NICO TASSI

The 'postulate of abundance'. *Cholo* market and religion in La Paz, Bolivia

In Bolivia's capital city, La Paz, urbanised indigenous highlanders (*cholos*) have produced one of the most successful experiments of indigenous entrepreneurship in the region. Rejecting locally dominant bourgeois values, for example modesty and thriftiness, *cholos* run a thriving transnational economy of conspicuous consumption placing moral emphasis on spending in excess, and rapidly materialising profit into abundant display – whether through dress, through exhibition of goods or through religious parades. Despite their economic affluence, *cholos* remain a rather discriminated group from the rest of the *mestizo* urban population for their supposed failure to submit to laws of economic rationality. This article is an attempt to redress the misunderstanding between *cholos* and elites and to understand the functioning of *cholos*' postulate of abundance both in religious and economic practices. I argue that 'abundance' is a salient economic and cosmological value associated with the reproduction of goods and cosmological relations. I suggest that *cholos*' postulate of abundance may provide an insight into a form of market economy in which excess, rather than scarcity, operates as the motivating force for exchange.

Key words Bolivia, Andes, economy, religion, *cholo*

The 'non-bourgeois' upper class

In Bolivia, white *mestizos* use the word *cholo* to disparagingly address urbanised indigenous highlanders. In a context where racial demarcations remain palpable and the indigenous world is still stigmatised by its association with poverty, backwardness and tradition, the word *cholo* maintains strong racial connotations. These are weighed down by the ambiguity and even a sense of degeneration attached to the cultural hybridisation presupposed by this social category.

Coherently with an established pattern in the Andes, Bolivian white elites have often tried to appropriate the indigenous symbolic capital in order to shape a sense of belonging to a land they have never quite felt to be theirs. All this while maintaining and reproducing a regime of difference and boundaries that enabled them to keep indigenous people at a distance. As argued by Thomas Abercrombie (1992), through wearing 'indigenous' fabrics and costumes and dancing to 'indigenous' music while skimming over racial and cultural discriminations, the Bolivian elites have been constructing an anchorage in a now 'nationalised' heritage. Bolivian elites have often used the indigenous cultural capital to construct a sense of national identity and a connection to an ancestral land while maintaining discriminative practices towards the indigenous population.

With some notable exceptions, the urbanisation of indigenous practices is being seen with a certain apprehension by the Bolivian elites – and to a certain extent even by indigenous intellectuals – whose pastoral idyll of the *indio bon sauvage* runs the risk of being spoiled by urban modernity. Indeed, if the poverty-ridden rural *indio* wearing traditional Andean gear can be a reassuringly distant figure for the urban elites, wealthy *cholos* wearing ostentatious sunglasses and aviator jackets carry the threat of similarity, which requires the most radical rejection because it menaces traditional social separations.

In Bolivia's capital city La Paz, *cholos paceños* represent a large percentage of the urban population.[1] The west slope of the city, the sector to which the indigenous population was relegated during the colony and which is still today identified as the indigenous slope, is mostly inhabited by settlers of Aymara origins who established themselves as traders (Guss 2006). Some of them moved from transporting goods from the countryside to urban trading.[2] Others flocked into the city as a consequence of the scarcity of productive lands on the Andean plateau. Still others came to La Paz following entrepreneurial ambitions. Beginning with the subsistence sale of second-hand sewing machines and radios, the *cholo* retailing economy forayed into household appliances and digital technologies, televisions and computers. It rapidly evolved into a seriously lucrative business led by intrepid Aymara entrepreneurs who took advantage of the growing inflow of contraband goods. Based on kinship networks, which reconnected the urban market with *cholo* migrants in Bolivia's neighbouring countries, indigenous relatives in the countryside, customs officials and international suppliers, *cholos* have produced one of the most successful forms of indigenous trade in the region. They established their own banking practices based on local religious brotherhoods and produced an economic structure interjecting redistribution and accumulation, self-interest and generosity, communal cooperation and market competition without the sense of contradiction associated with these. This *cholo* market of affordable commodities appealed not only to customers from the local urban sectors but also to foreign buyers from Argentina and to lowlands entrepreneurs.

Despite their dramatic economic achievements, *cholos*' social mobility remains limited. They remain marginalised due to their perceived 'uncivilised' manners and indecent behaviour. A specific social category – *comerciante* (merchant) – with a slightly pejorative meaning emphasising the 'coarse materiality' of their lifestyle, was created to address wealthy *cholos* and differentiate them from the *mestizo-criollo* middle-class, who were seen to be more proper and sophisticated – and much less affluent. As suggested by

1 This article is based on the ethnographic evidence collected during 12 months of fieldwork conducted in the city of La Paz between 2003 and 2004 and successive fieldtrips in 2008 and 2009. My research was aimed at outlining the intersection of economic and religious practice among *cholo* traders in the neighbourhood of Gran Poder. I worked with two of the biggest *cholo* trade unions, focusing on their commercial activities, economic networks and practices as well as on their involvement in and organisation of the religious festival of Gran Poder. Also crucial to my ethnographic work was the analysis of the interactions, relations and misunderstandings among the *cholo* community and political and religious authorities.

