

Anatomy of a regional conflict: Tarija and resource grievances in Morales' Bolivia

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Abstract:

In 2008, the Department of Tarija became the epicenter of national political struggles over political autonomy for lowland regions at odds with the Morales administration. In September, following a series of regional referenda on autonomy and a national recall election, citizen committees in Tarija mobilized urban-based sectors and organized a general strike to oppose central government. This paper analyzes this mobilization and argues that it is unhelpful to understand the strike as simply an act of political sabotage orchestrated by racist, regional elites. The factors driving protest and interest in autonomy are varied and deeply related to patterns of hydrocarbon extraction in the department that have allowed for the mobilization of grievance and cultivation of resource regionalism at departmental and intra-departmental scales. Theoretically it suggests that alongside class and ethnicity, identities of place and region can be equally important in processes of mobilization, and that the resonance of these spatialized identities is particularly acute in resource extraction peripheries.

Keywords: Bolivia; Tarija; gas; extractive industry; social protest; regionalism.

Introduction: interpreting Bolivia's protests

The struggle that during 2008 pitted the so-called “media luna” departments of Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni and Pando against La Paz and the central government over the issue of autonomy – including access to and control of natural resource rents – brought the country to the brink of generalized civil unrest. These conflicts have been interpreted as self-interested acts of conservatism orchestrated by civic committees and departmental political leaders in order to undermine the government of Evo Morales (Weisbrot and Sandoval, 2008). Such interpretations are consistent with the argument that the demand for regional autonomy is a strategy of lowland elites who can no longer legitimately call on authoritarian interventions in the face of social processes that challenge their privilege and power (Eaton, 2007), as well as with the argument that the cultivation of Tarijeño identity and interests is an elite strategy to foster regional affiliations and so prevent conflicts falling out along class lines (Vacaflores and Lizárraga, 2005). While accepting much of these interpretations, this paper argues that they do not capture all that was going on in these mobilizations. We argue that it is important to recognize that departmental and sub-departmental conflict dynamics had their own histories and geographies – making it a mistake to interpret them only in terms of the current moment, or to view them as manifestations across four departments of the same general phenomenon. Likewise these conflicts had their own sets of motivations and grievances. While these appeared to manifest themselves as a moment of broader collective protest, they also indicate complex and at times divergent internal forces.

This paperⁱ explores the conflicts in one of the media lunaⁱⁱ departments, Tarija. The department has been little studied in comparison to Santa Cruz, but is nonetheless the most critical to the viability of the Movimiento hacia Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism-MAS) government's resource extraction based path towards "post neo-liberal" patterns of social and infrastructural spending (Weisbrot and Sandoval, 2008; Farthing, 2009; Bebbington, 2009). Much media coverage of the 2008 events portrayed the Department of Tarija as being solidly in the camp of the media luna, casting an image of a relatively well-off and mostly criollo - mestizoⁱⁱⁱ citizenry that fiercely opposed the indigenous-populist administration of President Evo Morales (The Economist, 2008). However, this abbreviated version of departmental politics provides little insight into the intra-departmental sensitivities, identities and power struggles within Tarija, nor into its variant of the complex, ever shifting landscape of social movements, actors and political alliances in Evo's Bolivia.

We contend that "autonomist" and protest agendas vary across the media luna. What was distinctive to Tarija was the dispute with central government focused on access to and continued control over hydrocarbon rents (cf. Vacaflores and Lizárraga, 2005), and the struggle to balance internal relationships within Tarija – in particular between the gas producing province of the Gran Chaco and the city of Tarija. Understanding what is going on inside Tarija therefore requires a look back into the department's history and the role of hydrocarbons in that history.

The paper is composed of four parts. The first lays out theoretical points of departure. The second explains elements of the Tarijeño context, examines the trajectory of hydrocarbon extraction, and discusses how it has become the main axis of conflicts

among different interests within Tarija as well as between them and the central government. While these interests have a class component, they have equally important geographical and ethnic dimensions. We argue that grievances had accumulated around gas for a number of years and were themselves part of much more sedimented regionalist grievances. The section discusses how conscious elite strategy and government decisions alike transformed these grievances into protest.

The third section focuses on the protest of September 2008, emphasizing the different actors involved and the convergences and divergences among the concerns that motivated them. The final section interprets these protests as deriving their motive force from grievances that are as much specifically Tarijeño as they are part of a wider set of concerns in the media luna, and which at the same time reflect tensions and fissures within MAS.

Identity, protest and resource economies

One of the insights of the literature on “new social movements” is that mobilization and protest occurs around identities that go beyond those of class, and that it is more the norm than the exception that actors in protest have multiple identities. While the theme of a protest might privilege interests linked to one of these identities, the others remain relevant. Rather than reflecting an essence, these identities are produced through the position of actors within networks of social relationships and discourses. Identities might also be consciously cultivated as “strategic essentialisms” (Rubin, 1998) or as parts of the “invention of tradition” in order to strengthen claim making, recruit adherents and/or obfuscate other interests. However, such strategizing and invention does not occur in a historical vacuum, and material political economies set frames within which identities can be strategized and influence which sets of identities are more, and less, likely to be viable within a given geographical and historical context (Escobar, 2008).

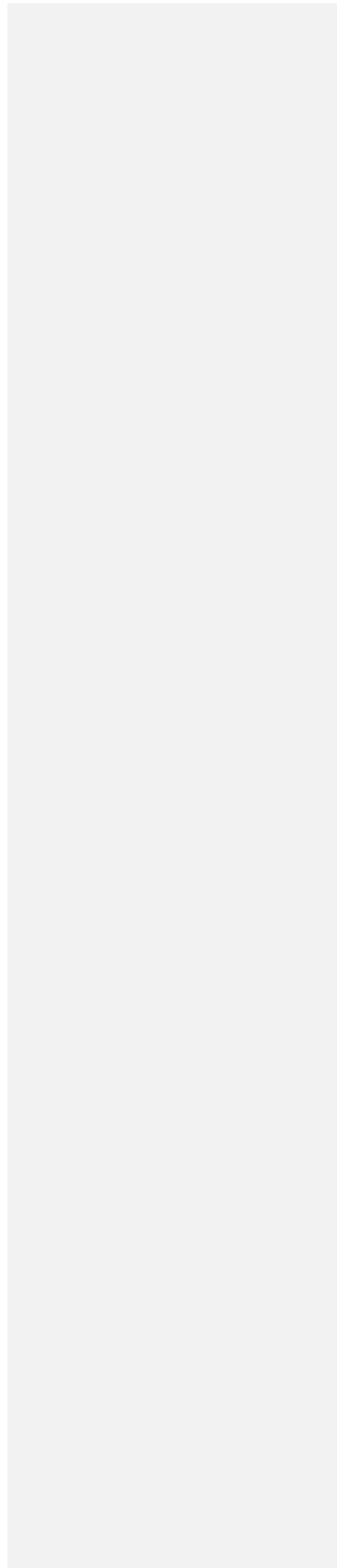
The emergence and construction of identities has been an important theme in efforts to explain the changing political landscapes of lowland Bolivia. Some authors (Eaton, 2007; Vacaflares and Lizárraga, 2005) draw attention to elite efforts to construct regional identities around a notion of regional grievance. They suggest, however, that this is a self-interested strategy. On the one hand, if regional identities dominate, then others based on class and ethnicity and which threaten elite power will not prosper. Regional identities are viewed as being functional to elite efforts to control resources and continue to dominate regional political economy and society.

