Part I

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Ruptures

2 • City of the Future

The rising sun momentarily illuminates a peeling billboard on the road from the airport to La Paz that reads "El Alto: City of the Future." The early morning rays bathe the distant peaks of the Andes in an almost preternatural golden glow. A cold wind stirs, picking up dust and pieces of trash. A street vendor wraps a shawl more tightly around her shoulders as she serves a steaming beverage to commuters en route to La Paz. Farther along, young fare collectors hang from the doors of minibuses, shouting out prices and soliciting passengers for the trip to the Plaza Pérez Velasco, the first stop for many minibuses traveling from El Alto to La Paz. "A La Pérez un boliviano, La Pérez un boliviano," yells one boy, who struggles to fill a minibus with two more riders before departing. The fare, however, abruptly drops to 70 centavos, when another minibus pulls alongside. "La Pérez 70, La Pérez 70," he bellows, trying to lift his voice above the competition but pronouncing the words so rapidly that they run together in an almost unintelligible slur.

We are in "La Ceja"—literally, "the Eyebrow"—the nerve center of El Alto, more than two miles above sea level on the Bolivian high plateau, or *altiplano*, and the gateway to La Paz, several thousand feet below. El Alto has grown on the western edge of Bolivia's capital city, where the broad expanse of the altiplano meets the rugged canyons that shelter La Paz, which was founded in 1548. This is an area of cold winds, low temperatures, searing sunshine, and scant vegetation. Night-time temperatures frequently drop below freezing during the coldest winter months of June and July. Although the cold is alleviated in the daytime by a brilliant sun that burns

Ayamara countryside, ten to fifteen miles outside La Paz

down from a crystalline blue sky, bone-chilling winds often cancel the sun's warmth. The winds abate when the frosty dry winter gradually gives way to the summer rainy season (November–March), but heavy showers that cast a damp chill over the city often preempt the more clement weather.

When El Alto separated from La Paz in 1988 and became a city in its own right, municipal boosters erected the billboard that so enthusiastically heralds the birth of the new metropolis. But why, a visitor might reasonably have asked, did they find so much reason for optimism? The country, and particularly El Alto, was in the grip of a wrenching crisis. Social indicators—unemployment figures, infant mortality rates, housing statistics, and public access to social services—suggested that living conditions were getting worse, not better. The city's spectacular growth only aggravated these problems: the annual rate of expansion hovered around 9 percent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which contrasted with a 4 percent rate of population growth nationwide (INE 1992).

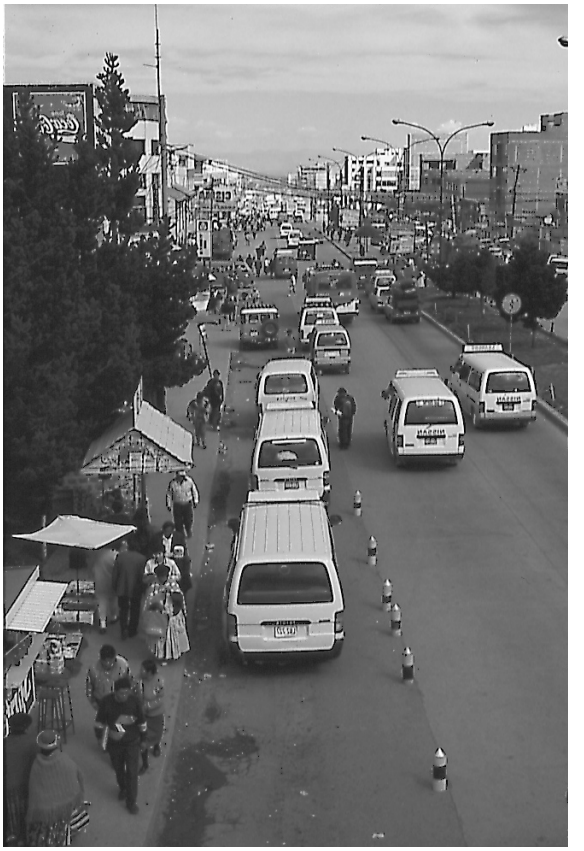
By 1995 nearly a half-million people lived in the city. Although many in the city's younger population cohort were born in El Alto, most of their parents emigrated from the rural Aymara hinterland of La Paz department; indeed, 92 percent of El Alto's residents were born in the city or the surrounding countryside (INE 1992). High prices and unaffordable rents in

La Paz drove another big group into El Alto, and thousands of Quechua-speaking miners resettled in El Alto after state mines shut down in the 1980s.