2 The neighbourhoods of the west slope, and in particular barrio Gran Poder, are still today disseminated with *tambos*, inns/storehouses where the goods transported from the countryside on mule-back, from coal to vegetables from meat to beer, were originally gathered and sold to urban buyers. Scholars (Harris *et al.* 1987) have suggested that Andean indigenous peasants had played a crucial role in such commercial practices and indeed they had intervened in the market for centuries.

Father Marcelo, a member of the Augustinian congregation in charge of the Sanctuary of Holy Trinity, *cholo* traders are 'a non-bourgeois upper class', implying that despite their striking economic success, they refuse or they have not been able to fully adjust to the manners and behavioural canons of urban propriety. Rejecting locally dominant bourgeois values – for example, modesty and thriftiness – the *cholos* run a thriving transnational economy of conspicuous consumption where the individual accumulation of money seems to be despised and profit needs to be constantly transubstantiated into material means.

Against the backdrop of persistent discrimination and the influx of new consumer goods, the community of *cholos* has been undergoing a cultural renaissance and has maintained bonds with the indigenous world, its practices, beliefs and social networks. In fact, *cholos*' boisterous social prominence in contemporary La Paz could not be fully understood without paying attention to another emblematic event. At the end of May and beginning of June, the Gran Poder dance parade (*Entrada del Gran Poder*) transforms the west slope and the city centre of La Paz into the theatre of one of the biggest religious celebrations on the continent. The *Entrada del Gran Poder* mobilises not just an incredible number of people and tens of thousands of devotees/dancers, but also an amount of material resources that would seem to exceed the possibilities of this apparently underprivileged area of the city. The preparation, organisation and celebrations are spread across the whole year, involving a series of activities, social and religious events that have come to occupy a prominent role in *cholos*' everyday life. Doña Marta, owner of an appliance shop in the Gran Poder neighbourhood and member of one of the trade unions I worked with, commented: 'my husband almost doesn't work in the shop. He only comes during the intervals of the fiesta'.

By simultaneously analysing *cholos*' economic and religious practices and principles, the aim of this paper is to highlight urban elites' misconceptions about *cholos*' 'irrational and backward' manners and their supposed failure to become modern, bourgeois urban citizens. In the Andes money and market transactions were often endowed with profound religious connotations (Harris 2000; Platt 1992, 1995). On the one hand, precious metals maintain an association with the sacred, gold traditionally being identified with the sweat of the sun and silver with the tears of the moon (Harris 2000; Sallnow 1989). On the other hand, the Andean economies have long been based on a particular practice of exchange and circulation of products determined by the substantial differentiation of ecozones of the tropical mountain environment (Lehmann 1982; Masuda *et al.* 1985; Murra 1975, 1980). Harris (2000) suggests that such circulation of goods comes to constitute a crucial cosmological principle invested with reproductive and regenerative qualities. In the north of Potosi, for instance, goods that have 'circulated' and money in the form of profit derived from such circulation, are referred to as 'growing' and 'giving birth' (cf. Strathern 1988). Circulation and production appear to be part of a single process that involves both economic and cosmological forces.

One of the common outcomes of the studies and analyses of Andean economies has been the ability of Andean peoples to re-signify and reintegrate market transactions in their own ritual system, this either being 'circulation' or 'devil' worship. Instead of the market constituting a rationalising agent or a fetishised instrument feeding a modernist imaginary and enabling to gain access to the 'magical' realm of the modern (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; de Boeck 1998; Taussig 1980), in the Andes market transactions have often been understood as a complement to the local ritual/economic structure

(cf. Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999; Himpele 2003; Platt 1992).[3] In this paper I will be looking at the workings of a successful form of market economy controlled by *cholos* rather than *mestizo* intermediaries and colonial authorities. This will enable me to gain an insight on processes of urbanisation of economic/ritual practices, alternative forms of exchange and circulation of commodities. Beside circulation, I will analyse in more detail another cosmological principle of the *cholo* community, the principle of material abundance. I will argue that both in the *cholo* market and religious dance parades, the performance of material abundance constitutes an iconic statement instantiating economic and cosmological reproduction. *Cholos*' religious and economic principles and practices may provide an alternative to certain assumptions about modernity and its ontological distinction between spiritual and material worlds, as well as to dominant understandings of market dynamics and relations.