Other authors have emphasized the emergence and cultivation of indigenous identities in the lowlands and the rise of movements and organization around these identities (Albó, 2009; Postero 2006). Such processes are as much endogenous as strategically cultivated, and can also involve an association of identity and grievances rooted in regional political economy. In particular, grievances related to the adverse effects of resource extraction have been part of this emergence of identities. A variant of this process that has received far less attention in the critical social sciences of Bolivia has been the emergence of a so-called Chaqueño culture both in the broader Chaco (of Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina) as well as more specifically in the Chaco of Tarija. This identity has also been cultivated throughout the twentieth century as one grounded in shared productive practices (ranching), shared culture (music, dance) and shared grievances (the suffering of the Chaco War and the marginalization of the Chaco within Tarija and Bolivia).

The emergence of such identities has several implications. First, the co-existence of distinct (strategically essentialized) and multiple identities suggests that the hegemony of any one of them is never stable. Second, identities are scaled, being simultaneously created and contested at the level of province, territory, department and nation. Third, grievance plays a central role in the construction of lowland identities, and grievance is always mobilized in relation to political economic history.

We suggest that it is important to recognize the co-existence of these scaled, multiple, aggrieved and historical political economy informed identities in order to understand the protests of 2008. What at one cut might appear a political act motivated by identities of a particular nature and scale, was often, we suggest, motivated by other

identities and constituted a momentary resolution of the multiple identities underlying political action.



Tarija: the sedimentation of grievance and the rise of resource regionalism

Tarija

From its earliest days as an outpost of the expanding Spanish empire's efforts to forge a trade route between the Audiencia of Charcas and the Port of Buenos Aires, and as supplier of livestock and agricultural products to the Potosí mines, Tarija was frontier territory. Today, bordering Argentina and Paraguay, the department is Bolivia's smallest with a land area of 37,623km² (cf. Bolivia's 1.1 million km²) and a population of 509,708 as of 2009 (less than 5 percent of Bolivia's approximately 10 million inhabitants). Poverty rates have been falling steadily over the past thirty years, from 87 percent in 1976 (above national rates) to 50.6 percent in 2001 (below the national rate of 58.6 percent), and departmental figures for life expectancy, literacy and infant mortality rates all compare favorably to the national average^{iv}. This has attracted in-migration such that Tarija's population is now largely urban, young (fifty percent under 23 years of age) and increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse. Nearly one in every four residents was born in another department (INE, 2009).

Tarija's geographical diversity, covering altiplano, valley, sub-Andean Yungas and Chaco (see Figure 1), coupled with a very limited road network and a frontier history, has contributed to strong sub-departmental identities. In particular, residents of the Chaco (where hydrocarbon deposits are concentrated) tend to identify themselves as Chaqueños rather than as Tarijeños, a historical division that has become even more acute as debates about the distribution of gas rents have grown tenser. It has long

been an ambition of Chaqueño elites to seek autonomy from Tarija and establish a tenth Department of Bolivia.^v

The Tarijeño/Chaqueño divide exists alongside other identities of ethnicity, class and origin that form part of a more socially complex and culturally diverse department than is generally conveyed by either the identities that its elites project or the identities that the rest of Bolivia confers on Tarija. In particular, Guaraní, Weenhayek and Tapiete^{vi} indigenous identities have become increasingly visible since the 1990s as part of a process of progressive organization and liberation from various forms of subjugation including semi-slavery (Castro, 2004). These identities have become increasingly spatialized as each of these peoples have made territorial claims under the terms of legislation passed in the 1990s, and more recently have entertained seeking out the indigenous autonomies created by the Morales government. More recently, urban migrant and migrant landless identities have also emerged as other groups assert legitimacy and make claims (UNDP, 2003). The UNDP study, led by Fernando Calderón, argues that in Tarija, identities are increasingly reflective of relationships to natural resources, livelihood and occupation, and most importantly place of origin.

Figure 1: Map of Tarija

Insert map of Tarija here

Hydrocarbons in Tarija, grievances in Bolivia

Oil and gas have long played a role in Tarija and through them Tarija has played an important role in the national economy. The department's reserves were first exploited by Standard Oil of New Jersey in 1924 and later nationalized after the Chaco War (1932-1935). Since then Bolivia's hydrocarbons have been nationalized on three occasions, the rationale each time being that Bolivia was not benefitting sufficiently from its natural resources (Miranda, 2008). Yet, whether its hydrocarbon sector was under state control or in the hands of private operators, Bolivia has a history of negotiating unfavorable deals for its oil and gas^{vii} (Ribera, 2008).

The most recent privatization occurred during the first Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario/National Revolutionary Movement-MNR-Movimiento Bolivia Libre/Free Bolivia Movement-MBL) government of 1993-1997 as part of a broad initiative to consolidate neoliberal economic policies (Perreault, 2008). The State withdrew from its operational role and created a series of mixed capital corporations between the state hydrocarbons agency, Yacimientos Petroleros Fiscales de Bolivia (YPFB), and private transnational firms for oil and gas exploration, transportation and refining. Transnational firms were to make a 50 percent capital investment, the other 50 percent of the company being owned by YPFB employees and pension funds (Kohl 2002; Kohl 2004; Kohl and Farthing 2006).