What the "City of the Future" represented to the people who encountered it—as native sons and daughters, longtime residents, recent arrivals, temporary sojourners, or passing motorists—varied tremendously. For affluent residents of La Paz, El Alto was stillborn from the very beginning; indeed, the very suggestion that El Alto could be the future—their future—struck them as a sick joke. The economic depression of the 1980s had already shaken them to the core, and imagining their destiny intertwined with El Alto's was more than they could tolerate. From the comfort of their homes in the warm low elevations of La Paz, El Alto appeared to overflow with filth and contagion. Its destitute indigenous inhabitants fed their more affluent neighbors' fears of crime and rebellion, and El Alto's expanding perimeter—pushed steadily by legions of new immigrants—evoked images of a permanent stain (*la mancha urbana*) that would spread inexorably across the flat treeless landscape and threaten to engulf them. Well-heeled *paceños* (residents of La Paz) therefore entered El Alto only when absolutely necessary, such as when they were on their way to another destination. Some had to go to the airport, located in the center of El Alto. Others sped through on the Panamerican Highway, heading to weekend redoubts on Lake Titicaca. Most never stopped in El Alto.

Standing in El Alto on the rim of the canyon overlooking La Paz and contemplating the steel-and-glass skyscrapers that rise from the city center below puts the crushing poverty—and the abundant wealth—of metropolitan La Paz in stark perspective. Symbolic of the increasing concentration of wealth in Bolivia, many of these gleaming monoliths are the product of "free" financial markets, which have allowed cocaine traffickers to repatriate their profits and launder them in the construction industry. The urban tableau, etched against the backdrop of the majestic snow-capped Mount Illimani, is extraordinary, but it is also an affront to those who must endure the indignities of daily life in El Alto, Bolivia's fourth largest city.

If one ventures down the canyon from El Alto, past the city center, to La Paz's Zona Sur at the opposite end of the metropolitan area, one sees the extreme measures that the rich are taking to protect themselves. Here lies the exclusive neighborhood of Aranjuez, a gated community of large garish houses. Security guards strictly control entry, allowing only residents and their visitors past the gate. When I entered the neighborhood one day without permission, a nervous guard told me to leave, because, he said,



Minibuses in El Alto provided transportation for urban residents.

"People are very touchy here." (La gente se pone muy susceptible aquí.)[1] Other neighborhoods in the affluent Zona Sur are increasingly constructing their own shopping centers and restaurants so that residents do not have to venture into the city center for these services.

Despite the growing disparities between rich and poor, "the City of the Future" still means something important to many people who settle in El Alto. It represents their hopes and dreams of a better life, or, at the very least, of another chance. Recent immigrants often complain that urban life is no better, and sometimes even worse, than in the countryside. Yet the city does hold certain attractions for them. In rural areas schools do not extend beyond the third grade, so El Alto offers immigrant children more educational possibilities. It also lures people with the hope of jobs—any

Aranjuez neighborhood, Zona Sur (southern zone), La Paz

Central El Alto

job—that will allow them to pursue dignified lives and attain the modicum of subsistence security that was wrenched from their grasp in rural areas and mining centers. Running water—even if only from a distant public spigot—and cooking on a gas-fueled stove can also ease the domestic burden of women, who walk long distances in rural areas to obtain water and firewood. But these minimal services and opportunities have grown more restricted since the mid-1980s.

Of course, everyone in El Alto does not succeed; a great many never do. But even though living conditions have worsened, some people acquire part of what they want for themselves and their families, and a few consider themselves quite successful. These people are a source of inspiration to others, which is one reason that people with few other options keep coming to the city. The pride that so many people have, either in their accomplishments or about their lives, belies the notion of El Alto as a cold forbidding slum.

Slum is a pejorative that devalues the lives of people in poor urban neighborhoods, and it is misleading for several reasons. For U.S. suburbanites, slum provokes fears of street violence, and it conjures up images of decay: decrepit tenements, leaky pipes, cockroach-infested apartments, and crumbling public housing projects. These images tell us little about the ways that residents of poor U.S. neighborhoods struggle to live dignified lives and build meaningful relationships with each other. And they completely misrepresent El Alto. Although dilapidated buildings do exist and most housing is inadequate, El Alto is a new city: the people have built most of the dwellings with adobe or kiln-fired bricks and corrugated metal roofs, and, because of the high altitude, El Alto has very few insects.

Similarly, crime certainly exists, and many people will tell you that it is getting worse.[2] Yet compared to New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Medellín, Rio de Janeiro, San Salvador, and other cities of the United States and Latin America, El Alto is a relatively peaceful place. Few people own guns, and the homicide rate in El Alto, and Bolivia in general, is low. Equally important, the police do not regularly use deadly force against criminal suspects.[3] This is not to say, however, that people are content with the police force. Complaints of police ineffectiveness are widespread, and many people believe that police officers are less interested in protecting citizens than in separating them from their money through fines and the extraction of bribes.

