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# Claiming Autonomous Spaces in El Alto, Bolivia

## Challenging Injustices from the Grass Roots in a Conflict over Public Transport in District 3

*Mathias Krams*

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### **Abstract**

How can injustices and dominant power relations that obstruct citizens' political participation be challenged? This article approaches that question through an exploration of *autonomously claimed spaces* – a space for civic action that has been given particular attention in social movement research and the study of resistance. It will explore how *autonomous claimed spaces* are created, how they shape actions within them, and how they interact with institutionalised movement spaces to challenge injustices. For this, the article looks at the reactions of neighbours in El Alto (Bolivia) to irresponsible profit-seeking practices on the local level, specifically at a conflict over the provision of public transport in district 3. This exploration highlights the importance of *autonomous claimed spaces* as temporary correctives to misuses of power and as starting points for mobilisation. It demonstrates how *autonomous claimed spaces* and a movement's institutionalised spaces function as interdependent elements with fluid boundaries in a common struggle for social justice.

*Keywords:* autonomous spaces, capitalism, change, resistance, social movements

### **Introduction**

With over 80 percent of its inhabitants being of indigenous descent (Webber 2012: 48) and containing a “large population of the (social and economic)

outcasts of neo-liberal policies” (Arbona 2007: 128), El Alto is regarded as the emblem of “racial and economic exclusion in Bolivia” (Arbona 2005: 10; cf. Deledicque & Contartese 2009: 136; Gill 2000: 1). At the same time, it has historically been the epicentre of social rebellions and fights against “neoliberalism and the coloniality of power” (Deledicque & Contartese 2009: 135)<sup>1</sup>. El Alto is therefore a fertile field for exploring the question of how injustices and dominant power relations in capitalist societies can be challenged, which will be done in this article based on an example from the local context (Harvey 2012: 150).

To this end, a spatial perspective shall be adopted. Spatial perspectives have been integrated in the study of social movements and contentious politics in various ways, looking for example at the “territorialisation of social movements” (cf. Zibechi 2012: 14), transnational networks of activism (cf. Tarrow 2005, Cumbers et al. 2008; Routledge 2000) and how spaces shape movements’ actions or how social movements constitute spaces of action in themselves (Nicholls et al. 2013; Routledge 1993, Tilly 2000, Haug 2013). This article will focus specifically on spaces for civic action; that is, spaces where citizens can influence and shape politics and initiate social change in terms of improving living conditions and reducing citizens’ exploitation. Gaventa (2006) defines these spaces as “opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests” (Gaventa 2006: 26). Using such an action-oriented definition of space allows us to look not only at how actors’ agency is “shaped and constrained by the spatial environments” in which they act, but also at how simultaneously political agents such as social movements produce “new spatial structures and relations” (Sewell 2001: 55) as a “technology of struggle” (Nicholls et al 2013: 13).<sup>2</sup>

Cornwall (2002) distinguishes between two kinds of spaces produced by social movements according to their permanence: firstly, “relatively durable institutionalised spaces” from which citizens try to “influence public policy through advocacy and the mobilisation dissent” and which might even “assume some of the functions of government” (Cornwall 2002: 21f.). And secondly, spaces that “lend temporary visibility to identities, issues and interests, that are literally brought into view and given shape through collective political action” (Cornwall 2002: 22). The latter kind of space for civic action has been given particular attention in social movement research and the study of resistance. This is because they indicate “cracks within the dominant [...] order” (Newman 2011: 353) and thus constitute a “possible space of

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include the encirclement and blockade of La Paz led by Tupac Katari in 1781, the Federal Revolution in 1899, and, more recently, the so called Gas War in 2003 (Deledicque & Contartese 2009: 135, 140).

<sup>2</sup> On the concept of the production of space see Lefebvre (1991). According to Lefebvre, “space is a social product... it is not simply ‘there’, a neutral container waiting to be filled, but is a dynamic, humanly constructed means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (Lefebvre 1991: 24).

resistance to existing social-political-economic structures” (Newman 2011: 355). Others argue that these spaces “contribute to transforming patterns of exclusion and social injustice and to challenging power relationships” (Gaventa 2006: 23). They fight exclusion from the transnational level down to the local level, where the conflict that will be analysed in this article is situated (Juris 2005). Some authors call them autonomous spaces (Newman 2011; Chatterton 2005) or claimed spaces (Gaventa 2006), others define them as free spaces (Polletta 1999, Della Porta & Fabbri 2016).

