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Review/Reseña

Sian Lazar, *El Alto, Rebel City. Self and Citizenship in Andean Bolivia*.
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The Construction of Citizenship and Indigenous Subjectivity in Bolivia

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In December 2005, the unprecedented election of indigenous leader Evo Morales as President of Bolivia crowned a complex political process that has dramatically shifted the power relations that have excluded indigenous peoples from full membership in Bolivian society since colonial times. The electoral victory of Evo Morales and his *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement Towards Socialism, or MAS), the political movement that brought together both indigenous and non-indigenous

actors and their demands, also has profound cultural resonances for the indigenous majority in Bolivia. They often decode this political event as a contemporary form of *pachakutik* or the return to a lost golden age of harmony and justice that was violently interrupted by the conquest.

Much of Morales' support comes from El Alto, a city of approximately 700,000 inhabitants strategically located "above" the capital of La Paz. Made up mostly of Aymara indigenous migrants, El Alto has emerged as a key site for Bolivian politics during the last decade. Sian Lazar's timely book, *El Alto, Rebel City*, presents a nuanced ethnographic account of how *alteños* enact a complex notion of citizenship that emerges from a complex mix of indigenous political awareness, Andean traditions, specific urban dynamics of El Alto based in a strong sense of urban/local identity, and the long-term effects of neoliberal reforms implemented since the mid-eighties. Lazar argues that this has generated a subjectivity that also incorporates elements taken from the neoliberal set of values such as self-responsibility or individual achieving.

The author's rich ethnographic account focuses in *la ciudad de El Alto*, a place that in 2003 witnessed one of the most spectacular social mobilizations led by its Aymara/indigenous inhabitants, to protest against the Bolivian government and its neoliberal policies. These series of demonstrations, blockades, and massive mobilization, known as the Gas War or *la Guerra del Gas*, forced the resignation of Bolivian president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. The crucial role that El Alto's indigenous organizations played in these social protests definitively cemented El Alto's inhabitants' reputation as fierce demonstrators. This was reinforced by El Alto's strategic location, right above Bolivia's capital city, which gives to its indigenous inhabitants the ability to lockdown access to the city of La Paz. This ability is well known, as indigenous insurgents in the historical rebellion led by Tupac Katari also utilized it in the siege of 1781, almost annihilating the Spanish population of La Paz.

But El Alto's strategic location in relation to La Paz is not the only reason why this city and its indigenous inhabitants are so important to an understanding of contemporary Bolivia. Lazar explains that the city also operates as a territorial and cultural interface between indigenous rural

communities and the central state that La Paz represents. The retreat of the Bolivian state due to neoliberal reforms, and the resulting vulnerability of the Indian population, fueled a migratory movement of impoverished rural Aymaras into the city. This, in turn, facilitated a gradual emergence of a strong grass-root indigenous movement in El Alto. El Alto's proximity to La Paz initially attracted waves of migrants fleeing from rural areas and looking for the economic opportunities the capital city offers. In a couple of decades, the vertiginous growth of El Alto transformed it from a small shantytown into a large city that rivals La Paz in size.

An example that summarizes the growing complexity of this city is the creation of the *Universidad Pública de El Alto* (The Public University of El Alto) in 2002. Interestingly enough, local associations are the main contributors for this initiative that aims to provide professional training for *alteños*. Although the author does not examine this particular case in as much detail as she does it with El Alto's Federation of Street Traders, the *Universidad Pública de El Alto* represents an excellent window to look at a nuanced, and understudied, subject making process that challenges traditional anthropological approaches to analyze contesting social subjects. The local effort to organize a university, at the heart of an urban setting tainted with resistance, ethnic demands for justice, and contestation, indicates the subtle interweaving of such "insurgent" discourses and the imaginaries of economic and social mobility that university level training implies.

Within this context of social struggle and identity politics, citizenship emerges as a major issue in the book. Citizenship, Lazar says, is a "bundle of practices that constitute encounters between the state and citizens" (5). In her compelling analysis of these practices, Lazar locates citizenship between two conflicting traditions: liberal citizenship and collectivist Andean notions of community and self. Yet she meticulously avoids, on the one hand, facile applications of western notions of citizenship (that only partially operate in Bolivian politics) and, on the other hand, depictions of indigenous' forms of political organization as relentlessly anchored in Andean traditions only. Such equilibrium is not an easy task, but can be extremely fruitful. Lazar says,

The nature of citizenship in this indigenous city indicates that we cannot understand citizenship in non-Western contexts as purely a legal status consisting of the individual ownership of a set of rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the state. Specifically, I examine the tension between collective and individual senses of self and political agency, and I consider how individualized, liberal understandings of political action interact with collectivist traditions, (...) a logic of combining that is a long-standing, if often misunderstood, feature of Bolivia. It is not simply a question of the imposition of Western notions of individual rights and citizenship onto a kind of indigenous collectivist self; rather, the citizens of El Alto creatively combine these different political resources according to the circumstances and their political aims. I therefore address particularly important issues about how citizenship can be constructed and experienced in ways completely different from those envisaged by more Eurocentric perspectives. (3)

Hence, Lazar's lens on citizenship is based on the hybrid practices through which *alteños* enact their citizenship. If we accept this permanent reworking of citizenship practices and its contents, it is unlikely that *alteños'* (and Bolivians') definition of belonging as a process has crystallized into its final stage, even with the extraordinary political developments occurred with Evo Morales's presidency. Although Lazar is not explicit about it, her take on an ongoing, and highly creative, construction of citizenship constitutes an invitation for a potentially productive research agenda for the future.

