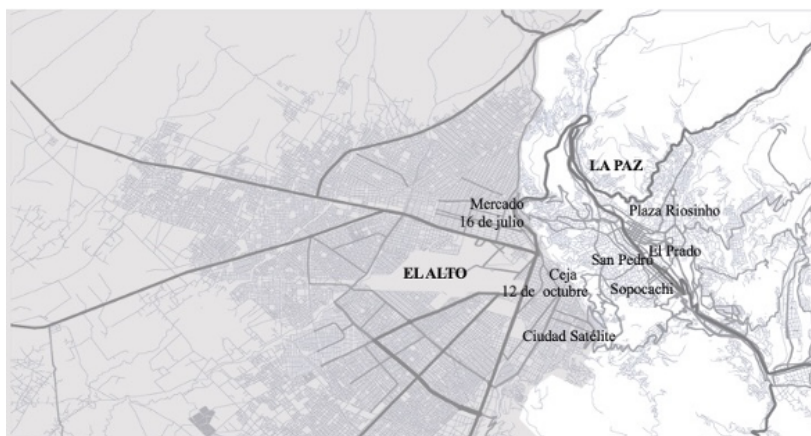


FIGURE 2. Map of La Paz and El Alto

Violence is often considered quotidian in El Alto, with poverty, crime, and domestic violence statistics all at high levels. In October 2003, 800,000 workers, peasants, migrants, and small merchants, most of them Indigenous, protested privatization of natural gas by blocking the supply of fuel to La Paz. When this resulted in state violence, the same group blocked the major highway to La Paz with train cars, then occupied the city itself (Hylton and Thomson, 2007, p. xiii). This eventually contributed to the fall of the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, and then his successor Carlos Mesa, paving the road to the first election of Evo Morales. Such marginalized areas in Bolivia have also been known to employ community justice measures such as lynching (see Goldstein, 2004; Lazar, 2008, p. 61). These more recent events, in addition to a long historical legacy of marginalized Bolivian citizens as violent protest actors (see Hylton and Thomson, 2007), are used by many Paceños to frame El Alto as a particularly threatening place. At the same time, Alteños have their own view of changes in their city. McNelly explains that in the early 2000s, Alteños began to connect neoliberal economic change to «everyday experiences of poverty and exclusion» (2019, p. 337). This is an important perspective to highlight as a counterpoint to my own writing here, concentrating on the ways El Alto is viewed from the exterior.

Danger and threat are in large part linked to notions of disorder and filth. Before 1988, the year El Alto was officially incorporated as a city, there were few public services, and little infrastructure. The 16 de Julio market, one of the largest outdoor markets in Latin America, appears to be an endless stretch of loud, colorful chaos. Not only are the streets dusty, most are littered with discarded food containers, flyers, and other refuse. It is not unusual to smell urine or rotting food. At times there seem to be as many feral dogs as humans. The multiple sensory stimuli, for many, index underdevelopment.

The lack of hygiene associated with El Alto is not dissimilar to the ways that Bolivia's outdoor markets have long been blamed for being unhygienic. Weismantel suggests that race provided an excuse for the unhygienic conditions and crime that plagued urban markets in the Andes, making these problems seem to emanate not from political neglect of this economic sector, but rather from the inherent unwholesomeness of those who worked there (2001, p. xxvii). These workers were primarily Indigenous women who came from rural areas to sell agricultural products in the city.

Because El Alto has been associated with rural to urban migrants of recent generations, perceptions of underdevelopment, disorder, and filth are discursively linked to indigeneity to the extent that it is often called an «Indigenous city» (Lazar, 2008). In the 1990s, Lesley Gill suggested that

movement to the city from rural areas, associated with Indigenous people, was primarily a consequence of a steady decline in the feasibility of small-scale agriculture (2000, p. 2) and neoliberal measures that resulted in the closing of tin mines and loss of tens of thousands of public sector jobs (Hylton and Thomson, 2007, p. 95)¹. As a result, most migrants to the city have been poor with few support systems in place.

In the Andes, race and class are often conflated so that this kind of poverty reinforces one's racial classification as Indigenous (see de la Cadena, 2000; Gotkowitz, 2012). While most people have a naturalized sense of who counts as *criollo/a* (European descended), *mestizo/a* (mixed ancestry), or *indígena* (Indigenous) (not to mention Afro-descended individuals), these categories are often more marked by characteristics such as clothing, language, education, career, and food consumption, than ancestry or phenotypic traits. Thus, these categories are flexible to an extent, but one's usual presence in El Alto would have marked the individual as Indigenous for much of the city's history.