Explaining the comparative tranquility of El Alto is not easy; indeed, the poverty and social inequality are so severe that one might ask why people do not own guns. Part of the explanation may be that the drug traffic has largely

bypassed El Alto, and the gang warfare and police violence associated with it elsewhere have not become major problems. Another explanation for El Alto's low levels of violent crime is, perhaps, the intricate network of grassroots associations (e.g., mothers' clubs, neighborhood committees, civic associations, labor organizations, soccer leagues, and folkloric groups), some nongovernmental organizations, and churches that struggle against considerable chaos and disarray to sustain a modicum of economic security, decency, and social solidarity.

The Catholic Church is a major presence in the city. An imposing cathedral looms above humble adobe homes on the western edge of El Alto, and a variety of less ostentatious local churches house numerous neighborhood congregations throughout the city. More than half of El Alto's residents (71 percent) profess adherence to Catholicism, and many priests, religious, and lay catechists do their best to minister to the needs, both spiritual and material, of this population. For example, Father Vitaliano Choque—a Bolivian Aymara—meets periodically with a number of Christian base communities to read the Bible and discuss its implications for people's daily lives. Christian base communities are Catholic congregations that emerged in the 1960s from reforms in the Catholic Church and the desire to encourage progressive social change. Their expressed purpose is to bring together small groups of people for reflection, the formation of social awareness, and the struggle for social justice. Father Vitaliano, who receives little encouragement or support from the Catholic hierarchy, works with these groups to build a sense of community and forge a critical understanding of the social problems that weigh heavily on them.

Yet many of El Alto's residents are Catholic in name only, and the city has considerable religious mobility. Many professed Catholics rarely, if ever, attend mass, and limit their dealings with the church to baptisms, funerals, and other major life passages. These individuals, together with about forty-two thousand others who express no religious preference, are frequently drawn to a variety of evangelical churches that are mainly Protestant and have sprung up across the city in recent years. The churches include the Baptists, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Seventh-day Adventists, but the Pentecostals represent the majority of new denominations.

Pentecostal *cultos*, or worship services, are ecstatic events characterized by music, singing, and praying. They are intensely participatory occasions in which congregants receive the healing power of the Holy Spirit by collectively cleansing themselves of sin. The cultos occur several times a week and provide residents—particularly new immigrants and women—with an institutional setting in which to build and reaffirm new social relation-

ships. Unlike the Catholic base communities, which focus on social inequality, the Pentecostal culto concentrates more closely on the individual and self-sacrifice as a means of personal improvement. A growing number of people are experimenting with Pentecostalism and other forms of evangelical Protestantism as they search for new solutions to their problems, and as established institutions, particularly state agencies, fail to adequately address their suffering.

In addition to the churches, 285 neighborhood committees, or *juntas de vecinos*, operate around the city, and together they form the Federación de Juntas de Vecinos de El Alto (FEJUVE). These local groups seek to improve the quality of life in particular urban neighborhoods by channeling the demands of residents for electricity, sewerage, potable water, land titles, and other social services to state officials. The most dynamic neighborhood committees are those that struggle to represent rural immigrants on the expanding urban periphery. Unlike residents in older, more established neighborhoods, where a minimal urban infrastructure exists, people in outlying areas lack all basic services, and unscrupulous land speculators frequently prey upon them. Thus new immigrants usually initiate the formation of a junta de vecinos to obtain title to their property.

Forming a neighborhood committee is a complicated matter. Local groups receive legal recognition only after the state approves an urban settlement plan. For the state to grant this approval, which paves the way for land titling and the provision of services, a minimum of two hundred families must inhabit a designated area. Yet many lot owners are unable to move immediately into the new settlements, because they lack the funds to build a home or because they have not established the urban contacts that are crucial for a successful move to the city. Land speculators may also simply retain empty urban lots until real estate values increase and they can sell the land at a higher price (Sandóval and Sostres 1989). To make matters worse, the state cannot keep pace with the demand for services, and as neoliberal restructuring further reduces its budget, providing social services to new neighborhoods is usually a painfully slow process.

As state agencies have retrenched under neoliberalism, a plethora of nominally private nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have proliferated across El Alto and partially taken the agencies' place. These grassroots development institutions do not engage in large-scale urban infrastructure projects, such as constructing sewage systems or installing electricity. They do, however, attempt to provide urban residents with some relief from the city's grinding poverty through a series of small-scale projects funded by organizations in North America and Western Europe. Such projects include

adult literacy classes, small business development, home construction loans and support, day care centers, seminars on gender and sexuality issues, and health clinics.