Drawing on prior research on free spaces, Polletta & Kretschmer (2013) define these kinds of spaces as:

“small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization” (Polletta & Kretschmer 2013: 1).

According to Polletta, certain “associational ties” and the inherent “normative commitment” constitute free spaces and give them the potential to initiate mobilisations for collective action (Polletta 1999: 13). Also other conceptualisations define these spaces by the social ties and the normative ideals that they exhibit. Newman (2011) for example defines autonomous political spaces as:

“spaces in which alternative practices, relationships and modes of organisation are actively produced, and in which we see a conscious effort to live in ways that are non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian and non-exploitative” (Newman 2011: 356).

They are claimed by “less powerful actors from or against the power holders” (Gaventa 2006: 27), express a “desire for freedom, self-organisation and mutual aid” (Chatterton 2005: 545) and help “new demands to develop and to grow” (Gaventa 2006: 27). Although not identical, these spaces share many commonalities in their conceptualisation that feed into what will be understood in this article as *autonomous claimed spaces*: bottom-up created, temporary spaces for civic action aimed at achieving social justice, which are formed through horizontal solidarity relations among the participating actors.

This case study of a local conflict is intended to expand our understanding of what, according to the developed definition, is understood as *autonomous claimed space*. The selected case is assumed to be particularly illustrative for this purpose, due to the high visibility of *autonomous claimed spaces* in El Alto’s everyday politics. Hence, the analysis explores which *autonomous claimed spaces* exist in El Alto, how they have been created, how they shape actions within them and what potential they possess to challenge harmful practices and to fight for social justice. In relation to this, the analysis also tackles another question that has not been given sufficient attention in previ-

ous research: How do *autonomous claimed spaces* interact with a movement's institutionalised spaces in challenging injustices?

Institutionalised movement spaces, the more durable kind of space produced by social movements, are thereby understood as being constituted by the formalised (with regard to rules, procedures, leadership), centralised, and professionalised organisational structures that some movements develop in order to persist over time (Della Porta & Diani 2006: 140; Cornwall 2002: 21). In El Alto, these institutionalised movement spaces play a central role in the citizens' struggle for social justice. The society of El Alto has been described as "society in movement", a movement which strives for social change and urban justice (Zibechi 2010: 87). This movement also has its own structures of self-organisation and governance that exist parallel to the structures of the municipal government. These institutionalised movement spaces consist of numerous neighbourhood councils (*juntas vecinales*) which are amalgamated in the Federation of Neighbourhood Councils of El Alto (FEJUVE – *Federación de Juntas Vecinales de El Alto*). As the analysis will demonstrate, according to the conceptualisation presented above, these institutionalised spaces of self-governance do not qualify as *autonomous claimed spaces*. This is not only due to their relative durability, but mainly because of hierarchical relations and corrupt behaviour that occasionally comes to light due to a misuse of power.

There are other spaces, however, in the form of bottom-up initiated neighbourhood assemblies and civic actions organised through horizontal solidarity networks of the grass roots that can be described as *autonomous claimed spaces*. One instance in which they became visible and which demonstrates the close interaction between *autonomous claimed spaces* and institutionalised movement spaces forms the basis of this analysis: the conflict over the provision of public transport in district 3 of El Alto. This case demonstrates the negative effects of irresponsible and harmful profit-seeking practices on the local level and the grass roots' reactions to them.

The empirical research is based on nine qualitative interviews that were conducted with key actors in the conflict analysed during a 10-week field research from July to September 2015. This material has been complemented by local newspaper articles that covered the events described, as well as previous academic studies on social movements and neighbourhood organisations in El Alto.