For many outsiders, the city of El Alto and its quintessential inhabitants reinforce perceptions of the other, naturalizing associations of Indigenous rural-to-urban migrants with poverty, dirt, protest, violence and danger. For many middle class *Paceños*, *Alteños* are a physical threat through their propensity toward violence and a moral threat as they undermine the perceived modernity of the city. But as Bolivia changes, some *Paceños* have shifted their views of El Alto. These changes are tied to constitutional shifts granting Indigenous groups more sovereignty, spearheaded by Bolivia's first Indigenous-identified president, Evo Morales, and his appointment of many Indigenous people to government posts. It is also connected to development projects such as the cable car system opening in La Paz in 2014. The *Teleférico*, in Morales's estimation, resituated La Paz

1 The importance of the word «neoliberal» here is twofold. First, it goes beyond describing the sorts of cuts to social services and moves toward privatization (of resources, education, healthcare, property, etc.) to draw attention the ideological structures that have accompanied these economic policies. The concept draws attention not just to new configurations of consumption, but also the ways consumer economies are now moralized on multiple levels and intertwined with notions of identity. Second, it is important contextually. Bolivia was an early adopter of neoliberal policies, as a result of the World Bank led «New Economic Policy», begun in 1985. The policy cut social services while privatizing industry and resources so that Bolivian citizens were forced to pay higher rates for their basic necessities (Gill, 2000; Hylton and Thomson 2007). Structural adjustment forced thousands of government workers out of jobs, and dismantled services in areas where residents could not afford to purchase them from private companies (Gill, 2000). Though Morales began to reinstate social services and nationalize resources, Bolivia is still experiencing the effects of neoliberal economic measures. Consequently, «neoliberalism» is a word that has been invoked in Evo's rhetoric, thus has implications for political affiliation in Bolivia, which in itself is often associated with class status.

as an enviable «*ciudad moderna y modelo*» [modern and model city] (Ministerio de Comunicación de Bolivia, 2014). By viewing different discourses about El Alto in contexts of temporality and modernity, we are able to trace shifting ideologies of class in relation to global notions of progress.

Middle Classness and Space

In the early 2010s, economists, journalists and NGOs celebrated the growth in Latin American middle classes, at times placing estimates around 50 or 60 percent of the population (Castañeda, 2011; Castellani and Parent, 2011). These «new middle classes» are considered to be more heterogeneous, more economically vulnerable, and more impoverished than what would be considered middle class in the United States or Europe (Cadena *et al.*, 2017). Despite increases in social welfare in many countries, Latin America's middle class lacks key social supports such as unemployment benefits and job security, and do not necessarily represent a decrease in income inequality. Their high reliance on informal market activities and the introduction of credit make them less likely to maintain class status across generations (Kozameh and Ray, 2012; Portes and Hoffman, 2003). These groups differ from previous middle classes in having grown up amid neoliberal reforms, suggesting they may be generally oriented to market ideologies and logics of individualization, which normalize consumption and precarity as defining characteristics of how the term middle class is understood (Han, 2012). These new forms of middle classness are also less closely associated with whiteness than previous generations and are often more aligned with populist rather than elite politics (Dávila, 2018, p. 4).

But Bolivia does not necessarily fit squarely within such formations. Cárdenas, Kharas, and Henao (2011) note that Bolivia has a remarkably small middle class in relation to the rest of Latin America and the world at large. This analysis relies on an economic model and in doing so, it erases aspects of class identity discussed above, that profoundly impact social assessments of others' and one's own class belonging. As in many places around the world, the proportion of the population of Bolivians that consider themselves «middle class» far exceeds economic statistics. Instead, class categories in this context incorporate forms of self-presentation (such as clothing), level of education, profession, means of moving about the city (and beyond), and the spaces in which one lives, regularly travels, and spends money. As noted earlier, each of these are also key ways in which race becomes defined in Bolivia. We might think of class crudely in terms of elites, middle class, and those in poverty, often corresponding to racial designations of *criollo*, *mestizo*, and Indigenous, not because of a

causal effect, but rather because race and class are formed in and through one another.

These characteristics suggest that rather than thinking of middle classness as an economic category defined in relation to people's differential access to means of production or other resources, we must pay attention to the ways class is enacted through behaviors and sensibilities often learned from family and other close social relationships (Bourdieu, 1984). This means that we can understand several different types of middle classes existing alongside one another. Class is actively produced and projected through symbolic, discursive, and material practices (Dávila, 2018), and as scholars of Latin America have recently pointed out, aspirations to upward mobility (Aritzía, 2012; Freeman, 2014; O'Dougherty, 2002). Middle classness then might be considered a form of identification, which Dávila discusses is in part enacted through relationships with spaces of consumption. Though this may not describe all types of middle classes in La Paz in the 2010s, this is the form of middle classness I concentrate on here. Spaces of consumption play a role in «representing, generating, and constructing the 'middle class' dispositions, outlooks, and identities defined by consumption, whether these statuses are actually achieved, or simply imagined» (Dávila, 2018, p. 5). For many Paceños, this consumption is tied to notinos of incorporating globally understood symbols of middle-classness in their identities and practices².