By the mid-1990s conservative estimates put forty NGOs in El Alto. Some NGOs concentrate their projects exclusively in particular neighborhoods of the city, but others operate programs in La Paz and other parts of Bolivia as well as El Alto. Many NGOs maintain their headquarters in La Paz, where most of the professional staff lives, but a few are headquartered in El Alto, primarily in the commercial neighborhoods of La Ceja and Villa 16 de Julio. The largest NGOs employ thirty to forty people, but a great many operate with staffs of five or six and survive on shoestring budgets that are renewed, or canceled, by international sponsors on a project-by-project basis.

The offices of the largest NGOs typically contain computers, fax and photocopy machines, telephones and space heaters, and a four-wheel drive vehicle for chauffeuring staff members to project sites. In addition to the professional staff, who are mostly white and university educated, a group of lower-paid employees—"popular educators," who come from urban Aymara backgrounds—maintains the most direct daily involvement with project participants. They, along with the secretary, caretaker, driver, and maid, make up the category of "support staff" [*personal de apoyo*]. NGO salaries reflect one's position in this hierarchy, but they are generally superior to comparable jobs in the state sector and much better than the income of most alteños.

Although clientelism frequently undermines the democratic potential of these urban organizations, and political factionalism often divides them, the churches, neighborhood committees, NGOs, and others, such as civic associations, unions, and folkloric groups, try to uphold a measure of dignity and well-being among urban residents. The abundance of local forms of association in El Alto contrasts markedly with other cities. Consider, for example, Deborah Levenson-Estrada's description of the bleak associational life of Guatemala City's working-class residents:

> For a variety of reasons including political repression and instability of housing and employment, there developed little durable grass roots community organization to shelter the laboring poor from the difficulties of urban life except voluntary fire fighter organizations and Alcoholics Anonymous, groups that depended entirely on their local members. In addition, the city was bereft of private or state-authored systems of relief or improvement because no one with power

> was interested in reforming the urban populations' housing, sanitary conditions, health or morals. (1994:62)

Similarly, Elizabeth Leeds (1996) describes how drug dealing, state violence, and the absence of state-sponsored social services have disempowered community organizations in low-income neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro. She explains that even as procedural democracy expands in Brazil, poor neighborhoods are growing more violent, and local organizations are being undermined, because residents must contend with the illegal violence of drug traffickers and the official violence of state security forces. Leeds observes that

> In a society such as Brazil, where the poorer segments of the population are frequently ignored by the state except in the form of police repression, the need to create autonomous local forms of decision making and service provision becomes part of survival. When these forms are eroded by parallel, authoritarian, and frequently violent power structures, then formal democratic structures of the national polity become meaningless.
>
> The form that drug dealing has taken in the favelas [poor urban neighborhoods], due to the state's failure to provide basic services and state repression in creating the perception of danger to justify heavy-handed police or military action, has permitted the establishment of new channels of clientelistic relationships. The drug dealers themselves have in many instances created a forced symbiosis—alternative welfare "services" in exchange for protection and anonymity—while undermining the authority of legitimately elected local leaders. (1996:77)

Many first-generation rural immigrants also maintain varying degrees of contact and involvement with their natal communities. Of course, the quality of these ties varies over time, and some immigrants benefit more directly from them than others, but maintaining connections to rural kinfolk is a strategy that some immigrants have used successfully to protect themselves from full exposure to the market, the state, and elites during periods of crisis and unemployment. In this sense they are unlike urban-born industrial proletarians, who may no longer retain these ties and who face more difficulties weathering the disruptions generated by capitalism because their jobs are their only resources. We should not, however, overstate the efficacy of urban-rural ties. The extent to which alteños and their rural kinfolk can continue to partially protect themselves remains an open question, as their survival strategies are placed under more and more pressure.

State policies and the state's resolute refusal to attend to the needs of its citizens are seriously eroding the social relationships upon which people depend for their daily survival. Poor alteños must vie for an increasingly inadequate living, while they are forced to turn to other impoverished residents for some of what they need. The resulting tensions, partially rooted in new and old forms of domination, fuel an array of complex struggles among alteños—young and old, men and women, urban-born and rural immigrants, "Indians" and cholos, employed and underemployed—that simmer beneath the surface of daily life and sometimes erupt into the open.