The tremendously favorable legal framework, low taxes and generous investment terms for foreign capital led to a rapid increase in private investment, new discoveries and a substantial increase in Bolivia's certified reserves^{viii}. A number of the major international and Latin American firms invested in Bolivia during this period.^{ix}

Investment also poured into related infrastructural works: gas and oil pipelines, processing and storage facilities were constructed to connect new fields to new markets. Private investors keen on supplying the burgeoning energy market in Brazil were transforming the Bolivian gas and oil industry in the process (Center for Energy Economics, nd).

While these transformations passed largely under the political radar during the first Sánchez de Lozada regime (Kohl, 2002), this was not the case in his second term (2002-3) when continued social movement pressure to nationalize hydrocarbons, and the Guerra del Gas (Gas War) over plans to export gas through Chile, led to the president's departure. In July 2004 a national referendum was held and voters decided overwhelmingly for greater state control over the gas industry and for an increased share of gas revenues. The subsequent passage of Hydrocarbons Law 3058 in May 2005 (and its final implementation in 2005 during the interim Rodríguez Veltzé administration) enshrined the right of all Bolivians to benefit from gas rents through the establishment of a Impuesto Directo a Hidrocarburos (Direct Hydrocarbons Tax-IDH)^x, a mechanism to increase both producing and non-producing regional governments' share of hydrocarbon revenue. However because the agreement to introduce and distribute the IDH was crafted "in a climate of profound social and political crisis and in the midst of a series of conflicts, (the assignation of benefits) corresponded more to the pressure, struggles and protest to capture rents than to any planning and analysis about what to do with these rents." (Fundación Jubileo, 2008). Some analysts argue that the result has been a confusing system that sustains highly unequal IDH transfers (ranging from US\$751.3 per capita in Pando to US\$27 per capita in La Paz: Weisbrot and Sandoval, 2008:7) and fuels

increasingly virulent confrontations between central government and regions (Hodges, 2007).

In this context, Evo Morales campaigned inter alia on the recovery of Bolivia's natural resources with a promise to nationalize hydrocarbons, a commitment that he fulfilled by supreme decree four months into his mandate as President^{xi}. The national grievance over forgone and dispossessed hydrocarbon revenue had once again been recognized as law, but this time as part of a conscious policy platform that would translate hydrocarbon wealth into national social policy. Gas grievances became bundled with the identity of citizenship. Furthermore, that the nationalization was entitled "Heroes del Chaco" (Heroes of the Chaco War) was meant as a reminder that those who had died in the Chaco War to protect Bolivia's gas had been predominantly highland Indians, not Tarijeños or Chaqueños (see also Perreault, forthcoming).

Hydrocarbons in Tarija, grievances in Tarija

Following the Chaco War, fought with neighboring Paraguay over what were believed to be significant hydrocarbon reserves, the Bolivian government modified the Royalties Law (Ley de Regalías) to provide an 11 percent royalty^{xii} payment for hydrocarbons producing departments (at that time Santa Cruz and Tarija). Since then (between 1941 and 2007), Tarija has received over US\$774 million^{xiii}, with nearly 80 percent of those funds generated in the past decade (1996-2007) and the greatest increase in revenues coming after 2005 (Table 1).

(Table 1 about here)

The department has, then, long received revenue from hydrocarbons and has invested those revenues into a series of productive and infrastructure projects and service enterprises. However central government disbursements to the department were often paid erratically and inaccurately creating tension between the two parties. A former Superintendent of Hydrocarbons in Tarija comments, for instance, that royalties were not always transferred on a regular basis and that Tarijeños had to turn to civic mobilizations and protests to force their release by central government (personal communication Luis Lema, June 2008).

The sense of grievance has intensified over the past decade as elites in Tarija have increasingly coupled the department's future economic development with large-scale, export-oriented extractive industry activity.^{xiv} In the late 1990s, the increased presence of transnational firms and exploratory projects was accompanied by large infusions of capital and technology and revitalized a moribund hydrocarbons sector in the eastern provinces of Gran Chaco and O'Connor^{xv} (Perreault, 2008). This generated excitement around the possibility of massive infrastructure projects related to the transport and export of these gas reserves (Hindery, 2004). It is this view of development that leads political leaders in Tarija, as well as much of the population (even some who are in other respects supporters of MAS), to view the struggle over departmental revenue from gas as fundamental to the department's ambitions for regional economic development and effective autonomy.

Since 2005, with the implementation of Hydrocarbons Law 3058, the Department's revenues have soared from approximately US\$67 million in 2004 to over US\$214

million in 2007^{xvi} with hydrocarbons revenues accounting for about 89 of percent of the Department's income (CEDLA, 2008). This revenue bonanza, which is also in part attributable to higher prices for fossil fuels^{xvii}, has sparked a flurry of infrastructure works promoted and paid for by the Prefecture (Department government) of Tarija. The regional government is especially keen to complete a network of highways which form part of the southern Inter-Oceanic Corridor to spur Tarija's integration with national and international markets. The Departmental government also uses gas revenue to fund free health care insurance (SUSAT), programs for small farm development (PROSOL), and the development of several priority commodity chains. Any central government effort to reduce transfers to Tarija challenges this model of departmental development.

Triggers to protest: IDH, autonomy and the revocatorio

Resource Regionalism, IDH and Revenue Disputes

Arguments that tie regional development to regional natural resource endowments and to the claim that these resources and the revenue flowing from them should be controlled and used by regional actors are a key part of what we refer to as resource regionalism. Grievances frequently become bundled with this regionalism with claims that after years of disadvantage and marginalization it is now time for regions to be able to take full advantage of their endowments. While such resource regionalism has a long history in Tarija, it has intensified with the gas boom and the significant increase in the resources at stake since the introduction of the IDH under Hydrocarbons Law 3058. Presently Tarija produces over 60 percent of Bolivia's

natural gas and receives fully 30 percent of all royalties and IDH generated in Bolivia. Indeed, the IDH has further consolidated resource regionalism by providing a clear mechanism on which to peg demands for greater fiscal decentralization in the extractives sector.