Taking Dávila's suggestion that spaces of consumption play a role in enacting class, we might view discourses about El Alto by middle class Paceños through a lens of «moral geography». Jane Hill (1995) describes this concept as an interweaving of a moral framework with a geographic territory. Gabriella Modan furthers this concept, describing it as an «ideological framework» people use to create associations with different spaces. This process often «territorializes the space of the neighborhood as a place with a certain character, a place which embodies a particular set (or sets) of values» (2007, pp. 89-90).

Social values related to place become connected to notions of time, as well. That is, the future-oriented notion of modernity vs. the past-oriented notion of the pre-modern or backwardness—may be understood through Bakhtin's (1981) notion of chronotope. Kristina Wirtz points out

2 This incorporation of globally circulating middle classness may also be a distinguishing factor between the middle class Paceños I discuss here and those more aligned with «intellectual» circles, as well as the «nueva burguesía indígena» [new Indigenous bourgeoisie], who are both important in discourses of class in La Paz and El Alto, but are beyond the scope of this article.

that chronotope and subjectivity are mutually constitutive through processes of indexicality. «To locate configurations of persons in configurations of history and place is to socially identify them and vice versa» (2020, p. 207). Paceños, through the use of discursive judgement—using words like ‘modern’, ‘developed’, or ‘clean’ in contrast to ‘pre-modern’, ‘underdeveloped’, or ‘filthy’—present some spaces as morally superior to others, placing their own comfortability in the space as a primary factor in its worth (what Modan would call placing themselves at the deictic center). This then reinforces the ways race, class, space, and time become inextricably interwoven. Not only do time-spaces embedded in colonial logics «remain productive of racial orders», as Wirtz (2020, p. 208) suggests, but they also implicate class. The temporal and spatial imaginations folded together instantiate subjectivity, meaning that «space [and class] thus shapes our very experience of race and place» (Wirtz, 2020, p. 209).

In Bolivia, and La Paz in particular, space almost always carries a classed and racialized connotation, in part because La Paz sits in a valley at 3600 meters above sea level with the altiplano stretched out above at 4150 meters. Zona Sur, the neighborhood with lowest elevation, is home to mostly the wealthy, though on a global level its residents may look more like what North Atlantic expectations would categorize as middle class. Their homes have indoor heating, hot water and often a yard or garden. They drive late model cars made by Toyota or Nissan bought on credit. Their clothes reflect the latest US or European styles. They have liquidity, but not necessarily long-accumulated wealth. They likely have at least one domestic worker in the home. They may speak fluent English or German, in part as a result of attending international-focused primary and secondary schools. This allows for study in foreign universities or obtaining visas to places like the United States with little difficulty. These Paceños work primarily in banking or international business.

The contrary category to these elite Paceños would be people who during different historical moments would have been categorized as Indios, Indígenas, cholos, or campesinos. These people live in neighborhoods with less developed infrastructure, often without hot running water and sometimes without indoor bathroom facilities. Neighborhoods associated with these classes are often thought of as having high crime and are located in El Alto or on the laderas (sides of the valley). Their residents work in agriculture, construction, or as small vendors, taxi or bus drivers, mechanics, security guards, janitors, or police officers. The people of these neighborhoods rarely study past high school degrees, and travel around the city in shared transport vehicles. They speak a mix of Spanish, Aymara,

and Quechua, and women most often dress in the *de pollera* style associated with indigeneity.

Miriam Shakow details the ways emergent middle class people in Bolivia struggle to assert their position as «morally upright», at times connecting their superiority to having raised their economic and social status. She points out inadequacy in the «binaries of wealthy or poor, white or Indigenous» that are often at the center of discourses on class and race in what is sometimes conceptualized as «the two Bolivias» (2014, p. 1). Yet, as Shakow argues, despite the scant attention they receive, the Bolivian middle classes, in recent years, have profoundly shaped politics and social life (2014, p. 2; see also Albro, 2010). Further, she argues that racial and class identities are deeply connected to geography in Bolivia, and implications for movement between raced and classed spaces can tell us much about forms of middle class morality.