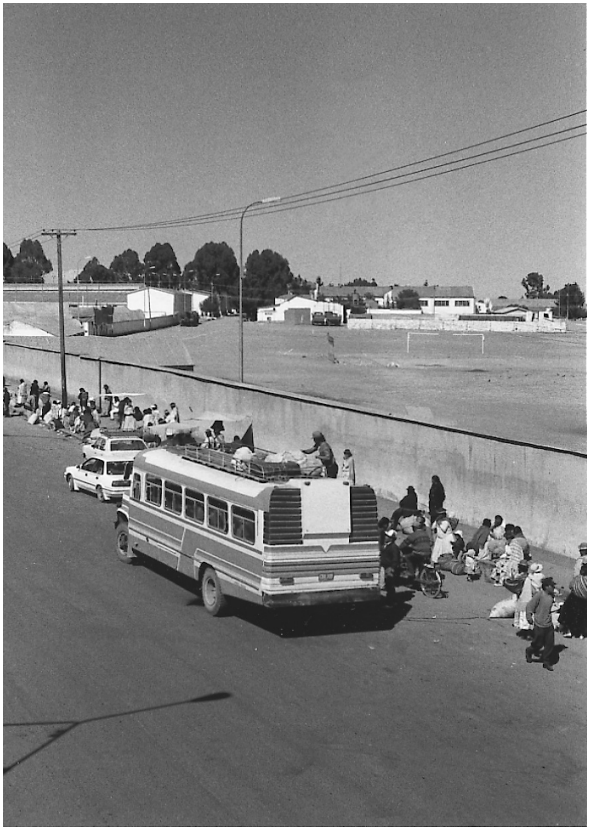
"Community," insofar as its exists in different places around the city, is an extremely unstable amalgam of social relationships relative to the conflicts and contradictions that generate, sustain, and often dissolve it. Most El Alto neighborhoods are not tightly knit homogeneous places that can be defined by this concept. Indigenous Aymara immigrants live on the same streets with former miners and longtime urban dwellers, and neighborhoods may be little more than reference points for people who must travel far from home in search of jobs, housing, health care, and contact with kinfolk and friends. Because of constant economic insecurity, people are continually forced into a series of contacts with relative strangers. There is considerable movement from one work site to another: from factory work to part-time construction jobs, from domestic service to street vending, from street vending to artisanry, and so forth. Long-term stable employment is virtually unknown. Consequently, putting down roots (*hacer raices*) is not easy, and those who attain a degree of permanency in a particular location do so with great effort.

El Alto's physical development has done little to facilitate the social integration of the city, which has expanded along three major highways and two railway lines. The Viacha and Oruro-Cochabamba highways cut across the city in the south, and the Panamerican Highway transects the city in the north. These thoroughfares have contributed to the growth of El Alto as a dynamic regional entrepôt. They link the city not only to La Paz but also to the rural hinterland, other Bolivian towns and cities, and neighboring Chile. But far from promoting its internal cohesiveness, these highways disarticulate the city's social life. For example, pedestrians trying to cross the Panamerican Highway where it passes the Villa 16 de Julio either risk being crushed by speeding trucks and minibuses, or they walk several blocks to reach an elevated crosswalk. Residents along the other roadways do not even enjoy the benefit of pedestrian crossings, and stop lights are rare.

Similarly, two military bases—both legacies of the cold war—are strate-

gically located at opposite ends of the city, where the military monitors the local population and controls access to La Paz. The air force base in the northern zone dates from the late 1940s, and an army base has controlled the city's southern flank since 1971, when it was established by the regime of General Hugo Banzer Suárez (1971–1978). High walls effectively seal the air force base off from the city, and many residents consider the military's activities behind the walls to belong to a different world. Yet they are well aware of the repressive role that the military often plays in their daily lives.

The army base, for example, is situated on the La Paz–Oruro highway, which connects the capital to the mining districts. Soldiers from this post have frequently disrupted the protests of miners, who have marched on La Paz from the mining centers on numerous occasions, and the army has



Civilians waiting for transportation outside the air force base

more recently put down the demonstrations of striking public school teachers. The bases also provide comfort for those who worry about the intentions of neighboring Chile. Most important, however, is that the military installations ease the anxieties of a small minority of paceño whites, who fear an onslaught of the indigenous masses of El Alto and the surrounding countryside. Such fears are fueled not only by the growing number of poor immigrants that populate the city but also by actual historical events. The encirclement and siege of La Paz in the eighteenth century by indigenous rebels under the leadership of Tupac Katari continues to be a reference point for both whites and indigenous people, who have very different interpretations of its significance.

When I asked residents what defensive purpose the bases served, several responded with sardonic smiles and replied that the military defended La Paz against *la gente* (the people). Yet for many of them, the military's presence in their city passes with little notice or comment most of the time. The military is not actively repressing people, as it does in the coca-producing region of the Chapare. Residents therefore do not perceive of themselves as living in an "occupied city" and at times take the military's presence for granted, because under normal circumstances residents do not perceive the soldiers as threats. Young conscripts on weekend leave flock to the Sunday market in 16 de Julio like hundreds of other people. They may also seek out odd jobs with vendors or local residents to earn money to spend on the various goods and diversions that the market offers. Residents refer affectionately to them as *soldaditos*, or little soldiers. I have frequently heard people express concern for the "poor little soldiers" [*pobres soldaditos*], when exhausted recruits jog in formation back to the air force base at the end of a strenuous day of drills and exercises. The concern of local people is not hard to understand: many of these young men are the sons, brothers, and husbands of El Alto residents.