The industry without chimneys

The *Fiesta del Gran Poder* is a celebration of the Holy Trinity, where Catholic and Andean beliefs, forms of worship and ideologies intersect in unexpected ways. As scholars have often suggested (Gisbert 2004; Platt 1996; Abercrombie 1998), in the Andes the Catholic fiestas became technologies through which Andean ancestral cults were substituted and transformed into the contemporary worship of Catholic Saints and images. At the same time, fiestas were crucial calendric institutions through which the Andeans learned of and directly participated in the events of the life of Christ.

The *Fiesta del Gran Poder* has not only functioned as a mediator between rural and urban religious practices, but has also constituted the element around which the indigenous social structure was both redefined and revived through urban religious brotherhoods (*fraternidades*) and trade unions. Religious brotherhoods play a central role in the *cholo* community and each and every one of them participates and 'competes' in the Gran Poder parade in the form of a dance group performing a chosen dance. *Fraternidades* were usually formed according to trade unions (such as traders, butchers, tailors, truck drivers) and to the community of origin of the migrants (*Viacha*, *Taraco*, *Achacachi*), although most of the time members of a same trade union would originate from the same indigenous community of the Bolivian plateau. According to a rotational system, every year a member or two would alternate in the sponsoring of the *fraternidad*'s celebrations for the Holy Trinity. Traditionally, the *fraternidad* of the *comerciantes* of Eloy Salmon Street has alternated fiesta sponsors from the lower and upper half of the street. This feeds an internal competition among members of the fraternity, which resembles the rivalry between moieties of Andean rural communities during the fiestas. Such competition can have a positive connotation and

3 The recent revival of economic anthropology has brought to attention heterogeneous forms of 'popular economies' and/or 'economies of luck and fortune', many of which escape the prescriptions of development agencies, and where accumulative and redistributive practices, gift and commodity, material and spiritual aspects often intersect in unexpected ways (Guyer 2004; Hart 1999; Gudeman 2001). In particular, my work draws from those scholarships (Hart 1999; Maurer 2005; Meyer and Geschiere 1999) that have tried to explain the cosmological function of money and the market and to account for the intersection of religious/cosmological concepts and economic practice.

can be understood as magnifying the lavishness of the celebrations and the reputation of the fraternity. In other words in Gran Poder the *fraternidad* implies a convergence of kinship, guild, religious commitment and economic interest.

During my first field trip to Bolivia, I mistook urban religious celebrations – always accompanied by music and dancing and coupled with the abundant consumption and selling of food and drinks – for commercial fairs, for so much did the sensorial intensity and material excess seem to overshadow the 'proper' religious celebrations. *Cholos* take pride in the fact that in Bolivia *Fiesta del Gran Poder* is the religious celebration that generates the highest capital investment, the highest expenditure, and produces what they refer to as 'movement' (*movimiento*), both a synonym of wealth and a reference to the reinvigoration and revival of the urban economy. In fact, the *Fiesta del Gran Poder* is often represented as an impressive and dynamic assemblage of goods, people and forces, in which everybody wants to participate, invest into and eventually get a share of. Originally from a family of Aymara butchers, Alejandro Chipana is a graduated economist (*licenciado*) who has maintained a strong bond with his roots and relatives. Today he plays an important role in the butcher's trade union and he has covered important functions in the organisation of the *Fiesta del Gran Poder*.

> I made a study of [the Fiesta del] Gran Poder. Its 'economic movement' reaches twenty million dollars[4] and that's no joke. From the day after the [previous] parade when Gran Poder starts and the new *pasantes* are invested [the *pasante* is the fiesta sponsor]. I did a study on the expenditures of Gran Poder since this very moment, from the beer which is bought to celebrate the *pasante*'s investiture. In order for your name to be respected, as a *pasante* you need to run into debt and attract as many people as possible to dance in your *fraternidad*. How do you do that? The *ayni*[5]! You find out that John Smith is celebrating his birthday and despite not being invited, you show up and surprise him with a few crates of beer. John is already obliged to dance in your fraternity. Every week you have at least 3–4 fiestas to attend, as a *pasante* you are busy the whole week. This is a process which involves great expenditures [. . .] You are gonna see the hamburger seller who has pawned her ring worth Bs 200 [£20] and now wants to invest that money in the Gran Poder to get a profit out of it. The profit of those few days is going to feed her kids from 4 to 6 months. In the *pollera* workshops, people are working as never before and people who were unemployed today have a job. The Fiesta del Gran Poder engenders a strong movement of money; something the state is not able to offer. Now politicians want to get involved in the organisation and take advantage. Just considering the expenditures of *folkloristas* [members of the fraternity], excluding the spectators, the Gran Poder generates an expenditure of $20m. That's why we call it 'the industry without chimneys'. (Alejandro Chipana, in interview with the author, 13/03/04)

As became evident from most conversations with my informants, the *Fiesta del Gran Poder* remains profoundly intertwined with the economic activities and development

4 The figure is an estimate of all expenses engendered by and related to the Gran Poder festival. This includes expenses incurred by all participants and all other external parties economically involved in it (from the costume-maker to the shoe-shiner, from the priest to the sponsors). The calculation refers to the 12-month period between the festivals.