The people I discuss in this article fall between these polarized positions. This research is based on fieldwork primarily undertaken in June, July, and August 2017 which was approved by my institution's ethics review board (IRB). I obtained the informed consent of the individuals involved in the research, maintained confidentiality, and they agreed this work may appear in publication. I interacted with and interviewed people who live in central areas of the city, in apartments or free-standing homes. Some have domestic workers, some do not. But those who do usually develop friendly relationships over time, and while a financial hierarchy is evident between employer and employee this relationship is not moralized. These city residents are often only a few generations removed from ancestors that were Aymara or Quechua speakers in rural areas. Most identify primarily as mestizo, while recognizing they have Indigenous ancestry. They have very little in common with the economic, social, and racial elite of the country, nor with the most vulnerable Bolivians. Some of them voted for Morales in 2005, 2009, and 2014. They, like *zona sur* elites, have some liquidity, rather than wealth, but have little access to credit. They work as teachers, university professors, lawyers, in municipal government, the tourism industry, in the burgeoning technology industry, and other office jobs. Some are artists and musicians. They primarily speak Spanish and may be somewhat conversational in English or Portuguese but are not usually fluent to the degree that they might attend university abroad. Most have trouble getting visas to the US. They may have private cars but they are old and often need repairs. The car may sit for months until the family can afford the part it needs to run properly. Their clothing is Western style, and often bought used in the outdoor markets. One place younger

middle class people may buy them is in the El Alto market, but particularly for middle aged and older, shopping in central La Paz is far more likely.

One man in his late-thirties, who works in the judicial sector of the government described to me: «middle class refers, to my understanding, mostly to the descendants of migrants from the countryside, of the third or fourth generation, who have acquired their own home, a car, and are able to afford some luxuries like vacations or private education». He noted that his own upward class mobility had come at the expense of hard work on the part of his parents and grandparents, ending with «I live well, better than some, but not with much luxury».

In his comments we see that the definition is in part, teleological—to be middle class is to act middle class. To act middle class is to follow the norms that people say are middle class—a spiral of signification reliant on unstable signifiers. Thus, what is middle class is contextual. It may be produced on local, regional, national, or global levels, wherein each may inform others. So rather than looking at discourse which describes what it means to be middle class, I consider language practices through which people performatively instantiate a local middle-class subjectivity by reference to global notions of consumer capitalism, order, and development.

Of course, these groupings collapse widely diverse experiences into very limited categories. But this is necessary in part because when discussing categories such as class, we see endless variation, and the teleological nature of their definition requires contextual specificity. I use ethnography here then, to capture some of the texture of different subjectivities within such a category.

Soledad

One Paceña who fits a generally accepted description of middle class in La Paz is Soledad, who still lives in the house where she grew up, now with her husband Emiliano, and their white shaggy dog, called «Doggi». The house sits up a steep hill, a few blocks from Plaza Riosinho, near the bus terminal—a neighborhood characterized by many families having lived there for a few generations, thus having claim to middle class status, but still thought to be a rather dangerous place after dark. Emiliano is a lawyer, and Soledad devoted most of her time to raising three children, Marcela, Alejandro, and Catalina. Now that they are all in their thirties and have moved out, she is dedicated to volunteering at her evangelical church. The family still employs Luz, a *mujer de pollera* from El Alto, to do most of the cooking and cleaning. There are obvious power differentials between Luz and Soledad, but Luz eats meals with the family and when the children stop by the house, they often spend most of the time chatting

with her in the kitchen. Rather than the pollera and double braids like those of Luz, Soledad has a fluffy shoulder length hair style and usually wears a matching Western-style skirt and blouse, often with coordinating shoes, though on occasion I've also caught her at home wearing leopard print fleece pajama pants and pink slippers.

During my second week staying with the family of Soledad and Emiliano in 2017, Soledad asked if I'd like to accompany them on their weekly trip to buy vegetables. I happily agreed and squeezed my long legs into the back seat of the family's 1972 Volkswagen Bug. Rather than going to the supermarket, which might mark someone more on the elite end of the middle class spectrum, we drove to the other side of the Prado and stopped on Calle Illampu. We hopped out of the car and walked across the street to Julia, the *casera* (vendor) the family had been buying produce from for decades. To buy from the same vendor for years is thought of as remaining true to populist roots—associated with working-class rather than elite values. From Julia, we bought carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, celery, onions, beets, and some cheese. We then stayed for about 10 minutes chatting in a friendly conversation filled with news and gossip, catching up on developments in each family, and some joking exchanges, one of which involved Soledad trying to convince Julia that I was her fourth child she had never brought shopping before. This was met with much laughter.

We squeezed back into the car, and as Emiliano drove us back to the house, Soledad began to talk about going to the market in El Alto.

It's a better market—bigger obviously, and the prices are better. But of course, it's much further away. I used to be afraid of going there. It was overwhelming. And I felt as if I stuck out. It was all Indigenous people in the city. El Alto used to be very dangerous. And dirty. Everything chaotic... Now it's changing. Indigenous people aren't like they used to be. They don't have much desire to learn their native languages. They are all in the city. They have money now, they're middle class. They have nice homes and work in government... Now that the teleférico arrives in El Alto, there is much more exchange. The city is becoming more orderly. There are more businesses. You can see the difference easily. The sidewalks are less scattered with people selling. Now there are real businesses... It's the fastest growing city in Latin America, I read. And I think Bolivians are really proud of it. Changes in El Alto mean that the whole country is really progressing.