In the face of a situation in which a department with 5 percent of the population receives 30 percent of gas royalties and IDH, the argument for a change in the distribution of gas revenue gained momentum. Commentators and leaders from disadvantaged highland departments called for a more equitable formula based on population and poverty indicators (Barragán, 2008) and for a distribution that would contribute to a diversification of the economic base (Wanderley, 2008; Gray Molina et al, 2005).^{xviii} The MAS government argued the same and throughout 2008 tussled with the media luna over the assignation of IDH resources. Tensions came to a particular head in early 2008 when Morales promulgated a decree to pay the Pensioner's Stipend (Renta Dignidad) with IDH resources and thus reduce the amount of IDH going to departmental government coffers. This shift in funding was required as a result of the nationalization of YPFB which left state pension liabilities unfunded. The media luna for its part refused to accept the government's attempts to claw back these resources for national social programs, arguing that by law the money belonged to the regions (La Razón, 2008) and that what was actually at stake was, according to a senior figure in Tarija's prefecture, a "government ... seeking to consolidate absolute power and reconstitute a State that does everything ... interrupting the process of decentralization and strangling the Prefectural (departmental) governments" (Lea Plaza, 2009). The irony in this claim is, as we will note later, that leaders in the

Gran Chaco province had much the same view of the departmental government in Tarija.

The Referendum on Autonomy – advantage Tarija and the media luna

In this context, the political leaders of the media luna effectively deployed the recuperation of IDH revenues as a rallying point to promote the case for regional autonomy. In doing so they captured a popular historical demand for political-administrative decentralization (Suso, 2008). They collapsed this demand, however, to a simple call for “autonomy,” an expression that was embraced uncritically by large parts of the population. While debates about regional autonomy date back to the 19th century, in this more recent guise they can be traced back to civic movement activism for a more direct democracy, in particular to demands for greater decentralization under Popular Participation during the first Sánchez de Lozada government.

On the insistence of media luna leaders, the July 2006 election to select participants in the Constituent Assembly was held in conjunction with a binding referendum on autonomy. The four media luna departments voted overwhelming in favor of establishing autonomous departments though it was clear that there was little more than a vague notion as to what autonomy might mean in practice. The results in Tarija revealed extensive support for autonomy, with more than 60 per cent in favor. But as Bazoberry notes, the autonomy votes were likely to disguise more than they reveal. The multiple desires and expectations encapsulated in Yes and No votes could not be easily understood (Bazoberry, 2006).

In December 2007, immediately following the passage of the draft constitution in the absence of opposition members of the constituent assembly, the media luna declared autonomy from the central government. In an immediate association of autonomy with hydrocarbons, and in direct defiance to proposed changes in the new constitution, the Santa Cruz declaration of autonomy established that two thirds of taxes from the oil and gas industry generated in the Department would stay in the Department rather than be transferred to the central government.

Tensions between the executive and prefectures increased as opposition leaders pushed forward with a series of departmental referendums on autonomy bylaws. The first referendum for regional autonomy was held in Santa Cruz in early May where voters supported autonomy, followed by votes in Beni and Pando with the final referendum held June 22nd in Tarija (though none of these regional autonomy referendums 2008 were recognized as legitimate internationally).

However, prior to the Tarija vote, political leaders in the Province of Gran Chaco held a sub-regional vote to select a sub-prefect and departmental councilor. The election anticipated the departmental referendum and laid down the gauntlet for Tarija's Prefect Mario Cossio to follow through with earlier promises for further intra-departmental decentralization. Cossio responded to the challenge by refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the election and calling for departmental unity not separatism again repeating the irony that the departmental government did to the Province of Gran Chaco what the central government did to the department (ie. insist on the illegality of its referendum).

The run up to the Tarija autonomy referendum took on a carnival like atmosphere. Large banners swathed the balconies of departmental and municipal buildings in the main plaza while Chaqueño music blared from loudspeakers. Critics of the referendum pointed to the improvised and vague nature of Tarija's autonomous bylaws which, they said, would only deepen structures sustaining elite power and privilege fed by Tarija's new found gas wealth (Valdez, 2008). Rural leader Luis Alfaro dismissed the bylaws as a document prepared by and for the right and its logias (lodges) and argued that autonomy must be pursued within the framework of the new constitution. The Guaraní and Weenhayek leadership criticized the bylaws as discriminatory for failing to recognize indigenous autonomy while regional political leaders in the Provinces of Gran Chaco and Arce expressed disagreement with the process which they saw as marginalizing provincial calls for greater decentralization within the department. Nevertheless, of the nearly 62 percent of Tarijeños who voted over 78 percent favored the proposed autonomy bylaws. The elite-dominated local press immediately reported this as a resounding victory for the autonomic forces (Nuevo Sur, 2008). However viewed more closely, the results of the referendum reveal a much more divided Tarija based on rural-urban and ethnic lines. While in recent elections absenteeism in Tarija has typically ranged between 10 and 15 percent across all provinces, this time rates were far higher, particularly in more rural provinces beyond the urban core (Table 2). In the Province of Arce, where MAS has established a strong base among rural workers and urban migrants, less than half of all eligible voters participated in the referendum and with a department-wide rate of absenteeism at 38 percent, clearly many eligible voters decided to sit out the election.

(Table 2 about here)

The Revocatorio – advantage Morales and MAS

The idea of holding a recall referendum (revocatorio) on whether or not to revoke the President and Vice President first emerged as a means of overcoming the political impasse provoked by the passage in November 2007 of the new constitution without the presence of the full constituent assembly. As the media luna gained momentum, Morales agreed to this ill-conceived referendum proposed by opposition members in Congress in which the population would decide whether he – as well as all nine departmental prefects – should continue in post or be replaced. His move deepened existing power struggles within the right among media luna Prefects and leaders of the rightist opposition party Poder Democrático Social (Social Democratic Power-PODEMOS) whose candidate had campaigned bitterly against Morales in the 2005 elections. While the Prefects argued that autonomy was the only way to prevent the new constitution from going forward, PODEMOS believed a recall referendum was the way to derail it. To Morales' good fortune PODEMOS senators agreed to his proposal and MAS quickly set the referendum date for August 10th.

Jubilant with the results from the autonomy referenda and angry with this decision of the PODEMOS leadership, media luna departmental leaders hinted that they might boycott the recall referendum and instead push on with the immediate implementation of autonomy in their departments. However, after an initial period of triumphalism,

cleavages appeared within the coalition^{xix} as Prefects bickered over whether to participate in the recall referendum. Unable to agree on strategy, there was little coordinated or sustained effort to mount an anti-Morales campaign. There were, however, many high profile and increasingly violent protests (e.g. the humiliation of MAS campesino supporters in Chuquisaca, the takeover of the airport in Tarija) which kept Morales from attending official public events as well as campaigning in the media luna.