5 System of reciprocal prestations of labour among members of the same community.

of the *cholo* community in both practical and cosmological terms. However, if the economic affluence of *cholos* has permitted the development of one of the greatest religious celebrations in the continent, it is also true that the *fiesta* is held accountable for enabling the economy to grow and/or reproduce itself. As we can gather from the logic of Alejandro's explanation, the high levels of expenditure in the organisation and participation to the *Fiesta del Gran Poder* are justified by the belief that the money 'invested' will be reflected back onto the *cholo* community.

The postulate of abundance

In order to better understand this intersection of conspicuous expenditure and consumption with religious and spiritual practices, I want to explore here in more detail the aesthetic of material abundance and the material exaggerations that characterise both *cholo* market and religious celebrations and that Jeff Himpele (2003) defines as the 'postulate of abundance'. I believe this 'postulate of abundance' is key both to understanding *cholos*' cosmology and to shedding light on the mismatch between *cholos* and the urban elites who have often condemned *cholos*' exaggerations and coarse materiality.

As suggested above, the economic ascendance of *cholos*, coupled with their maintained allegiance with the indigenous world, its beliefs and networks, had fed a kind of religious practice where the aesthetic of material abundance played a rather central role.

During dance parades, the visual abundance engendered by hundreds of 'heavily' dressed dancers moving in synchrony in ordered lines, together with the continuous acoustic stimulation produced by the multiple brass bands parading along the route, produces a rather sensuous enchantment (Plates 1 and 2). There is an expression that *cholo* dancers and/or worshippers use to describe when that abundance of material and sensorial stimulations becomes overwhelming. They say 'it has got into me' (*me ha entrado*). The result of such aesthetic of abundance is not an ephemeral impression, a flickering touch of mind, but a blending and empowering of bodies, senses and worlds.

In June 2004, halfway through the Gran Poder parade, dancing with my 4 stone costume and mask, I grabbed the arm of my fellow dancer Juan and told him that I was going to give up and that the effort was too great. We had been dancing for about 3 hours along the 5-mile route under the midday sun with heavy costumes and masks. My feet were bleeding, my back was aching from the continuous oscillations of the dance and the end was still far ahead. Juan reached for a small bottle of whisky, which he forced me to drink. He put on a straight face and said: 'you can't stop now, you must exaggerate if you want the power of the *tata*[6]'. Beside being an ostentatious social practice displaying *cholo* economic status, the material exaggerations of dancing, the 'heavy' costumes and the appearance of material excess can for *cholos* consolidate a pathway of communication between the human and the divine. In the rare occasions when I refused invitations to drink during the celebrations of the Holy Trinity, my fellow *fraternos* would sometimes respond with preoccupation saying that I had to drink more, as if that exaggeration pleased the Saint, induced him to reciprocate that offering of abundance and reproduced a relation between human and spiritual worlds.

6 Father in Aymara. It is an affectionate way to refer to the Lord of *Gran Poder*.

Plate 1 Voluminous *chola* costume. Gran Poder parade 2004. Photo by Juan Yupanqui

Plate 2 Repeated sequence of *morenos*. Gran Poder parade. Photo by Juan Yupanqui

The dance parades, particularly, can be material and sensorial amplifications where the material world appears as an ontological extension of the spiritual world. These faithful displays of joy, beauty and material excess made to the spiritual world during dance parades carry the expectation that the power *cholos* achieve in these events and their proximity to spiritual forces will grant them the force to reflect back into their own lives the same, if not more, wealth (Himpele 2003).

The exaggerated display of expensive clothes and jewellery, the parade of richly decorated costumes, the abundance of food and alcohol and the intensity of music played by large brass bands were all elements understood to elicit 'attraction' (*atracción*), a term very popular among *cholos*. Particularly when describing the activities of the market and practices related to the Gran Poder festival, my informants often employed the

verb 'to attract'. 'Attraction' is a manifestation enabled by a concomitance of spiritual forces and display of material abundance. It can derive from the visually rich costume and the powerful choreographic effect of the dance performed by an abundant number of fraternity members. In the Gran Poder festival there is a hierarchy between the so-called 'heavy dances', 'light dances' and 'autochthonous dances'. 'Heavy dances' are characterised by the impressive amount of decorations on the costume, which is thought to provoke a particular shine, as well as a sense of monumentality, grandiosity and intensity. The excess of decorations and the excess of volume and weight are crucial in producing attraction. When I asked Froilan Flores[7] (alias *el gordo* [the chubby]), *pasante* of the *Morenada Los Intocables*, why people in Gran Poder seemed to be more willing to dance *morenada* than other dances, he commented that