Indeed, Soledad was right—El Alto continues to grow quickly. The influx of people has been accompanied by new businesses, new informal commercial endeavors, and perhaps most visually catching, the new «cholets» that mark the city's otherwise brown and orange-colored visual

field. Just as El Alto has grown, so too has the economy of the nation. The World Bank, IMF, and Cepal report that from 2014-2018 Bolivia had the highest growth in GDP in South America, related to nationalization of hydrocarbons, export of natural gas, diversification (with diesel, tin, and soy), price controls, and public investment.

As we pulled up to the house that afternoon, Soledad suggested that maybe next time we would go to El Alto for produce. I'm unsure how sincere she was, as the next week we went back to her casera, but she did travel to El Alto on church business a number of times in the following weeks, each time donning her usual matching dresses and high heels.

María and Joél

Once I had heard Soledad talk about El Alto on a number of occasions, I began listening for commentary from other, similarly positioned Paceños. Carmen, a former professor in sociology at UMSA, along with her adult son Joél accompanied me to El Alto one Sunday afternoon in 2018. Carmen suggested we take her car, a mid-1990s Toyota Cruiser, and I met the two at their apartment in San Pedro. Though our trip was unrelated to commercial activities, I hoped that our co-presence in El Alto might inspire her to talk about the city. As we drove up the steep hills Carmen confessed to me that El Alto often gives her anxiety. «It's chaotic and I don't trust people. It might take us a while to find a safe place to park the car when we arrive». But we found a spot right on the block in the 12 de octubre neighborhood and left the car without incident. As we walked down the sidewalk, she looked around. «It's not so bad these days. There are many more billboards, and new businesses popping up. There are places for food and ice cream. You can go in and sit down. And banks are easy to find. The storefronts just look nicer now. Not like before, [when they were] just handmade signs. These are real businesses».

Joél agreed. Though he doesn't frequent El Alto, he noted a few recent occasions he had gone to the feria and stayed in El Alto for dinner and to play arcade games with friends. «It's still not really my place», he said, «but it's nice for visiting nowadays. It's really come a long way».

Carmelo and Ramón

I heard similar comments from Camilo a man in his late-30s who is a small cafe owner on a touristy street in La Paz, and from his friend Ramón, a slightly younger man who had worked as a tour guide in the city. One day I had lunch with Ramón in the café, and he spoke of El Alto as growing and developing. He related this specifically to the hard work of Indigenous people.

I always mention to tourists the growth of El Alto. Since the 1960s, it's not so organized, like in La Paz. La Paz is very organized... El Alto is like the Wild Wild West of Bolivia. But it's becoming a bit more organized. El Alto has been forged with Indigenous work. It's about ayni—cooperation³. It's the spirit of Tupaj Katari⁴. All through Indigenous effort... it's a growing city, and there is a new bourgeoisie class, new rich Aymaras, with their cholets, with their businesses. They're making lots of money, Indigenous millionaires».

Carmelo decided to take a break from washing cups and came over to the table, hearing this last bit. «They're Indigenous capitalists. All of them. They want to industrialize. And that's why you see a difference. What's important in commerce is the visibility. The signs, the architecture. It's really important. So, they are cleaning up the city. They make it nice and they sell more. As they say, 'El Alto Productivo'⁵».

Ramón jumped back in. «They're becoming globalized. It's not just tradition and local people any more. They're the Indigenous people who are becoming part of the world. And with them, Bolivia is becoming part of the world, too. We're all developing».

Shifting Notions of Indigeneity

In each of these comments, we see the ways middle class Paceños drew on discourses about El Alto as resources for constructing their own identification as middle-class, and thus aligned themselves with development and orderliness. They acknowledged pre-existing stereotypes of El Alto, associated with danger, disorder, and dirt, but reflected a break from earlier mestizo and criollo ways of talking about Indigenous peoples as backward, stagnant, and incapable of «progress». For example, Bolivia's census of 1900 notoriously predicted «the slow and gradual disappearance of the Indigenous race», arguing that «if there has been a single source of retardation in our civilization, it is the Indigenous race, essentially resistant to all innovation and progress» (quoted in Choque and Mamani Condori, 2001, p. 204). More recent discourses have focused on the ways that Indigenous people have been central to change, at times invoking Aymara concepts like ayni or historical leaders like Tupaj Katari. This changing

3 «Ayni» is a form of Andean reciprocity with a long history in traditional communities, and now central to Bolivia's *vivir bien* Indigenous development agenda (Huarachi, 2011).