Once the referendum votes had been counted, both sides claimed victory. Morales and García Linera were ratified in their positions by over 67 percent of voters and carried 99 of 112 provinces, though the mainstream media preferred to use maps showing the entire media luna as having supported opposition figures (The Economist, 2008). The three other Prefects of the media luna were also ratified. In Tarija, Cossio was supported by 58 percent of voters while Morales was confirmed by slightly less than 50 percent of voters (see Table 3 below). While Morales failed to carry Tarija city, he enjoyed widespread support in Tarija's five rural provinces where support ranged from 57 to 69 percent. Conversely, Cossio won Tarija city handily but was not ratified in three of the rural provinces.

Once again, however, just as in the July 2006 elections and the 2008 referendum on autonomy, voting patterns are not as easy to read as might first appear. While the strong rural support for Morales seems consistent with the high rural absenteeism in the 2008 autonomy vote, the results of the referendum in Tarija also suggest that for an important segment of rural voters it was quite possible to both support Evo/MAS and favor increased regional autonomy. Even if we do not know precisely what these

voters took “autonomy” to mean, at a minimum we can assume that their support for it reflected a regional/place-based identity alongside any class or ethnic identity that informed their support for Morales. As Table 3 shows, in all rural provinces more people voted in favor of Cossio than voted against Evo by differences ranging from c. 12 to 17 percent. If we can assume that support for Cossio is an indication of being in favor of autonomy, then this is a healthy share of Evo supporters who support autonomy at the same time as supporting Morales and his platform which included the nationalization of natural resources. Seen this way, neither Cossio nor Morales received a clear mandate in Tarija. Instead the voting reaffirmed the complex and ambiguous identities and grievances that are deeply embedded in debates over autonomy and hydrocarbon governance.

(Table 3 about here)

Following the election, Morales adopted a more conciliatory tone. In his victory speech he called on the Prefects to set aside differences and carry on the work of recovering the country’s natural resources and building a more unified Bolivia (Morales, 2008). However, the media luna Prefects, joined by the recently elected and pro-autonomy Prefect of Chuquisaca, moved to reactivate the Consejo Nacional Democrático (National Democratic Council-CONALDE) and initiated a vigorous effort to undercut Morales’ authority. Abandoning efforts to negotiate a solution to the impasse, media luna leaders called on their bases to prepare a civic strike for mid August – a precursor to the growing storm.

Mobilizing grievance

The preceding sections have suggested that three factors – the IDH, autonomy and the recall referendum – became increasingly merged and had the effect of intensifying conflicts between the media luna and the central government at the same time as deepening certain ambiguities among voters. All this was the tinder for the conflict that unfolded in Tarija as Cossio and other leaders moved to strike to protect revenues and demand autonomy.

The strike began in the city of Villa Montes in the Chaco. In one sense this seemed an unlikely origin given its remoteness and its history of relatively weak social mobilization. It was, however, a symbolically significant place to start given its role in the Chaco War as the headquarters of the Bolivian army and a key line of defense toward the end of the war. The parallel drawn by the opposition was that chaqueños were mobilizing once again to protect the country’s hydrocarbon resources.^{xx} Also, Reynaldo Bayard, President of Tarija’s Civic Committee, is from Villa Montes and was there throughout the strike.

Shortly after the strike was called in Villa Montes, Yacuiba, the largest city in the Province of Gran Chaco, and situated along the border with Argentina, announced it was also joining the strike. With the border crossing closed, all transport between Eastern Bolivia and Argentina shut down. The participation of Yacuiba was significant because while MAS has a core of urban and rural migrant supporters there, on the autonomy issue Cossio and Civic Committee were able to recruit significant local support for the strike.

After ten days of fruitless protest chaqueño leaders acknowledged that the only ones who seemed to be suffering from the strike were the chaqueños themselves, and demanded that the urban areas of the media luna also strike. Local leaders then demanded that both Tarija and Santa Cruz strengthen their protest or face having their domestic gas supplies cut off. The threat was clear: “if you don’t all turn out as Tarijeños, we will act against you as Chaqueños.”

In Tarija, the mobilization of the middle and upper classes took place via the Civic Committee and other social organizations^{xxi} but this was not enough. While public employees of the Prefecture were also mobilized en masse, the campaign was in desperate need of warm bodies. Bringing members of the much feared Unión Juvenil Cruceñista (a sort of youth militia based in the Department of Santa Cruz) was decided against for the sensitivities it raised. Instead, university students in Tarija, who had participated in the campaign for autonomy, were mobilized to occupy the blockades – particularly in the Chaco – but also to participate in the take over and occupation of public buildings and to attend political rallies.^{xxii}

Mobilization and violence in Tarija, 2008: an anatomy of protests^{xxiii}

Tarija's Civic Committee officially declared a department-wide strike on the Friday afternoon of September 5th. However, in a move that reflects the laid-back approach to social protest by political elites in Tarija, the strike was not implemented until the following Monday morning giving residents time to stock up on supplies. Warnings were sent out across town: close your business, close your office, or risk the consequences.

As the strike unfolded, pro-autonomy groups conducted a series of occupations of central government offices. One of the offices targeted was the Institute for Land Reform (INRA). Leading the confrontation were some 40 young men with sticks, rocks, slingshots and metal shields in their hands ready to take on the 10-15 policemen assigned to guard the building. Behind the shock troop were a few young women and older adults –including parents and other relatives - who supported the young men with bottles of water, vinegar (to counteract the effects of the tear gas) and shouts of encouragement. The encounter was intense but brief and without casualties (despite sticks of dynamite being tossed at the police). Shortly after the building was taken over, a 4x4 appeared and out came a contingent of Tarija's Civic Committee members to claim victory. Not everyone was feeling victorious however. Some neighborhood residents (also in favor of autonomy) expressed dismay at the disorder and level of violence unfolding before them. Tarija, they said, not even in the worst of times, had descended into this level of violence.

That evening the Vice-Rector of Tarija's university, UAJMS, expressed his full support for the student occupation of government buildings, indicating that Tarija must protect its IDH, royalties and University: the government needs to listen,^{xxiv}. Like other public figures he cultivated the logic of grievance, conveying an image of Tarija as the forgotten department that, having found natural gas, must now find its own development path. Not only an instrument of development, this gas was also one of protest he implied, supporting the suggestion that closing off the valves to gas lines in the Chaco might be a good way to get the (central) government's attention.