> [*morenada*] is the heaviest dance in Bolivia and people are attracted by its charisma, by the 'suit' more than anything else. In the *Los Intocables* even the male dancers drip in jewellery: tie-clips, rings, [gold] little animals, we shine with elegance, we are practically enviable. (Froilan Flores, interview with the author, 19 March 2004)

The visual abundance and stimulation engenders 'attraction-envy', often understood as an aesthetic witchcraft in the sense that such physical display exerts a molecular captivation of the beholder. Events of a particular intensity can also have a psychosomatic impact on your body. The view can be so 'shining' and gripping and powerful as to literally 'grab' you.

A similar concern with visual richness and with the attractive quality of abundance is also expressed in the economic practices of *cholos*. In Gran Poder neighbourhood, for instance, you find an amazing concentration of commercial activities, which from the very beginning of my fieldwork I found unnecessary given the apparently limited purchasing power of its inhabitants.

What particularly strikes visitors is the co-presence in the same spot of retailers selling exactly the same goods or providing exactly the same service (Himpele 2003). So you may find 50 appliance shops next to each other on the same street (i.e. Calle León de la Barra), but you would need to walk nearly a mile uphill in this intense commercial area to find another one. The concentration of the same goods in the same location magnifies the feeling of abundance and heightens the appeal to the viewer, seller and customer not only to buy but also to participate in this abundance. Despite the excessive density of shops and stalls in the neighbourhood, *cholos* would keep concentrating their economic activities in the barrio in defiance of competition from the high number of other traders.

There is also an aesthetic of over-abundance in the display of the goods and the quantity of commodities stocked in shops and marketplaces that contributes to the proximity of sellers trading in the same goods (Plates 3 and 4). The body plays a crucial role in these dynamics of display and attraction, as the profit derived from the economic activities is incorporated into the body itself, which then becomes an instrument of joyful display of abundance. Successful female sellers change their good teeth into gold

7 Froilan Flores is a baker in his fifties and a renowned *folklorista*. He is one of the founders of the fraternidad *Los Intocables* and at the time he was a board member of the Association of Folkloric Groups of Gran Poder (ACFGP).

Plate 3 Market stalls: repeated sequences of the same goods (red chilli, tea, soap etc.)

ones, wear up to eight *pollera* skirts one on top of the other, expanding the volume of their bodies in order to convey the sensation of wellbeing, power and attraction. Being fat becomes a manifestation of status for married men and women engaged in successful economic activities. Especially for women, the plumpness of the body, the voluminous roundness of their piled skirts while sitting at the stall, together with the abundant display of goods, which are themselves piled in circular shapes (*amontonar*), seem to materialise the unsubstantial profit of their commercial activities into something not just tangible but also physically attractive. *Cholos*' practices of saving and buying reflect a similar concern with immediately reconverting profit and money into material goods either through investment or consumption, and therefore avoiding a static accumulation of monetary means.[8] While this could be partly explained as a consequence of Bolivia's experience of hyperinflation, I also realised that *cholos* place a sense of moral urgency

8 Tristan Platt (1992) suggests that in the ceremony of tribute payment performed in Northern Potosí, banknotes were held from flying away 'like butterflies (*pillpintu*)' by stone weights understood as referents to the state authority. According to Platt, the state 'pins down the helpless butterflies which might otherwise fly off to metamorphose themselves into flower after flower in a natural return to circulation' (1992: 142). The moneys of the state, and those of official banks in the case of *cholos*, seem to hold this characteristic to restrict the propensity to exchange and limit 'movement'. For instance the 'currency' most widely used during the Gran Poder festival is beer. The festival sponsor, *Paceña*, pays its sponsorship in crates of beer, to be precise 55,000 crates. Musicians and bar tenders receive a large share of their salary in beer. Incidentally corn beer was the currency used to pay rotative labourers (*mitayos*) in the Inka corn plantations and still today in the countryside

Plate 4 *Fruta amontonada* in Gran Poder

on re-investing, creating movement by injecting new goods and resources into the local economy and re-socialising profit. Profit must be worn, inhabited and physically incorporated into society.

To make sense of these economic practices we must pay attention to the celebration and worship of the God of Plenty (the *Ekeko*), a very popular figure among urban indigenous sectors (Plate 5). The religious celebration of the God of Plenty is combined, according to the pattern of Andean urban religiosity, with an effervescent commercial fair of *illas* – Aymara amulets, bearers of prosperity and abundance – proving a strong association between and intertwining of spiritual and material forces. The Ekeko is a visibly fat figure, his body being amplified by the numerous goods he is carrying, and he happily parades gold teeth.