Living on the Rim

Unlike other Third World cities, such as Singapore, Jakarta, Bangkok, Dhaka, and the free-trade zones on the U.S.-Mexico border, El Alto has not attracted transnational corporations searching for cheap pliable labor. The poor infrastructure and harsh climate may be reasons; another explanation may be the long history of popular mobilization and unionization in Bolivia. Peasant organizations of the altiplano have persistently targeted the state with the demands of rural people, and the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), the nation's leading trade union organization, has champi-

oned workers' rights for decades. Although the COB has suffered major setbacks in recent years, labor militancy is still part of the lived experiences of many alteños. By contrast, immigrants to Thai and Malaysian cities may never have heard of a labor union, a factor that makes these cities highly attractive to globe-trotting corporations.[4]

El Alto remains—for the time being—a backwater of the global economy, a city of immigrants dislocated from their old ways of life. Before the 1950s, most of the five thousand hectares now occupied by El Alto were covered by rural estates and controlled by landlords who lived in La Paz. A rail line connected the region with the port of Guaqui on Lake Titicaca, and most inhabitants of the area lived in the encampment that grew up around the rail terminus. An aviation school, which eventually became the airport, was founded in 1923, and the offices of the Bolivian National Airlines—Lloyd Aéreo Boliviano—were established there in 1925. Some large landlords began to sell off portions of their properties for urban development in the 1940s, but the emergence of El Alto really got underway after the 1952 revolution, which dramatically reorganized the political, social, and economic life of the country (Sandóval and Sostres 1989).

The revolutionary transformation bore directly on the development of El Alto in a number of ways. The government, led by the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), abolished unpaid labor. This act freed thousands of Aymara peasants from the control of rural landlords and enabled them to decide where and to whom to sell their labor. In addition, the MNR implemented a sweeping land reform that effectively dismantled the large altiplano haciendas and redistributed the land to former tenants and indigenous communities. After the disappearance of the haciendas and the landlords who controlled them, the beneficiaries of these reforms established new marketing networks that no longer revolved around the estates, and they strove to produce enough food from the newly acquired fields to satisfy the subsistence needs of their households.

Peasants' hopes of subsistence security were short lived, however. The government and foreign-aid organizations directed economic assistance to Bolivia's eastern lowlands, where a new group of agricultural exporters began to emerge on land that had been unaffected by the land reform. Aymara peasants of the altiplano never received the credit, technical assistance, and price supports that enabled lowland commercial agriculture to develop and prosper.[5] Moreover, the subsequent fragmentation of landholdings through inheritance reduced the average size of fields and made subsistence agriculture increasingly difficult. Forced to continue supplementing the returns of agriculture with waged labor, many peasants set

their sights on the city of La Paz, and a steady stream of immigrants in the 1950s became a flood by the 1970s and 1980s.

From a few core villas, or neighborhoods, clustered around the area known as La Ceja, El Alto expanded. In 1950 only eleven thousand people lived in the area, but ten years later the number had almost tripled (Sandóval and Sostres 1989). In the 1960s Elvira Canasas was one of the early immigrants to settle in La Ceja, after she and her family left the Caracoles mining camp. More than thirty years later Canasas recalled how quiet and empty the area was, and she remembered the complete absence of water. To obtain it, Canasas, who was a young girl, collected the scalding hot water discharged from the trains after they entered the station. "Everybody wanted that water," she told me, "and I started collecting it when I was ten years old. The other girls and I would wait for the trains from Arica and Guaqui to arrive. Sometimes they came in at one or two o'clock in the morning. We would always be there with our empty cans. The water came out of a pipe by the engines, and sometimes it burned us because it had passed through the motor."

By 1992 the dramatic growth of the city had moved some residents to declare that El Alto was the "Aymara Capital of the World" (Morales 1994), but government bureaucrats saw a city out of control. City officials and paceño elites worried for years that so many new arrivals would disrupt their control of city politics, and they were therefore quite relieved when El Alto became an autonomous city in 1988. Some of their fears were not unfounded. Beginning in the late 1980s alteños, disillusioned with the established political parties, gave overwhelming electoral support to a talk show host named Carlos Palenque and his party, Conciencia de la Patria (CONDEPA). Until his untimely death in 1997, Palenque hosted a popular television and radio program called *La tribuna libre del pueblo,* which addressed the ordinary problems of women and men who lived in the poor neighborhoods of La Paz and El Alto. Individuals brought their difficulties to the show and were supported by "Compadre" Palenque and his female sidekick, the "Comadre" Remedios, an urban Aymara woman, or *cholita*. The couple appeared to listen sympathetically to highly emotional tales of grief and then offered help by denouncing the authorities or intervening with them, appealing to listeners for assistance, or simply expressing their sympathy. Palenque used the program and its popularity to thrust himself onto the national political stage, where mainstream political parties and traditional elites routinely condemned his brand of "cholo populism." Yet CONDEPA captured the mayoralty of El Alto and held it for most of the 1990s, and, with the backing of poor paceños, it won the La Paz mayoralty in 1993.