## **History and Context of the Conflict**

Among the numerous conflicts currently being fought out in El Alto the conflict selected for this analysis stands out due to the very particular form of resistance that has been chosen: citizens of neighbourhoods in district 3 of El Alto founded their own transport association, the *Transporte Vecinal*

(neighbourly transport), to defend themselves against insufficient citizens' security and poor public transport.

The public dispute was sparked in November 2013 by the discontent of the *vecin@s* (neighbours) of district 3, especially from the neighbourhoods Villa Adela and Villa Adela Yunguyo, with the quality and safety of the transport provided by the transport association *Sindicato Arco Iris*<sup>3</sup>. This included allegations of discrimination and abuse, robbery, a case of murder, as well as disputes regarding ticket prices, and a practice known as *trameaje*, whereby transport routes are shortened and changed to increase profit (INT4; INT2).

Due to inadequate responses from elected decision makers and after changes promised in initial negotiations failed to appear, the conflict continued to escalate. The *vecin@s* mobilised and started the first mass blockades and demonstrations. After further negotiations, which in spite of promises did not lead to the desired changes, in February 2014 the *vecin@s* of the neighbourhoods Villa Adela and Villa Adela Yunguyo decided to establish a neighbourly transport association, the *Transporte Vecinal*. Representatives of the *Transporte Vecinal* describe the process of its formation as being "born out of the need of the *vecinos*" (INT4) and providing a "service of the *vecinos*" (INT3).<sup>4</sup>

The founding of the *Transporte Vecinal* was followed by a number of fierce violent clashes on the streets between members of the *Sindicato Arco Iris* and *vecin@s* of the affected neighbourhoods. Eventually the representatives of the *sindicato* and the *Transporte Vecinal* agreed on a renunciation of violence. Since then, both organisations officially serve the contested route between Puente Bolivia and Cruce Viadela and the *Transporte Vecinal* has managed to establish itself as one of the various transport associations in district 3. Due to the small number of routes served, the effect on the wellbeing of the *vecin@s* has been limited, however.

## **Institutionalised Movement Spaces in El Alto**

What options did the citizens of the conflict-affected neighbourhoods have to defend themselves against their mistreatment by the transport association? In what spaces could they engage to bring about change and establish social justice?

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<sup>3</sup> The transport associations, which are called *sindicatos* in El Alto, consist of private bus owners and drivers who join together to organise and coordinate their services and who receive operating licences from their municipal umbrella organisation, the *Federación Andina de Choferes 1 de Mayo de El Alto*, or simply *Federación Andina*. Due to this structure of organisation the *Federación Andina* and the *sindicatos* involved are also referred to as the federalised transport.

<sup>4</sup> All quotes from the interviews are translated from Spanish to English by the author.

At first sight, the neighbourhood councils and the structure of the FEJUVE as the institutionalised space of the *vecin@* movement seem to be a promising option. In El Alto, the second biggest city of Bolivia, “collective civic organization” exists “parallel to the state at zone, citywide and national levels” and mediates the “relationship between citizen and state” (Lazar 2008: 258). The goal of this coexistence is to act as a corrective to state politics, as ‘counter power’<sup>5</sup>, and to benefit from the services of the state system rather than aiming at its long-term overthrow (Zibechi 2010: 132). At the local level, neighbourhood councils are the central format of institutionalised grass roots politics and participation. Neighbours convene as *juntas vecinales* (neighbourhood councils) in order to secure the provision of basic services, neighbourhood development as well as the defence of the *vecin@s*’ rights and interests. These assemblies for collective decision-making are organised by elected leaders who also represent the interests of their community at assemblies at the district level, from where other representatives are sent to the municipal level. The FEJUVE, the federation of neighbourhood assemblies at the municipal level, negotiates directly with the municipal government and acts as a “broker of the *vecin@s*” or, if negotiations fail, organises collective direct actions in the name of the *vecin@s* such as strikes, demonstrations, and blockades (INT1). A representative of the FEJUVE describes the strategy of the FEJUVE to exercise their influence on government policies as follows:

„What we normally do is to send a note to the municipality, asking them to keep us informed and to remind them of the state law, according to which we can issue written and oral petitions that they have to respond to. If this shows no effect, what we do is to send a resolution, which is a written protest. If they do not respond or correct their actions, we repeat to send something, and, if nothing happens, we organize ourselves to start a protest against the municipality, so that they take our suggestions into account. It’s effective. It is very effective. It seems that the authorities wait for us to protest, and the same thing happens regarding any matter. Because we ask them to make benefits available not only to the top leaders, but to all *vecin@s*. Usually the people who are furthest away are the victims“ (INT1).