The Day of the Ekeko, 24 January, is a public holiday in La Paz and one of its crucial features is the *Alasita* fair of *illas*-amulets. Today's *illas* and *Ekekos* are miniature objects usually made of plastic, metal or pulp paper, which are sold in large quantities in the fair and later blessed by priests and/or ritual specialists (*yatiri*). In a conversation I had with *yatiri* Raimundo trying to figure out the value and meaning of those tiny and bizarre objects, he explained that *illas* are like seeds that you need to carefully feed, look after and protect if you want them to grow and develop into fruits. *Illas*, once blessed, do not simply provide a model, in miniature, for the objects, desires and goods they represent, but they give rise to the objects themselves, their energy and even physical

the silver peso coin is known as 'a maize (cob)'. Corn beer was the completing element of a system of production, redistribution and circulation.

Plate 5 Ekeko with goods/*illas* hanging from the body. Alasita Fair, La Paz

form (Allen 1997). The *Ekekos* and the *illas* are 'iconic statements' that bring about 'growth', abundance and reproduction. They are elements that enable people to direct the world in the direction of their needs and desires and that actualise the abundance they represent.

Concepts such as 'repetition' and 'multiplication' embody crucial Andean ideas about reproduction (Platt 1996; Ferraro 2004). In his ethnographic analysis of quechua numbers, Gary Urton (1997) points out how repeated sequences of numbers are referents to filial relations and embody in their own 'succession' a sense of physical and material reproduction. As in the case of the *Ekeko*, these iconic statements of abundance and repetition produced in the Gran Poder parade and market through the performance of replicated sequences of dancers, costumes and goods induce 'attraction' and instantiate reproduction.

Hybrid modernity

Such aesthetics of abundance and its related 'exaggerated' practices were regarded with certain disdain by the urban non-indigenous population who identified it with *cholos*'

failure to understand and submit to the ideology of economic and social progress. On several occasions during my fieldwork, political and religious authorities often blamed *cholos* for transforming the religious celebrations of the *Fiesta del Gran Poder* and the performance of ancestral dances into a marketable business. In a press conference that took place in the *Casa de la cultura* (the House of Culture) a few days before the *Fiesta*, the Secretary of Culture, manifested his disappointment in the 'exaggerations' taking place during the celebrations. He invited participants to take a more respectful attitude towards the city and its cleanliness. In a polemical statement, the Secretary of Culture admonished the organisers for showing more concern for economic matters than for social and cultural ones, and vindicated the necessity of preserving traditional dances on the verge of extinction and avoiding distortions to the folkloric tradition.

The Gran Poder trader Nicolás Huallpara[9] responded to the criticisms of the Secretary of Culture by emphasising the 'attraction' that the supposedly exaggerated celebrations had been able to exert over national and international audiences and consequentially the economic quality of the festival, its role in boosting the urban economy, and its producing of 'goods for export': dancing and its related paraphernalia such as the costumes and masks today being appreciated beyond national boundaries.

Even the Catholic Church was highly sceptical about how *cholos* were handling the *Fiesta del Gran Poder*. Among the Catholic clergy I worked with, dancing and its connected activities were generally understood as an improper religious practice ('popular religion'), which had to be tolerated but also needed to be brought back on the right track. In fact, at the time of my fieldwork, increasing divergences were developing between the official Catholic groups linked to the clergy and the community of *cholos* in charge of the parade. The dispute developed as a consequence of the increasingly unorthodox practices adopted by *cholos* during the Gran Poder festival and their limited participation in the official Catholic ceremonies. The position of the Church was that the growing emphasis on the dance parade and the mushrooming of musical celebrations in the district had overshadowed the real religious motives of the Holy Trinity. Church control over the fiesta was diminishing in favour of the *cholo* community, which had acquired the power to negotiate with the religious authorities and to insert into the ritual cycle practices that the Catholic Church was reluctant to accept.[10] The Sanctuary priest and other more orthodox religious groups adopted a series of strategies to restore the festival of Holy Trinity of its Roman Catholic flavour. Recently, a process of Catholic catechisation was not very successfully forced onto *cholos*. As Father Marcelo commented:

> Once we tried to separate the religious part of the fiesta from the folklore, the dance, the material exaggerations, the stewardship, but it didn't work. The dances are the expression of the Aymara religiosity [...] Now the Church has decided to catechise all of the participants in the Gran Poder festival. This is not easy though. Gran Poder people are not used to being educated, they don't have this culture of being taught by somebody. So they get here already doubting, bored, and some undergo the catechisation just because they are forced to do it. Others

9 Nicolás was at the time of the press conference the president of the Association in charge of the festival of Gran Poder (ACFGP) and a successful trader in household appliances. He later became a councillor and 'mediator' between the municipality and the Gran Poder community.