Although Compadre Palenque never offered more than individualistic solutions to the collective poverty and suffering of people in El Alto and La Paz, he addressed the hopes, fears, and feelings of marginalization of many poor urban Aymaras. While national politicians were waging a determined assault on the lives of the poor, Palenque spoke caringly to them as individuals and appeared to take their suffering seriously. After he died of a heart attack, his image appeared to a La Paz mechanic on a rock, which immediately became the focus of popular devotion and media attention. Many of Palenque's followers refused to believe that he was really dead and declared that he had become "the saint of the poor" [*El santo de los pobres*]. The hopes, fears, frustrations, and dilemmas that he addressed did not diminish with his passing.

El Alto consists of three broadly defined zones and a far-flung perimeter. La Ceja is the heart of El Alto, the seat of municipal government, and the dividing line between the northern and southern regions of the city. La Ceja is the oldest and most commercialized section of the city, and its residents are merchants, teachers, and public employees who are generally more prosperous and have greater access to social services than the occupants of outlying zones. Most popular organizations associated with the city have their headquarters in La Ceja, including the Federación de Juntas de Vecinos de El Alto (FEJUVE); the Central Obrera Regional (COR), an affiliate of the COB; and the Comité Cívico de El Alto, a local civic association.

During the daytime female vendors clog the streets in this part of town. Many come from other parts of the city to sell their wares, and most wear the distinctive dress of urban Aymara women—brightly colored shawls, bowler hats, and full gathered skirts. They are frequently accompanied by small children, who, wrapped securely in a shawl and tied to their mother's back, observe the world as it passes by on the streets. A profusion of minivans competes with the street vendors and pedestrians for space in and along the cobblestoned streets of La Ceja. All public transportation to and from La Paz converges in this area, and the congestion is often overwhelming.

The northern zone is most noted for the heavy concentration of rural Aymara immigrants and a small Aymara petty bourgeoisie based in commerce. One of its villas—the Villa Pacajes—takes its name from the rural province in which so many of the residents were born. In the early morning hours groups of men and women from this region and across the city leave their homes to catch buses for work, and children head off to school. The bleak treeless streets are quiet and eerily deserted in the daytime, when gusts of wind stir up swirling clouds of dust. Those residents who are not

working in other parts of the city carry out domestic tasks behind the high walls that enclose their homes. They are typically teenage daughters, who, in their mother's absence, take care of younger siblings, or they are elderly people entrusted with similar tasks. The distant backfiring of a truck occasionally breaks the silence of the streets, or the stillness is disrupted by groups of immigrant women wielding picks and shovels to lay cobblestones and dig drainage ditches under the auspice of the Food for Work Program sponsored by the mayor's office and an NGO. Otherwise, large furry dogs that loll in the sunshine or scavenge for garbage patrol the streets until perceived intruders challenge their territorial claims.

Fiestas periodically brighten the daily round in this part of town. During the days preceding Todos Santos, or the Day of the Dead (All Saints' Day), residents bake large quantities of bread to offer to the spirits of the deceased. They fashion most of the bread into simple loaves, but human bread figures, or *t'anta wawas* (bread babies), are also a common sight in the markets and the homes of alteños during Todos Santos. People take the bread, along with other food and alcohol, to cemeteries around the city, where people visit the graves of deceased loved ones and offer food to wandering souls. Residents produce so much bread on the eve of Todos Santos that purchasing it is virtually impossible for two or three days afterward—demand is so low that bakeries stop production.

Daytime street scene

Family with bread for the Day of the Dead (All Saints' Day)

Children with bread figures, a feature of the Day of the Dead

Neighborhood fiestas that commemorate the founding of various villas also punctuate daily life in El Alto. In the northern zone the largest is the yearly celebration that marks the founding of the Villa 16 de Julio. Dance groups, dressed in elegant costumes, draw throngs of spectators as they parade along the Panamerican Highway and force traffic to detour. This parade—like its more famous counterpart, the Fiesta del Señor del Gran Poder in La Paz—demonstrates the newly acquired wealth and self-confidence of a prosperous group of Aymara merchants.[6] They belong to a relative handful of successful urban entrepreneurs who have the means to craft and assert an extremely visual, expensive, and highly public notion of urban Aymara ethnicity—one that is less available to their more impoverished brethren for whom "Aymaraness" is more commonly associated with rural poverty, backwardness, and being "Indian."