4 Katari was a military leader who in 1781 consolidated Indigenous forces with Creole and Mestizo compatriots to lay siege to La Paz, aimed at choking colonial Spanish control. At the height of these insurrections more than 100,000 had joined the rebellion, but after several months royalist forces captured Katari. He was sentenced to be drawn and quartered, and as his last words he shouted, «I will return and I will be millions».

5 «El Alto Productivo» is the official slogan of the *Oficialía Mayor de Promoción Económica* of El Alto, created by then-city councilor Gustavo Morales in 2006.

conception of indigeneity perhaps was not surprising, given the focus of Indigenous-identified President Evo Morales on the rights and status of Indigenous peoples throughout his tenure (though of course, not without controversy⁶). Instead of suggesting Indigenous peoples' very existence retards civilization, their progress signals an ascendance of the country as a whole. Seeing El Alto as depoliticized and entering neoliberal structures allowed for celebration of Indigenous people without threat.

These discourses of middle class Paceños explicitly celebrated that Indigenous people were «modernizing», but also implicitly reinforced both notions that they were somehow not already «modern» (see Deloria, 2004), and that they should begin subscribing to a neoliberal model of «modernization». This was true to the extent that indigeneity was celebrated as «the spirit of the nation» but only in certain, safe ways. By mentioning ayni and Tupaj Katari, these discourses reconcile previously understood incompatibility of Indigenous ways of thinking with development, order, and normative aesthetics. In doing so, they reveal shifting notions of El Alto as becoming more acceptable as Indigenous people enter neoliberal-style markets that appeal to the phenomenological, aesthetic, and social normativities of middle class, central La Paz. The city is developing, not because it is no longer Indigenous, but because the nature of indigeneity is shifting. This view, which celebrates certain domesticated notions of Indigenous culture while depoliticizing Indigenous engagement, may be seen as parallel to the «Indigenismo» promoted by the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario in 1950s Bolivia (see Bigenho, 2007). It does little to truly value Indigenous people's contributions without subsuming them within mestizo ideals. We see what might be a third type of Indigenous archetype here. This Indigenous person is not «the 'prepolitical' and uncorrupted» pure Indian of the countryside, nor the «vice-ridden, degenerate, and semiliterate» protestor—the urban cholo, derided in previous decades (Lazar, 2008, p. 16). Rather, these are new neoliberal Indigenous subjects, welcomed into the nation as long as they contribute to the types of development that middle class people see as beneficial to the nation as a whole. These five Paceños speak of Indigenous people respectfully, but they highlight a notion of progress. They see Indigenous peoples as capable of this «progress», defined as moving closer to globally-aligned middle class social norms and economics. These changes are framed as

6 Morales presents himself as Indigenous, yet some of his policies have caused the general public to question his motives. At times Bolivians suspect his loyalties do not lie with Indigenous people, and accuse him of simply using this identity to political advantage (see Canessa, 2014).

positive, in that as Indigenous peoples «advance», the city advances, and thus all of Bolivia advances.

Moral Geography of El Alto

In essence, these Paceños construct a moral geography in which La Paz becomes the unspoken moral standard, and the more El Alto reflects it, the more it is claimed within the mestizo imaginary of development. This process involves key moments of highlighting and erasure. In these narratives, «El Alto» is encapsulated in La Ceja and 16 de Julio, along with a few other central and highly commercial spaces. Spaces of recent migration, low development, and even unsightly types of businesses—like bars, brothels or gay bathhouses—become entirely erased from discussion. In this formation of moral geography, a previously marginalized space is reimagined as a part of the center. Whereas prior treatments of moral geography often focus on what people «belong» or are «welcome in» particular spaces (see Modan, 2007), these formations by Paceños instead take their own subject positions as the vantage point. They value space depending on whether *they* belong. As their ability to use certain spaces in El Alto with comfort changes, their moral geography adapts to this new formation.

In this sense, it might very well be the case that Alteños feel that middle class Paceños are outside the purview of the moral geography of El Alto—that their values, behaviors, and even racial features mark them as out of place or even unwelcome. But in the formulation of those Paceños who commented to me, their own (semi-)hegemonic positioning within the class and racial hierarchies of La Paz allows them the confidence to see themselves as central to the moral geography, rather than centering their understanding on the geography itself. Drawing from Mitchell, we might see here how geography works in constituting subject positions and identities (2003, p. 204). The way one understands and talks about geography positions the self. To highlight the orderliness and development of El Alto not only positions the space in particular ways, but constitutes a particular type of subject who values these things—a middle class mestizo subject. In describing the space so as to make themselves fit, these Paceños reformulate what belonging means in a shifting space. And in doing so, they not only reposition themselves as subjects, but also reconstitute those who live and conduct commerce in El Alto as part of development and modernity. Through this shifted understanding of the space of El Alto, the people associated with it are included in this belonging, now representing welcomed additions to the neoliberal, developing nation state.