10 This includes the Mass for the *pasantes*, the massive blessing of the fraternity outside the Sanctuary and the offerings of food to the Lord of Gran Poder during the service.

> even send substitutes to 'represent' them because they lack the time or the will to be themselves catechised. (Father Marcelo, interview with the author, 4 December 2003).

To further complicate the matter, if, on the one hand, one problem with *cholos* was their excessive emphasis on the material and the economic to the detriment of the religious, on the other, a common modernist discourse among urban elites condemned *cholos*'s excessive religious celebrations for being detrimental to their economic development. *Cholos* were considered industrious but not progressive. Their enterprise, skilfulness and productivity were directed by reckless principles instead of being guided by proper goals and motivations – progress and development. A catchphrase commonly used by urban elites to criticise *cholos* was: *mientras Bolivia danza Chile avanza* [while Bolivia is dancing, Chile is advancing – or developing]. Instead of taking advantage of the economic conjuncture in order to improve their social conditions, *cholos* seemed to be happy to 'irresponsibly' over-indulge in religious celebrations.

I would like to dwell for a moment on the reasons why the urbanisation of the *indio* did not quite fit the expectations of 'indigenous modernisation' held by the state, the Catholic Church and the elites. Traditionally, in the region, both leftist and conservative politicians had identified the *cholificación* – indigenous urbanisation – as a necessary stage for the Indian to go through in order to develop a political consciousness, emancipate himself from superstitious beliefs and play an active role in the shaping of the modern Bolivian nation (Quijano cited in De la Cadena 2006). However, the attempt by the Catholic Church to re-catechise *cholos* to Christian values and ideas and the elites' complaints about the exaggerations and the manners of the *cholo* community, seem to point at some serious malfunctions in their extraordinary economic development. Particularly, I would like to focus my attention on three elements that I believe are at the core of *cholos*' 'failed modernity' and that embody fundamental discrepancies between *cholos* and elites' ideological principles.

1. Conscious upholding of 'backward' practices

One element that has always intrigued me about *cholos* is the lack of shame for their attachment to 'backward' indigenous beliefs, practices and social networks. As suggested by Latour (1993), the ideology of modernity implies liberation from the 'obscurity of the olden days' and the outlining of a new dawn where social needs and natural reality, spiritual and material worlds, signs and things are no longer blended together. Narratives of modernity, and elites' discourses, place the moderns quite apart from their predecessors by infiltrating a sense of moral redemption in the 'new' processes, events and practices. This evolutionist and liberating prospect often tends to place a sense of indignity in the backward non-modern and produces a consequent desire to overcome it. In the case of *cholos* this seems to be aggravated by the persistent racial discrimination still attached to the 'primitive' indigenous world. However, *cholos* showed a certain resistance to straightforwardly accepting and embracing this modern ideology and rejecting those customs and practices that were considered improper, not to say backward or primitive. I take here an excerpt from an interview with Alejandro Chipana.

> The time came when the people of Aymara descent, I am not going to say rich or poor, I simply say Aymara, made it into politics, university and achieved an awareness of our [indigenous] surnames, customs and traditions. I am a butcher who does not hide his own surname. [. . .] Look, there was a Chipana who had kept his maternal surname Levez [to hide his indigenous provenance]. He presented himself as a Levez but when I introduced myself firmly as a Chipana he then said 'you are my cousin, my brother'. This is the shame that many had but it has been overcome [. . .] now we don't need to ask for permission or to beg for help from the institutions and private companies. We made the feeble authorities realise that we are not simply drunkards. It is not like before, we now have certain power. (Alejandro Chipana, interview with the author, 13 March 2004)

As Alejandro suggests, *cholos*' new social and economic status and the 'awareness' of their ancestry has enabled them to absorb elements from the two streams (the *indio* and the *criollo*) without being fully dependent on the modernist cultural models – as often both the *criollo* and the *indio* were (cf. Arguedas 1975). Indeed, *cholos* had developed not only a political consciousness but also an 'awareness' of their customs that enabled them to practise and negotiate their 'Andean' culture without the sense of shame imposed by the modernist paradigm.

If we go back to the practices of *cholo* economy, excessive spending and buying, it is not only about the desire to appropriate the power and the goods of the all-powerful whites and to feed a modernist imaginary. In fact, the *cholos* are the ones running this transnational network of commodities, which therefore doesn't seem to be too far from their reach and control. As we have seen, a significant proportion of their profit is invested in Andean dance costumes and music for the parade, in other words the profit from commodities is reconverted into what my informant Nicolás Huallpara called Andean 'goods for export', meaning dance and costume.