On the third full day, the general strike turned violent. Responding to rumors that members of the Federation of Peasant Communities of Tarija, supporters of Morales and MAS, intended to march on the city's main square, the right mobilized to prevent the march. Civic leaders called upon residents to maintain a permanent vigil and to defend their city. When MAS sympathizers failed to appear, a mob of pro-autonomy supporters headed to the Mercado Campesino, a MAS stronghold, for a showdown. An angry and violent confrontation pitched students and other urban youth against market vendors and peasants. Over 80 people were injured, including a young construction worker who lost his hand when he mishandled a stick of dynamite (El Diario, 2008).

In the Chaco, local residents were pressured to shut their businesses and offices or risk retaliation. The Civic Committee of Villa Montes controlled all activity in the city and had all major routes effectively blocked. During the height of the strike, the government reported that a section of the major pipeline (GASYRG) transporting natural gas to Brazil and operated by Transierra S.A.^{xxv}, was damaged when

protestors attempted to shut off one of the valves. There was also damage reported to the CHLB liquid gas plant (a firm that had been recently nationalized) in Villa Montes.

Saul Avalos, then Minister of Hydrocarbons denounced the disruption of gas supplies as right wing efforts to sabotage Bolivia's economy and jeopardize the delivery of gas supplies to neighboring countries.^{xxvi} According to Avalos, the country stood to lose some US\$8 million per day in lost gas sales to Brazil. For their part, representatives of Brazilian energy interests assured the Bolivian public that the affected gas fields and pipelines were under their control and that production had been only temporarily interrupted.

Tarija with its three daily papers and its own television stations, provided a steady stream of pro autonomy, pro strike analysis. Throughout the strike period, Morales accused the press of an anti-government bias and of being instruments of oppositional forces. Indeed, as elsewhere in Latin America, the Bolivian press is controlled by elite interests and in Tarija it played an important role in cultivating grievance and celebrating regional identity prior to and during this strike. And yet the press also, if inadvertently, contributed to a loss of motivation among some supporters of the strike. The images of racist confrontations and acts of vandalism in the City of Santa Cruz and above all the news from Pando of armed confrontation and dozens of deaths and disappearances traumatized many Tarijeños who otherwise identified with many of the grievances underlying the strike.^{xxvii} The triumphalist rhetoric that had characterized public discourse in Tarija for so many months gave way to appeals for peace, dialogue and mutual understanding.

Of course, these calls for peace may also have been hastened by the realization that the protest had garnered little internal or external support beyond the media luna. The unexpected expulsion of US Ambassador Philip Goldberg together with pronouncements of support and solidarity with Morales from the governments of Brazil and Argentina, and international bodies such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the recently created the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), made it clear that any effort to create a parallel government would fail.

As quickly as the protest began, it subsided. Tarijeños returned to their daily routines but now with a social fabric considerably more frayed and with the realization that few concessions had been gained. As one resident poignantly remarked: “the confrontation between the students and vendors in the *Mercado Campesino* was absolute madness: “one day we go to buy our tomatoes and potatoes from the vendor, the next day we are throwing rocks at each other and tomorrow we will go back and buy our tomatoes and potatoes again” (Torrez, 2008).

Interpreting protest: conflicts within and between resource nationalism and resource regionalism

In the face of generalized and generalizing interpretations of events in contemporary Bolivia, and particularly of the motivations deemed to have underlain the events of 2008, the intent here has been to describe processes that appear less unitary, and more embedded in longer historical geographies, than media and other renditions have suggested.

First, the conflicts in Tarija cannot be understood independently of natural gas. The history of hydrocarbons – and the failure to derive either great national or significant regional benefit from their extraction – inspires latent regionalist and nationalistic grievances for many actors. Meanwhile, in the contemporary context, gas has become central to the way in which the key actors think about development. As one leading figure in Tarija put it, paraphrasing, “people in Tarija began to wake up in the morning thinking about gas.” Gas became the source of rents that, if accessed and controlled, could be used to sustain other projects. For the departmental government, gas rents became the essential ingredient for regional investment projects and patronage. For Tarija’s Civic Committee control of gas rents became the means of staking out effective autonomy from La Paz. For business, gas rents offered the possibility of new entrepreneurial opportunities through subcontracts. For the university, gas rents offered an unprecedented revenue stream. Meanwhile, for the Province of Gran Chaco gas was a political instrument, a vehicle for determining its relationships with Tarija and the country. And for the different indigenous

organizations in the Chaco, what happened with gas would determine the future of their territorial claims.

Gas became equally central to how the national government saw its project. Morales and MAS need gas revenue to fund social and industrialization programs and to compensate for an otherwise very narrow tax base. At the same time MAS needs gas to sustain its political project – gas and its nationalization has been symbolically central to MAS’s agenda. Thus, while the central government resists autonomy for nationalist and constitutional reasons, it also does so for reasons of simple political strategy.^{xxviii}

Second, gas has become a resource that divides Tarija. It does so along boundaries that rather than being simply regional/national are instead defined by differences of view as to the political scale at which gas and the revenues it generates should be governed. While a MAS view (bolstered by the Constitution) privileges the central management of revenue for the collective good, an autonomist view (bolstered by arguments for decentralization) privileges departmental government, and an ethnicist view (bolstered by international conventions such as the International Labor Organization’s Convention on Indigenous and Traditional Populations - ILO 169) privileges the authority of indigenous collectivities. As the earlier discussion of voting patterns argued, these views do not map simply onto different actors, a reflection of the multiple identities that have informed political positioning around gas and autonomy. Thus in practice one encounters persons and organizations who can identify with, and act politically on the basis of, all three views –while voting for Evo Morales they also vote for Mario Cossio, turn out in the strike in Villa Montes, and

have sympathies for free, prior informed consent for indigenous peoples under whose lands the gas lies. In interviews we often encountered Guarani and Weenhayek persons electorally and ideologically committed to a MAS government, but who also insist that local indigenous organizations must have more say in the control of gas and its revenues; as well as MAS activists and officials who in some contexts espouse indigenous rights while in others have told Guarani and Weenhayek leaders not to criticize gas expansion in their territories and to defend the nationalist argument against regionalist positions. And finally (for the purpose of these illustrations) one encounters regionalist positions associated with opposition parties but who also identify with certain MAS positions on the Constitution.^{xxix}

Motivations at the moment of protest are thus complex and people standing side by side in Tarija were not necessarily moved by the same grievances, or the same level of commitment to nationalist or regionalist discourses.^{xxx} Moreover, regionalism itself is scaled – and protestors in Villa Montes were as aggrieved by what they perceived as the centralizing tendencies of Tarija city as by those of La Paz. All of this greatly complicates the terrain on which leaders such as Morales and Cossio have to maneuver and enroll support for their political projects.