Alteños in La Paz

While most discourses of middle class Paceños visiting El Alto in recent years have been colored by a hopeful sense of «development» and «modernization», there have been far more negative examples of discourse surrounding the presence of Alteños evaluated as disorderly when they enter spaces deemed middle class.

The first example is from 2014, when controversy erupted in affluent Zona Sur upon the opening of the Teleférico's line connecting Irpavi (in Zona Sur) with El Alto. Shortly after beginning full service, those people used to a more formal commercial setting were not prepared for an influx of informal vendors, presumably from El Alto. Mujeres de pollera had set out their wares on blankets near the US-style mall, Megacenter. A US expat who was an acquaintance of mine posted on Facebook: «As one might expect, many middle and upper-class folks (typically white or mestizo) are upset about 'their' space being invaded by people from El Alto (typically Indigenous) and have taken to social media to express their dissatisfaction with this turn of events. Most of the comments refer to these 'invaders' as dirty, smelly, litter-dropping, on-the-floor-sitting Indians».

In this case, those Alteños who had come with their informal style of commerce to a space associated with affluence and whiteness, were painted as out of place. Their non-belonging was framed as racial difference, but again harkened back to nodes of differentiation associated with disorderliness, filth, and unmodern practices. As Vacano suggests, the production of Latin American «race» is «integral to the making of the modern. It is not a vestige of premodern times, nor merely a reflection of modern phenomena» (2012, p. 8). As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2003) argues, in Bolivia (and much of Latin America) there has historically been an alignment of modernity with colonial interests and elites. The moral geography invoked in Megacenter was of the type Modan (2007) describes; appealing to seemingly commonsense notions of what is correct or incorrect behavior in a particular location to establish who belongs and who does not.

A second, and far more heightened example, comes from the aftermath of the 2019 presidential election. On the 20th of October, Bolivia had held presidential elections, with Evo Morales running for a fourth term. This was controversial because the 2009 Bolivian constitution, which Evo had championed, limited presidents to two terms. Evo justified his third term because he was elected the first time under the previous constitution, but had no such rationalization for running a fourth time. Anticipating this years before, he called for a referendum in early 2016 to abolish term limits. However, 51.3% of voters upheld the term limit. Not to be dissuaded, Morales and his party Movimiento a Socialismo (or MAS) applied

to the constitutional court to abolish term limits in late 2017. The court ruled in their favor, allowing Morales to run once again.

On the 20th, after polls closed, the electoral tribunal began to release preliminary results from a rapid count. Around 7:30pm, Morales led with 45.3% of the votes and his primary opponent Carlos Mesa garnered 38.2%. Morales led by just over 7% which did not meet the 10% lead necessary to avoid a run-off. At 7:40pm, with almost 85% of votes counted, reporting of results halted without explanation for 24 hours. At the first update on the evening of the 21st of October, Morales had surged. With 95.3% of verified votes, Morales led by 10.12% avoiding a run-off and securing a fourth term.

This struck many as suspicious. The OAS cited election «irregularities» and put into motion an audit of the election to begin in the following weeks. By the 24th, Morales began describing the doubt cast on his victory as an attempted coup. Protests broke out around the country, representing both Morales supporters and those who felt the election was fraudulent, and continued for 21 days. By the 10th of November, police in many cities announced they were no longer willing to actively suppress protestors, and pressure was mounting from Bolivia's most important trade unions (traditionally pro-Morales groups) and other civil groups that formerly supported him. Finally, the head of Bolivia's armed forces called for Morales to resign in order to «help restore peace and stability after weeks of protest». Morales announced his immediate resignation on television, stating that he was resigning to protect MAS members. He concluded by asking rioters to «stop burning down the houses of [his] brothers and sisters». A number of other high profile MAS politicians resigned shortly thereafter. It is within this context that the presence of *Alteños* in La Paz prompted discriminatory discourses, particularly related to violence.

What many foreign news outlets referred to as «riots» erupted in at least nine cities. Protesters blocked roads. Fistfights between rival factions were common, as were throwing sticks and stones. Police in almost every municipality used tear gas against civilians in the streets. As part of this repressive violence, thirty seven people were reported killed in conflicts related to the election, and more than 800 were injured (Bjork-James, 2020a). Groups supporting Morales, made primarily of coca growers, miners, and other union members (those who would be considered outside of the middle class), descended from El Alto to the streets of central La Paz, where they were outnumbered by those protesting the alleged «fraud» and, essentially, Morales.