The decision-making councils in the FEJUVE do at times, however, not succeed in representing the interests and needs of the grass roots and in finding common solutions. One factor is a lack of personal capacity in some representatives to negotiate and find common solutions, partly caused by the fear of losing their positions (INT1). Another factor is corruption and the fact that some officials, especially in the higher ranks of the FEJUVE, want to make use of their posts for political influence and economic benefits (Zibechi 2010: 81). These impediments range from the local level, where one driver of the *Trans-*

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<sup>5</sup> David Graeber describes ‘counter power’ as “a collection of social institutions set in opposition to the state and capital: from self-governing communities to radical labor unions to popular militias” (Graeber 2004: 24).

*porte Vecinal* criticises opaque agreements between decision makers and illegitimate influencing of assemblies, to corruption and excessive bureaucracy in the structures of the FEJUVE, as well as a general lack of transparency which makes it difficult to monitor the elected representatives (INT4). In the transport conflict in district 3, the *Transporte Vecinal* experienced the negative effect of prevailing corruption when they failed to deliver the material and financial support demanded by the FEJUVE. The consequence was a partial withdrawal of support for the *Transporte Vecinal* and the use of “bad language” to delegitimise and weaken the mobilisation and aspirations of the *vecin@s* (INT3; INT4). A driver comments:

“Influence has an economic cost which at times we do not manage to cover” (INT4).

Other representatives of the *Transporte Vecinal* state:

“The junta vecinal exists to serve their own people, not to serve themselves from the people” (INT3).

“There is no consensus with the grass roots. Only a consensus between the top leaders of the federalised transport and the directors of the municipal government” (INT4).

A common complaint therefore is that “the authorities don’t listen to us” (INT2), which results in a rupture between the leadership and the grass roots. Zibechi (2010) attributes this rupture to the institutionalisation of the social movement, which:

“consolidates the separation between leaders and led, creating leaders who no longer “lead by obeying” but “lead by commanding”. So, the institutionalization of social movements is a vital step toward producing separation” (Zibechi 2010: 68).

## **Autonomous Spaces in El Alto**

Institutionalised movement spaces in El Alto are at times perceived to be closed towards the demands of the grass roots or inefficient in dealing with their concerns. In some instances, they are therefore not a reliable option for the neighbours to initiate social change in terms of improving living conditions and achieving policies in the interest of the citizens. That is why another type of space for civic action is used intensively by the citizens of El Alto to raise their concerns, to counter the misuse of power and to demonstrate against discriminatory practices, public insecurity and the passiveness of their leaders: *autonomous claimed spaces*.

In times of crisis or when basic needs are not fulfilled, as has been the case in Villa Adela and Villa Adela Yunguyo, institutionalised movement



spaces at the grass roots dissolve and *autonomous claimed spaces* temporarily take over (Zibechi 2010: 88). For this, hierarchical structures recede fluidly into the background, spaces for civic action become more inclusive, and with them mobilising powers become activated for actions for change. An example for this has been the resistance against the military intervention in El Alto during the so-called Gas War in 2003. *Vecin@s* organised themselves in a decentralised manner, independently from the FEJUVE and its leaders (Schorr 2012: 215), thus making it possible

“to disperse the state’s military machine, and to do so [the *vecin@s*] had to overstep their own organizations and leaders not only because they were ineffective at defending and fighting but also because these leaders and organizations had already formed part of that ‘other’ that needed to be dispersed” (Zibechi 2010: 50).

The case under examination, namely the resistance against the harmful practices of the *Sindicato Arco Iris* in District 3 of El Alto, represents another case in point.