Third, resource regionalism is and will continue to be a significant factor in hydrocarbon and decentralization politics in Bolivia. This is so first because it is a motivation and identity that cannot simply be explained as a product of elite strategies to build regional identities and thus block conflict around class or ethnic cleavage. Supporters of MAS have regional (and ethnic territorial) identities also that have every likelihood of influencing how they will respond to government policy on

hydrocarbons. This has been clear in recent conflicts between indigenous organizations and the government over oil exploration in the North of La Paz.

Fourth, resource regionalism will be important because MAS has apparently embraced it at the same time as rejecting some of its manifestations. Morales himself has spoken of the need to correct the imbalances caused by spatial unevenness in the distribution of the IDH. Part of MAS' response has been to promote extraction in other departments so that they too might have revenue from royalties. In short, it appears that MAS is ready to foster a whole set of resource regionalisms in order "to establish an economic and political equilibrium between departments and regions of the country" (Morales, 2008, October).^{xxxii} In a September 2009 interview, Vice-President García Linera offered, "Is it mandatory to get gas and oil from the Amazon north of La Paz? Yes. Why? Because we have to balance the economic structures of Bolivian society, because the rapid development of Tarija with 90 percent of the gas is going to generate imbalances in the long run. It is necessary, accordingly, to balance in the long term the territorialities of the state" (Álvaro García Linera, 2009).

Furthermore, in response to its struggles with Tarija's departmental government, MAS has also encouraged competitor resource regionalisms within Tarija. In this sense MAS' political strategy evidently assumes that place based identities are as key to socio-political mobilization as are class and ethnic identities. In February 2007, Morales signed supreme decree 29042 assigning the Province of Gran Chaco 45 percent of all royalties earned from hydrocarbon activity in the Department. Subsequently MAS merely by-passed departmental authorities who argued that the province should only receive 45 percent of royalties from production generated in the

province (La Razón, 2007), with an announcement by Morales in October 2009 that the Province of Gran Chaco would receive these royalties directly from central government. Furthermore, dressed in chaqueño attire Morales announced that chaqueños would be given the right to vote on regional autonomy in the December 2009 elections. When the results showed 81 percent voting in favor of autonomy, it was clear that MAS had captured a provincial resource regionalism in order to disarm a departmental variant. The incongruous image of Chaco elites applauding Morales in October 2009, and celebrating in December suggests that elite blocs are nowhere near as stable as some of the readings of the elite politics underlying autonomist tendencies would imply. At the same time, however, it suggests that MAS is willing to build alliances that might also have the effect of aggravating divides within its own bases.

The conflicts in Tarija and their subsequent fall-out demonstrate that a range of grievances co-exist, and that many of these grievances are tied to geographical identities that have some substance in historical experiences. More importantly, readings of these conflicts that presume more or less unitary MAS post-neoliberal positions pitted against equally unitary conservative regionalist positions are not only incorrect but do no favors to either of these political projects. The conflicts during 2008 should be viewed as an indication of just how dependent MAS has made itself on gas, and just how fraught such a position might well become. Just as the right apparently overplayed its hand on autonomy and so divided internally, the risk that MAS could overplay its hand on gas and induce protest from its own bases is real.^{xxxii}

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Table 1: Hydrocarbon Income Department of Tarija 1996-2007*

Hydrocarbon linked Income received via transfers (in millions of US dollars) ¹												
Source	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Hydrocarbons	7	8	7	5	4	12	26	37	64	103	157	175
Royalties												
IEDH	4	3	4	3	6	5	4	27	3	4	3	3
IDH										14	31	36
Total	11	11	11	8	10	17	30	41	67	122	191	214

Source: CEDLA (2009) La Gestión de la Renta de los Hidrocarburos en las Prefecturas: Caso Tarija

¹In current dollars. Exchange rates from Banco Central de Bolivia: Cotizaciones oficiales del boliviano con relación al dolar estadounidense

Table 2: Participation in Referendum on Autonomy by Province

Department of Tarija 25 June 2008

Province	% Participation
Arce	43%
Cercado (the urban core)	71%
Gran Chaco	54%
Aviles	55%
Mendez	57%
O'Connor	53%
Department-wide	62%

*Source: Author elaborated based on data from the Corte Departamental Electoral Tarija, June 2008

Table 3: Results of Recall Referendum, Department of Tarija

Province	To Ratify Prefect Mario Cossio		To Ratify President Morales & Vice President Garcia Linera		% Participation*
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Cercado (urban core)	64%	36%	38%	62%	82
Arce	44%	56%	69%	31%	82
Gran Chaco	55%	45%	57%	43%	74
Aviles	49%	51%	68%	32%	83
Mendez	55%	45%	61%	39%	82
O'Connor	48%	52%	66%	34%	78
Department-wide	58%	42%	50%	50%	80

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from the Corte Departamental Electoral Tarija, Referéndum Revocatorio August, 2008

*Percentage is calculated on the basis of total number of valid ballots cast

Notes

ⁱ The paper forms part of a wider project on the conflicts that have emerged around natural gas extraction in Tarija since the latter 1990s, in particular the conflicts among indigenous groups, companies, landowners and the state. The first author is grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK for support to this project (Grant Number: PTA-051-2006-00005). The study is also part of a larger ESRC supported research project on territories, conflicts and development in areas affected by resource extraction in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia (RES-167-25-0170: see www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/research/andes).

ⁱⁱ The media luna, or crescent, refers to a dissident political block incorporating the eastern lowland departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, Tarija and on occasion Chuquisaca. Promoted by political elites from Santa Cruz, the movement seeks greater financial, political and administrative autonomy from central government and its strength and visibility increased in the aftermath of the election of Evo Morales and MAS in 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ Criollo refers to persons of white, European descent while mestizo refers to persons of mixed ethnicity.

^{iv} The information in this section is from INE 2001 and INE 2009.

^v A proposal to create a tenth department (Chaco) was proposed at the Constituent Assembly but later abandoned when deemed unviable. See Bazoberry (2006) for historical debates on this issue.