Throughout the text Lazar insists that El Alto constitutes a place where *alteños'* discourses and practices of belonging are permanently re-laborated and reworked. Street markets are the sites *par excellence* where the crossover between indigenous discourse and market-oriented strategies of survival shape a new form of subjectivity. The gigantic street markets are by far the most important economic activity of El Alto, and the multiple activities around them, such as transport and other services, add complexity to this already convoluted arena. But more importantly, the examination of El Alto's grass-root organizations, created around street markets' activities, indicates that their everyday practices generate a considerable amount of tension between El Alto's social actors. One might expect that *alteños* (either Aymaras, *Cholos* or mestizos, former miners, and non-indigenous actors), who share a tangible memory of contestation and social resistance, would show an important degree of cohesion like that

seen during the massive demonstrations of 2003. However, one of the main contributions of this book is the acknowledgement of inner tensions in indigenous subjectivity, which become evident through the description of the conflicts over the best locations to offer their products between urban merchants' organizations such as *Federación de Gremialistas* and *Asociación de Pescaderas*.

Alongside the rapid growth of this urban setting, new forms of indigenous subjectivity are being structured. No doubt the salient cycle of protests that have been consistently organized from El Alto have helped to generate the popular image of this city as a place for contestation *only*. However, Lazar avoids facile generalizations about the political nature of everyday life in El Alto. She also takes into account the convoluted social tissue generated in El Alto as a heterogeneous and conflicting place. Instead of focusing *solely* on the palpable "contesting" dimension of El Alto, Lazar also places her attention on the contradictions between two main subjectivities. On the one hand, she examines how indigenous discourse on political participation, racism, and social inequalities produced shared tenets for the immense majority of El Alto population. On the other hand, Lazar notices how another set of ideas, now centered on individual and market-oriented values, gained force among El Alto inhabitants.

For the author, what is at stake here is new forms of framing the "Indian Question". While *longue durée* exploitation and exclusion over Bolivia's indigenous population cements the claims for social justice that characterizes indigenous movement, at the same time, technical modernization, neoliberal reforms, and limited modernity are producing the emergence of a different indigenous collective self where both Andean traditions and adaptation strategies to modernization (in its neoliberal version) are mixed. Therefore, a cornerstone of her analysis of El Alto is the tension between collectiveness and individuality. Traditional anthropological frames tended to rescue collective aspects over processes of individuation. In this sense, the particular trajectories of individuals were quintessentially responses to overarching sociocultural structures. But what if the experiences, values, and expectations that bring into life *alteños'*

current subjectivity begin to gradually erode the traditional collective substratum of their social life? Lazar clearly provides an option for a “third pathway” that dwells between these two strong tendencies that collide in El Alto, namely the Andean collective traditions, and the appearance of a neoliberal subjectivity. Certainly these forces are in a delicate equilibrium, as is revealed by the cases of corruption among local leaders. Lazar interprets these cases with a nuanced combination of collective traditions, self-interest, and strategies to cope with striking poverty. Lazar emphasizes that such apparent contradiction is far from being solved; on the contrary, it is an ongoing process that shapes, and re-shapes, notions of citizenship, self, and its social practices in El Alto. Thus, Lazar argues that citizenship in El Alto cannot be measured exclusively with conventional western categories for political participation or leadership.

The dramatic growth of the informal sector of the economy—especially after the neoliberal reforms of the mid-eighties—has spawned subtle changes in social values and forms of organization, undermining the creation of collective organization among workers and citizens. Nevertheless, market competition and its correlated individual values have not been able to suppress collective organization of *alteños*. Instead, Lazar shows the continued importance of “decentralized” forms of citizenship, like trade unions or small-scale commerce. How are the inhabitants of El Alto able to enact the apparently contradictory terms of these subjectivities? Lazar offers a compelling approach to comprehend this process; a “syncretic appropriation” operates among social actors such as organization leaders or small merchants, meaning that certain practices (for instance, leaders’ formation and their personal trajectory) might be linked to an individual ethic, but are ultimately articulated through an amalgam of collective and traditional Andean practices. According to the author, this is due to the oblique form in which subjectivity gets shaped, operating fluidly “in between” different substratum. This is how “collectiveness” in El Alto (and throughout Bolivia) resists the disenfranchising pressures of the neoliberal reforms applied since the mid-eighties.

El Alto, Rebel City offers a compelling approach to understand indigenous identity and citizenship in the Andean region, challenging essentialized perspectives that tend to understand indigenous agency and cultural resilience as processes that are relevant only when they are relentlessly paired with resistance and insurgency. Lazar's book does not propose a new "program" to examine indigenous subjectivity in the Andes, but she certainly gives us a glimpse of a much more complex scenario, one where the formation of indigenous subjectivity is the result of a delicate and constant process that gets reworked in daily practices and discourses.

This book deals with a major challenge in contemporary scholarship, which is to depict how indigenous communities creatively seek to make citizenship and traditional forms of belonging compatible. In this sense, Lazar succeeds in showing *alteños* as social subjects who resist essentialized descriptions. On the contrary, *alteños*' notions of citizenship and self are composed by the blending of left-inspired discourses, ethnic demands, racial conflicts, social mobility images, and market-oriented values. The amount of ethnographic evidence and its careful post-field analysis indicate the success of Lazar's project. One might wonder whether these same processes characterize the rest of indigenous Bolivia. Or is this just a story about El Alto? The lack of a comparative (or wider) perspective does not erase the book's compelling argument on the complexities behind indigenous notions of citizenship. This is an important contribution to the growing scholarly debate generated around the Bolivian political process that gained international attention with Evo Morales' administration. Lazar's excellent book shows that what really made such dramatic turn in Bolivian politics possible was the emergence of grass-rooted movements such as those observed in El Alto.