### *Creating and Acting through Autonomous Claimed Spaces*

The social ties among the *vecin@s*, which are necessary to create *autonomous claimed spaces* and to carry out mobilisations for protests and blockades (INT1) are created and reproduced through the neighbours’ everyday involvement in numerous collective organisations. These serve to carry out their jobs, to solve conflicts, to improve living conditions in the neighbourhood, to be involved in cultural events or to secure a good education for their children. These associations take the form of, for example, professional associations, school councils, and, most importantly, the neighbourhood councils (Lazar 2006: 191-192, 194). In the neighbourhood community, social ties are most pronounced among resident families who migrated to El Alto from the same area of origin and therefore share a common history and collective neighbourhood identity (Zibechi 2010: 20). The strong solidarity in these settings strengthens the community and its mobilisation capacity as the fundamental base of *autonomous claimed spaces*. As Zibechi (2010) notes:

“Community does not merely exist, it is made. It is not an institution, not even an organization, but a way to make links between people” (Zibechi 2010: 14).

The second constitutive element for creating mobilisation power and bringing new *autonomous claimed spaces* into existence is the normative commitment that animates these social ties (Polletta 1999: 13). In El Alto this normative commitment is expressed in particular through a “communal ethos”, which is based on values such as unity and solidarity, which are reproduced in everyday interactions of the *vecin@s* (Zibechi 2010: 22, 30, 44). In the

conflict over public transport in district 3 of El Alto, members of the affected neighbourhoods referred to the values of their collective identity to legitimise their collective actions and described the practices of their opponents, who are often citizens of the same neighbourhoods or surrounding areas, as violating these values. One driver of the *Transporte Vecinal* explains in reference to the values that characterise their daily practice:

“Our intention has always been to provide a better service to the users [...]. One value that characterises us is the constant bond between our associates in the grass roots and us as leaders. We are always united. If for example a misfortune occurs, the entire governing body always mobilises and goes out to the streets to make up for it. If support is required, economic support, moral support, that has always been available. This is something that doesn't exist in the federalised transport. They are only associates, nothing more. Our unity is always a unity that strengthens us [...]. The people don't want to lose this goal [of autonomy]. Our people do not want this battle, since the formation of the *Transporte Vecinal*, to get lost, or it [the *Transporte Vecinal*] to get absorbed by another institution, or even worse for it to be absorbed by this *sindicato* that we confronted” (INT4).

During the mobilisation process, the organisational structures of the neighbourhood councils were used as “structures of territorial identity” within which other associational ties, informal grass roots networks, and solidarities were activated (Zibechi 2005: 13). Through past experiences of communal solidarity and effective collective direct action, “micro-structures of neighbourhood mobilization” (García Linera et al. 2010: 605) had been established that put “into practice the everyday face-to-face social relationships between each and everyone” (Mamani Ramírez 2005: 84). Using these micro-structures of mobilisation to bring people together allowed the creation of *autonomous claimed spaces* independently of the institutionalised neighbourhood councils (Zibechi 2005: 43). When “violations, attacks and the poor service” provided by the transport association Sindicato Arco Iris were disregarded by the decision makers of the municipal government and the FEJUVE, the *vecin@s* of the neighbourhoods of Villa Adela and Villa Adela Yunguyo started a spontaneous march and blockade which led to violent confrontations with members of the Sindicato Arco Iris (INT2). In order to discuss the further course of action, the agitated *vecin@s* gathered for a vast assembly of more than a thousand people. A former leader of the *junta vecinal* in Villa Adela describes such assemblies as “large councils, because these councils are an agglomeration of people, it's like an assembly, it's extended, yet open, any neighbour can come” (INT2).

Present at this council were also leaders of the FEJUVE, including the Secretary of Transportation. Instead of taking the concerns of the *vecin@s* seriously, these leaders “laughed at the people” and “evaded” the assembly (INT2). Abandoned by the leadership of the FEJUVE, the *vecin@s* organised themselves in their neighbourhood for further actions. This was followed by

months of protests, confrontations on the streets, and the initiation of the *Transporte Vecinal*.

The character of relations and the norms enacted in these spaces differed from the usual practice in neighbourhood councils. Hierarchical structures and top-down directions were challenged by horizontal solidarity ties and broad-based participation, removed both from the control of the FEJUVE as institutionalised space of the social movement and from the influences of the state in form of the municipal government.