^{vi} Of the three the Guarani are the principal indigenous group in Tarija (850 families), followed by the Weenhayek (350 families). There are very few Tapiete (13 families). See Castro (2004)

^{vii} An example of the limited bargaining position of the Bolivian government around gas is exemplified in the infamous “borrón y cuenta nueva” agreement signed with Argentina in 1990 by the Paz Zamora government. During the 1980s, Bolivia had run up significant debts with Argentina. At the same time, Argentina’s growing internal debt led to an arrangement whereby Bolivia accepted payment in-kind, i.e. equipment in exchange for gas – equipment that was considered of questionable value. After both governments had lost track of the value of these improvised and complicated arrangements it was agreed that each government would forgive any outstanding debts of the other and start anew (Lema, 2008). See also Quiroga Santa Cruz (1977) for a critical historical assessment of hydrocarbons negotiations with Brazil in the 1970s.

^{ix} These included Amoco (USA), Repsol (Spain), ExxonMobil (USA), British Gas (UK), British Petroleum(UK), Total (France), Pluspetrol (Argentina), Petrobras (Brazil), and Perez Companac (Argentina).

^x The IDH, or Direct Hydrocarbons Tax, was introduced in Hydrocarbons Law 3058 calling for the transfer of 32 percent of oil and gas profits towards the prefectures, municipal governments, the National Treasury (TGN), universities and the Indigenous Fund. In 2008, the Pensioner's stipend was added to this list. Initially the prefectures received 33,2 percent of IDH, the National treasury 28,6 percent; municipal governments 26,5 percent; the universities 6,6 percent and the Indigenous Fund 5,0 percent. Under Morales' reformulated distribution, the Pensioner's bonus receives 26,1 percent, the Prefectures 9,9 percent, the municipal governments 33,7 percent, the National Treasury 20,2 percent; the Universities 6,6% and the Indigenous 3,5%. See Fundación Jubileo (2008) for a discussion of how these changes impact central government, departmental and municipal budgets.

^{xi} Critics in CODEPANAL (Comité de Defensa del Patrimonio Nacional) accuse Morales of nationalizing gas rents but leaving transnational firms in charge of hydrocarbon operations as well as failing to fulfil a pledge to industrialize Bolivian hydrocarbons. See www.cedib.org for more on debates over the nationalization of hydrocarbons.

^{xii} A royalty is a payment in recognition that the resource being extracted is not renewable and thus has a finite period.

^{xiii} In current US dollars.

^{xiv} See for instance the positions of the Departmental government (the Prefecture).

^{xv} Bolivia is divided into a series of jurisdictions known as municipalities, provinces and departments. Municipal governments are governed by elected mayors and councils. Departments are governed by elected Prefects, similar to the role of a governor. Provincial authorities are designated by the Departmental Prefects. In Tarija there are 9 provinces of which three are gas producing areas: Gran Chaco, O'Connor and to a lesser extent, Arce.

^{xvi} Royalties are paid directly to the Prefectural government. As of November 2009, the Province of the Gran Chaco will receive a direct payment corresponding to 45 percent of Tarija's royalty payment. The IDH however is distributed to the Prefecture, to Tarija's 11 municipal governments and to the University Juan Misrael Saracho.

^{xvii} This bonanza ended in April 2009 when Bolivia renegotiated gas prices with Brazil and Argentina with prices dropping some 33 percent from their highs in 2008 but recovering somewhat in late 2009.

^{xviii} See Weisbrot and Sandoval (2008) for a map and analysis of the per capita distribution of IDH revenues, AIN (2007, Part 2 and Part 3) for a discussion of conflicts stemming from oil and gas revenue distribution and Fundación Jubileo (2008) for a discussion of the sums involved in the media luna-central government dispute over IDH.

^{xix} The Presidents of Santa Cruz, Pando, Beni, Chuquisaca and Tarija formed a coordinating group called CONALDE (The National Democratic Council).

^{xx} Many have argued that the Bolivia-Paraguay War of the Chaco was a war over hydrocarbons, and engineered by Standard Oil. In the April 2009 agreement between Bolivia and Paraguay over the definition of the border, Morales referred once again to this claim (BBC, 2009).

^{xxi} Among these the Masonic lodges (logias) appeared to play an important role. The Vice President of Tarija's civic committee accused the government and MAS sympathizers of being behind the attack of a Masonic lodge in Tarija at the height of the strike (El Diario, 2008).

^{xxii} Source: various interviews with university staff during their involvement in the strike, September 2008.

^{xxiii} Levels of violence experienced in Tarija pale in comparison to those experienced in the Departments of Santa Cruz and Pando where the number of casualties and loss of property sparked international concern. In Santa Cruz, local news stations filmed attacks by mestizos on persons of indigenous/peasant descent. In Pando, the levels of violence reached alarming proportions when supporters of Prefect Leopoldo Fernandez engaged in direct confrontations with peasant supporters of MAS. At least 11 people were killed and more than 50 wounded. For more on the UN HCHR's report on the Pando massacre see <http://www.boliviainfoforum.org.uk/news-detail.asp?id=63>.

^{xxiv} In 2007 UAJMS received US\$5.3million of IDH resources.

^{xxv} PETROBRAS built and continues to hold an equity position in Transierra S.A. which operates the 432 km GASYRG pipeline running from Yacuiba (Tarija) to Rio Grande (Santa Cruz). The area of the incident was in El Palmar and in the months following the attack the government carried out a series of investigations to identify those who collaborated in the sabotage of the pipeline. Three individuals from Villa Montes were arrested and are being held in a La Paz prison awaiting trial (El Diario, 2008).

^{xxvi} Later Bayard, head of Tarija's Civic Committee, publicly acknowledged the role of the Prefecture in this act.

^{xxvii} I draw here on interviews and informal discussions in Tarija during the period of the strike.

^{xxviii} Arguably it resists expansion of Territorios Comunitarios de Origen (TCO) in areas of gas deposits for similar reasons: again, see our paper in for more on this.

^{xxix} Observations made by Podemos Senator from Tarija, Roberto Ruiz (Ruiz, 2009)

^{xxx} Perreault (2006) makes a similar observation in his analysis of the continuities and breaks between the Guerra del Agua and the Guerra del Gas.

^{xxxi} From a speech he gave in Caranavi in October 2008 to inaugurate oil and gas exploratory activities

^{xxxii} On April 30th, 2009, CIDOB's Executive Secretary said that henceforth the number 1 issue for CIDOB would be to insist that the Office of the Bolivian President request permission from TCOs prior to any hydrocarbon activity. In the light of this, he said, CIDOB's next assembly would discuss whether it and its member organizations would continue supporting MAS or not (La Razón, 2009).