The anti-Morales factions, included many among the middle classes. While many of those opposed to Morales were painted as economic elites,

racists, anti-Indigenous, and the like, Farthing and Arigho-Stiles (2019) point out that the post-election demonstrations also involved many in emergent middle classes whose economic status had improved under the government programs of Morales, and were less likely to align with anti-Indigenous ideologies. Anti-Morales groups in La Paz increasingly were referring to those coming from El Alto as «hordas masistas» (MAS hordes). The dean of UMSA and a journalist from the university television station, who were in part blamed for vote count problems, both had their houses burned, alongside sixty-four of the city's buses. Following these acts of arson, residents of La Paz's middle class and elite neighborhoods resurrected centuries-old descriptions of Indigenous peoples as violent, uncivilized, and savage. They specifically cited El Alto as the place from which these protesters emanated, descending the laderas looking for a fight. These forms of discourse erased any responsibility for violence among those termed «pititas»—those who guarded their neighborhoods from «invaders» by placing thin ropes called pititas (or llanitas) across road entrances.⁷

Bolivian literary scholar Edmundo Paz Soldán suggested

A widespread interpretation among the middle classes was that it was a self-attack and that former President Morales had sent express orders to his followers to «kill each other if necessary», a conclusion... that shows the implicit racism towards a political group that is seen as so savage that in order to achieve its objectives it is not even capable of respecting its own life (Paz Soldán, 2021).

The violence of those days was described differently along race and class lines: those who supported MAS, and in the La Paz context associated with El Alto were «hordes», a «mob», and «vandals», words associated with violence and lack of civility. My contacts in La Paz posted on Facebook, saying that the hordas masistas were attacking mothers and children. One friend called for «peace, and for all the pro-Evo groups to stop the violence». Various forms of media described them as attacking with weapons, stones, and sticks; as a murderous mob; and seemingly far less incendiary, as breaching police lines and as infiltrators or invaders. Yet it is this *breach of space* implied by crossing police lines and in the words «infiltrate» and «invade» that I argue underlies the sense of moral geography at work amongst middle class Paceños.

7 On 24th of October, Morales reacted to anti-MAS protestors placing pititas across roads by commenting «what strike is that?... I'm capable of giving workshops, seminars on how marches are done, so they can learn» (Página Siete, 2019) After his speech, the word «pitita» began to gain popularity among his detractors for identifying their resistance.

Conclusion

The valuations of El Alto and La Paz—in terms of both space and certain types of peoples' presence there—are wrapped up in notions of history and futurity. In some ways, discourses of development in El Alto are hopeful, that the past of El Alto was one associated with anger and rebellion, but the future may be associated with development. Whereas El Alto was once a relic, a degraded place in which people assumed to be backward clashed into the modernity associated with urban life, it now represents notions of the future for many Paceños, in a sense that as goes El Alto, so goes the nation. These discourses still reveal important underlying assumptions about space, morality, and class that are widespread. These forms of language make clear the linkages between development, safety, and acceptable forms of Indigenous subjectivity on one hand, contrasted with underdevelopment and disorder, danger, and indigeneity as undesirable, as understood by wide swaths of the Paceños population as a whole.

But the differences between understandings of middle class presence in El Alto, contrasted with discourses about the presence of Alteños in what are considered middle class and elite spaces in La Paz, add to our understanding of particularities of moral geography. It is not my contention that the very same people changed their language when Alteños entered middle class spaces of La Paz. Indeed, in some cases Soledad, María, Joél, Carmelo, and Ramón publicly supported vendors at Megacenter and the protests of MAS supporters in 2019. But seeing their commentaries as indicative of trends in speaking about El Alto as more pleasant, comfortable, and familiar space for middle class Paceños in contrast to widespread fears around the presence of Alteños in middle class spaces of La Paz allows for understanding the ways middle class Paceños position themselves at what Modan calls the deictic center of their narratives. She describes this as the «base point where a speaker locates themselves spatially, temporally, and socially» (2007, p. 148). They set up «a rigid distinction between core and marginal» people and spaces. As Mitchell contends, «landscape is part of a system of social regulation and reproduction because it is always an inseparable admixture of material form and discursive sign. The very value of a landscape—in structuring ways of life...—is precisely this mixture of textuality and materiality» (2003, p. 144).

It is worth noting that it is not just Alteños' presence in La Paz, but a particular visibility and assertion of presence that is considered «out of place». For generations, those who are prototypical Alteños, whether actually from El Alto or not, have thoroughly inundated the spaces of La Paz, but they remain unseen to many in the middle class. They are cooks

in kitchens, cleaners in homes or offices repair-people and other sorts of manual laborers. But when they make themselves undeniably visible, and with that self-exposure, assert agency as *Alteños*, they are rendered dangerous, filthy, primitive, violent, or anything that otherwise contrasts with ideals of modernity and orderliness.

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