According to the former leader of Villa Adela, the open council in which the protests and the *Transporte Vecinal* were initiated do no longer exist (INT2). Besides the temporality of these spaces, which will be discussed later on, his statements point to the co-presence that was made possible through the temporary open council. These *autonomous claimed spaces* made it possible for the citizens to become “visible to themselves as a collective actor”, which made them aware of the way they were mutually affected by the conflict (Polletta & Kretschmer 2013: 2). This not only strengthened the *vecin@s*’ collective identity but also allowed them to discuss issues, take direct decisions on the implementation of blockades and demonstrations, and also facilitated the establishment of the *Transporte Vecinal* (Polletta 1999: 25). Accordingly, Cornwall describes claimed spaces as “spaces in which they [the people] gain a sense of the legitimacy of their concerns and a sense of their own power” (Cornwall 2002: 26).

The solidarity networks that constitute *autonomous claimed spaces* not only fulfil an important role in “fostering [...] the very identities and interests on the basis of which mobilization is mounted”, they also supply the “personnel, resources, and tactical expertise” for further mobilisation and in this way shape the action that is possible within them (Polletta 1999: 25). Polletta describes how free spaces that are indigenous to a community exhibit very strong associational ties among the participants involved. This facilitates mobilisation as these networks “provide the communication resources, solidarity incentives, and commonality of interests necessary to develop a radical challenge” (Polletta 1999: 11). In the case examined here, this became evident in the strong sense of obligation to participate in contentious actions, which one of the interviewees describes as a “social necessity” (INT3). He goes on to explain: “Keeping a route is not easy, you need to maintain the support of the neighbours” (INT3). To gain this support, it was important to frame the resistance as in the interest of their own community, as a “struggle for the people”, or “in the service of the people”, for “a just cause” and for change in transportation (INT2). The wellbeing of the community in these instances is more important than potential individual risks: “the people want change, they are fighters, they fear neither life nor death” (INT2). The density of social ties in these *autonomous claimed spaces* therefore not only promotes mobilisation within the community but also gives “incentives to participate even in high-risk activism” (Polletta 1999: 12).

Potential for Challenging Injustices

The actions of the *vecin@s* in *autonomous claimed spaces* had two forms of outcome. Firstly, they gave the affected community the opportunity to raise their concerns, make themselves heard, and pressure the holders of power to take up their responsibilities and produce policies to improve their wellbeing (Rivas 2014). However, the examined conflict demonstrated that the *autonomous claimed spaces* of the *vecin@s* are not the only political spaces from which pressure is exercised on the government. The associational structures of the bus drivers who form part of the *Federación Andina* are just as powerful and have the potential to nullify the challenges the *vecin@s* pose to the municipal government (INT3).

Secondly, the *autonomous claimed spaces* have been used to initiate new structures to independently fulfil the *vecin@s'* needs and to “provide a better customer service” (INT4). The neighbours succeeded in establishing a few routes operated by the *Transportes Vecinales* in the district, which may have slightly contributed to improving the transport conditions for the *vecin@s*. But as an executive member of the *Transporte Vecinal* confirms, these new services cannot resolve the overarching problems in the transport sector, which need to be tackled at the municipal level:

“I don't think that the *Transporte Vecinal* has changed a lot. Because the *Transporte Vecinal* serves one route. It does not serve an entire area, because the need that people have is to go until the Ceja.<sup>6</sup> And perhaps we wanted to go up to the Ceja with our Trufis [shared public taxis], but the authorities, due to the influence of the federalised transport, said no, they didn't allow it, because the Ceja is where you make money. The *Transporte Vecinal* which was founded in district 3 is not the solution for a change to satisfy the needs of the *vecinos*” (INT3).

When autonomous solutions on the local level are not sufficient to solve more far-reaching problems, how then can actors in *autonomous claimed spaces* pressure for change?

*Autonomous claimed spaces* are constituted through social ties that are nourished by everyday interactions on the local level. This, according to Polletta (1999), makes it “difficult to mobilize beyond the bounds of the locality; hence the importance of formal movement organizations in mass recruitment” (Polletta 1999: 11).