A huge biweekly fair with approximately ten thousand officially recognized vendors also takes place in Villa 16 de Julio. The fair extends over many blocks and vividly displays the extent to which street vending has exploded under neoliberalism. The fair brings merchants and prospective buyers together from all over the country. A heady array of fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, and dry goods is on display early in the morning, as is a variety of herbs, elixirs, animals, and powders for an assortment of physical ailments. Merchants also peddle used automobiles and trucks, spare parts, stereo equipment, furniture, and small appliances.

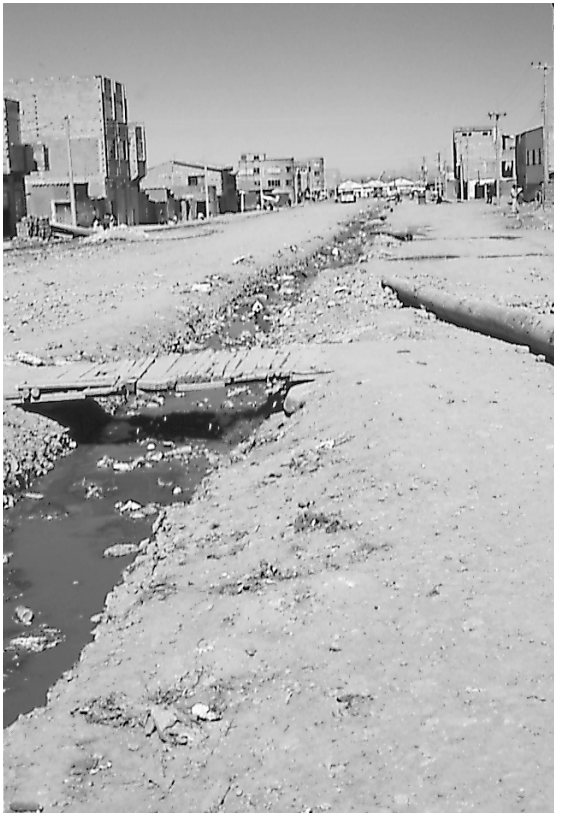
Most notable, however, is a vigorous trade in used clothing from the United States. Today more vendors than ever sell secondhand clothing in the 16 de Julio market. Alteños and Bolivians from many walks of life purchase it because their working conditions have stagnated or deteriorated, and they cannot afford the cost of new clothes. One resident, whose street has been taken over by the vendors, observes that now "even the refined people from La Paz come. We see them on the street all the time with their fancy cars and their cellular telephones." These "refined people" are usually sellers who are profiting from trade liberalization, which has created new economic opportunities for local importers and also for U.S.-based textile recycling firms. The latter purchase used clothes from charities in the United States and repackage them in bales for export to the Third World.[7]

While 16 de Julio in particular and the northern zone in general are the most commercially dynamic areas of El Alto, the southern part of the city is the poorest and most underserved. It contains many Aymara immigrants, a large group of former tin miners, and pockets of an impoverished non-Aymara middle class. With the exception of the Ciudad Satélite, where the neat matchbox houses and cobblestone streets resemble a La Paz

Used clothing for sale

Used clothing section of the 16 de Julio Market

suburb, rutted streets, open sewers, and makeshift dwellings fill this region. Angel Pérez, his wife, Maria, and their three children—aged two, three, and twelve—live here, and, like nearly a quarter of all alteños, they are renters. The family occupies a small room with a dirt floor in the Villa Exaltación. The room is divided by a piece of blue plastic. On one side, they have stacked two bunk beds against the wall. The children sleep on top, the parents on the bottom. On the other side is a table, two chairs, and a television, and the family's belongings are piled against the wall. Maria Pérez cooks meals on a small stove in an adjacent space. Although there is electricity, there is no water, and the family must share an outdoor privy with other families. For these accommodations the Pérez family pays $40 a month.



Open sewer in southern El Alto

They would like to own their own home, but when I met the Pérez family in 1995, they had been unable to save much money. They had come to El Alto from La Paz in 1993 to reduce expenses and to be closer to the biweekly market in the Villa 16 de Julio, where Angel and Maria Pérez sell quilts and bedspreads. Traveling to work was less expensive and time consuming than from La Paz, and renting a room was more economical as well. Yet fluctuating sales and periodic family emergencies always seemed to eat away any extra earnings that they set aside. Like thousands of other families, they confronted living conditions that consumed their earnings, sapped their energy, extended their work days, and threatened their health in a city that was unable to satisfy their most basic needs.

The Bolivian government's adoption of free-market policies in the mid-1980s substantially aggravated these conditions, and additional reform legislation in the mid-1990s made these policies even tougher. The chapters that follow explore these policies and how they influenced daily life in the city.