In El Alto, this formal movement organisation is the FEJUVE. Another option for the *vecin@s* therefore is to use the institutionalised movement space in the form of the FEJUVE to bring up issues at the municipal level in order to decide on more far-reaching measures or initiate broader mobilisations. As has been demonstrated in the introduction to the institutionalised movement spaces in El Alto, during the transport conflict in district 3, this strategy ini-

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<sup>6</sup> The Ceja is the traffic junction and the commercial centre of El Alto.

tially was only partially successful. In May 2016 the demands of the *vecin@s* from Villa Adela and Villa Adela Yunguyo were, however, finally brought up at the municipal level. During negotiations between the FEJUVE and the municipal government, the FEJUVE demanded the authorisation of a greater number of neighbourhood transport associations to break the monopoly of the *Federación Andina*, the federation of private transport associations (Aguilar 2016). In the next section, the interaction between *autonomous claimed spaces* and institutionalised movement spaces in challenging injustices will therefore be explored in greater detail.

### *Relation to Institutionalised Movement Spaces*

For analysing this interaction, it is insightful to go back to Cornwall's (2002) distinction of the permanence of bottom-up created spaces for civic action. According to her, institutionalised spaces are indispensable for maintaining the movement's activities over time, engaging in governance, and facilitating large-scale mobilisation (Cornwall 2002: 21). As has been shown above, the downside of this strong institutionalisation and durability is corruption that flourishes in its structures and the co-optation of some of its officials, which can lead to a divide between the leaders and the grass roots (INT4).

The *autonomous claimed spaces* in the form of non-hierarchical neighbourhood assemblies and the *vecin@s*' direct actions that have been analysed in this article are what Cornwall describes as impermanent spaces. They are characterised by their "flexibility and spontaneity", which are "almost impossible to institutionalise – if not also difficult to co-opt" (Cornwall 2002: 21f.). Zibechi describes the *autonomous claimed spaces* therefore as "cyclical movement" (Zibechi 2010: 88), whose temporary character can be seen as a strategy to avoid co-optation through state forces and institutionalised movement spaces:

"One way to avoid co-optation is to advocate fragmentation and dispersal, rather than advocating large movements or institutions, thus enabling the movement to acquire spaces of autonomy – gaps through which they can resist, because the state/party system does not enter into these gaps. When the FEJUVE leaders criticize the grass roots for their 'indifference', we are witnessing silent struggle to avoid subordination" (Zibechi 2010: 89).

In this way, those two bottom-up created spaces for civic action fulfil two complementing functions. The FEJUVE can be seen as an institutionalised expression of the 'society in movement' that functions as a counter-power to the municipal government and secures the influence of the *vecin@s* on the municipal level. If leaders and representatives, however, do not act in the interests of the *vecin@s*, if they no longer 'lead by obeying' or remain passive, *autonomous claimed spaces* develop from within these institutionalised movement spaces. In these instances, they function as temporary correctives

and as informal “social control” that counteracts the abuse of power and the ineffectiveness of representative structures within the FEJUVE. They are the starting point for mobilisations and make sure that the *vecin@s*’ issues are being heard (Tarazona Machicao 2010: 57). In this way, *autonomous claimed spaces* eliminate the separation between leaders and lead and enhance the veto-power of the *vecin@s* (Salazar Lohman 2015: 354).

Rather than regarding *autonomous claimed spaces* and institutionalised movement spaces as opposing forces that fight for dominance, they should therefore be considered as interdependent elements with fluid boundaries in a common struggle for social justice. Political realities in El Alto are not dualistically separable; rather, “citizenship in the indigenous city of El Alto involves a mix of urban and rural, collectivism and individualism, egalitarianism and hierarchy” (Lazar 2008: 258).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to reveal starting points for challenging injustices and dominant power relations from the grass roots. Specifically, the article has raised the question of what potential *autonomous claimed spaces* possess for achieving these goals, and how they interact with institutionalised movement spaces in doing so. In order to find answers to these questions, a specific case has been assessed: the conflict over the provision of public transport in district 3 of El Alto.

The analysis has demonstrated that institutionalised movement spaces at times do not succeed in representing the interests and needs of the grass roots. This is mainly due to corruption, co-optation, bureaucracy, ineffective control mechanisms, and individual incapacity that can be found in these spaces. In such instances, *autonomous claimed spaces* can function as a temporary corrective that grows from within the institutionalised spaces to control the abuse of power and serve as a starting point for mass mobilisations and insurrections.

*Autonomous claimed spaces* in El Alto are temporal and their boundaries to the institutionalised movement spaces are fluid and can change rapidly. In times of crisis or when people think their core values are under threat, they come to the fore in the form of powerful direct actions. When goals have been achieved, however, people let institutions do their work, and non-exploitative solidarity relations can be replaced by more hierarchical structures. *Autonomous claimed spaces* do not vanish with the decline of visible mass protest in the form of public assemblies, demonstrations, and blockades. The social relations and their underlying normative commitments that constitute these spaces are reproduced in everyday practices of collective mobilisation and organisation and wait to erupt as soon as the collective identity of the *vecin@s* or their physical well-being is threatened once again. It is their temporality, their non-governability and non-permeability to top-down influ-

ences, which gives them their strength and which allows them to be the source of resistance against political practices that threaten the well-being of the community and against attempts at co-optation.

Achieving social change and creating “participatory grassroots communal democracy to the realization of the free community of solidarity” (Clark 2013: 289) requires challenging state-capitalist systems from *autonomous claimed spaces*, but also putting the “developed demands” (Gaventa 2006: 27) into practice through the establishment of forms of organisation that make the subversion of harmful structures possible. This article has analysed the role of *autonomous claimed spaces* based on a struggle for social justice on the local level. Not less important, however, is their role in the transnational movement context. Here, they pose a challenge to non-democratic, exclusionary practices within arenas such as the World Social Forum, and constitute sites for imagining radical alternatives to the violent, exploitative, and exclusionary social relations that characterise current state-centred international politics (Juries 2005; Juries 2008; Smith et al. 2008; Smith 2015). Solutions to the obstacles that actors in *autonomous claimed spaces* face when fighting injustices and dominant power relations cannot be solely derived from political theory. Rather, it is a task for activists and social movements to experiment with these issues in their daily struggles, being inspired both by theory and other struggles across the globe.

– I reflect –

My research has been inspired by a theoretical and practical interest in autonomous claimed spaces and social change and how the first contributes to the latter. An internship within the scope of the German Civil Peace Service, during which I worked with a local NGO in El Alto, gave me the opportunity to deal empirically with this issue. In what follows, I would briefly like to mention some thoughts on my research from a post-colonial perspective.

To begin with, I would like to shed light on my research model. It had been developed in preparation of my field research and initially was entirely based on the work of western, mainly British authors. I only really became aware of this bias during my stay in Bolivia, where I learned more about perspectives and issues in Latin American societies and social science. Consequently, I adapted the analytical categories of my imported research model to include the new perspectives that I gained on the ground. This also brings me to my own positioning in the field. For my research, I, as a western, white, male researcher, went to a country of the global south for a relatively short stay to gather information in a one-sided data collection process, probably without direct benefits for the people on the ground. I noticed during my field research how rewarding it would have been to directly involve the affected actors in the process of defining the research question and setting up the design of the investigation in order to do justice to the particularities of the local context and the needs of the people under study. However, besides requiring much more time – which I did not have during my brief on-site visit – such a participatory action research approach would have made it much more difficult to get access to all involved actors in the field, as I might have been perceived as being partial.

Being aware of the shortcomings of my research in terms of accountability to the people on the ground, I am nevertheless grateful for the challenges I faced, all the insights and reflections that I gathered during the research process and I am confident that I learned a lot for future research projects.

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## Interviews

- INT1 Representative of FEJUVE, 14.08.2015.
- INT2 Former leader of affected neighbourhood, 01.09.2015.
- INT3 Leader of Transporte Vecinal, 14.09.2015.
- INT4 Driver of Transporte Vecinal, 11.09.2015.