2. 'Failed' objectification

Cholos' development of a thriving market economy, the influx of commodities, the development of their own banking practices, doesn't quite seem to correspond to the idea of estrangement that accompanies traditional theories of modernity when explaining such epochal 'transitions'. Indeed, a major estrangement of these narratives of modernity is the abstraction of that which was concrete, alienation of the individual from the material product of his activities and a decontextualisation and de-signification of social relations. Although here described in rather simplistic terms, this process of human withdrawal from the material world has been elsewhere described as reification, the synoptic illusion (Bourdieu 1977), disembedding (Polanyi 1959) abstraction (Marx 1990 [1867]). I want to suggest here, through the analysis of *cholo* practices, another challenge to such narratives of modernity by highlighting the specific relation between humans and objects and humans and commodities in the case of *cholos*. From the comments of political and religious authorities about *cholos* emerges a common ideology of separation and a sense of irreconcilability between human–object relations and relations between humans. For the authorities, the material exaggerations during the festival and the excessive concern with material wellbeing are detrimental to the healthy functioning of social relations. On the contrary, I suggest, *cholo* human and material domains encompass each other in surprising ways.

I will take here an emblematic example of *cholo* cultural practice in order to understand certain distortions to the process of disembedding or separation of the human from the material objectified world: the blessing of the minibuses by the drivers' unions during Carnival. In the Aymara tradition, Carnival coincides with the *Anata* festival in which the *Pachamama* is blessed and thanked in the form of offerings (*ch'alla*) in the hope of being supplied with an abundant harvest. In the city, the blessing of *Pachamama* as a dispenser of produce is substituted with the blessing of any material item (it can even be an office or a workshop) that constitutes a source of income for the family or trade union. For the thousands of minibus drivers in La Paz, the minibus represents a source of income to be blessed and thanked. From simply being a utilitarian instrument of money-making, the minibus is transformed into an entity with spiritual and corporeal characteristics.

In February 2004, I was unexpectedly faced with the impressive blessing of minibuses at the *Cementerio* bus terminal. Twelve minibuses had been lined up in three rows, all facing an improvised stage in the middle of the street where *morenada* music was being played on huge loudspeakers from a CD player. Considering the fact that neither the drivers nor the union own the minibuses, which are instead rented from wealthier businessmen, the act could not be straightforwardly interpreted as a display of one's material properties. Music was played and beer was poured for the minibuses as they came to be treated literally as human/animal bodies and attributed with human-like qualities. Ethnographic works in the rural Andes have often suggested how music is supposed to fortify the spirit of people, animals and crops, stimulating their growth and stirring their emotions (Arnold and Yapita 1998; Stobart 2000). The minibuses were arranged in lines – a regimentation very similar to the fiesta dance parade – and successively blessed with petals and confetti on top of their roofs in a similar fashion to the blessing of *pasantes* during a fiesta. Furthermore, flowers were tied to rear-view mirrors, an image powerfully reminiscent of the decorations secured on the ears of sheep and llamas during the mating season. After a season of intense work, the minibuses were decorated, energised with beer and music, and thanked for their services. The event restored the force and vigour of the minibus and made it ready for a new season of production.

Following an Andean pattern, modern objects, goods and means of production in the urban context can be perceived as 'functioning bodies' whose spirit is stirred by music and alcohol. Rather than objectification of relations and the disembedding of the human from the objective produced by industrial production, the minibus, despite being privately owned, remains included in networks of relations and communications with other humans and objects as well as with local cosmological forces. Private wealth and mass-produced objects are here integrated into a local system of production that is based on the continuous and fluid connection, exchange and reflection between human, divine and material world – the minibus that needs to be re-energised, cheered by music and re-socialised by grouping it together with the other minibuses.

On this point, I want to remind briefly of another practice of both the *cholo* market and religion. I refer here to the capacity of the display of material abundance to 'attract' people into relations and originate economic bonds and affiliations. Both a devotee joining a religious brotherhood to dance in the *Fiesta del Gran Poder* and a seller joining a market of the west slope would base their choice certainly on their economic possibilities but also on the 'attraction' elicited by the abundance of goods, food and music that the market or the fraternity can produce. This material plenty is the element

that draws people to join and participate in the first place, and its 'attraction' will be very promptly sanctioned through official bonds of *compadrazgo* – *compadrazgo* being the most common way through which the tie between the new members and the fraternity is consolidated – and economic partnerships. In other words, in the case of *cholo* religious and economic practices, we may consider the possibility, discarded by the clergy and the elites, that material abundance can be conducive to social relations.

3. The intersection of spiritual forces and material abundance

As a third constitutive element of *cholos*' hybrid modernity is their understanding of the relationship between spiritual and material worlds. It is *cholos*' nonchalant blending of economic concerns with religious ones, of sacred and profane domains' abundant materiality and spiritual forces that elicits so much nervousness among the clergy and the elites.

When I first asked the meat trader Justo Soria whether he found the close concomitance of religious and material values in the ostentatious dance parade of Gran Poder contradictory, he replied that my concern reflected the clergy's customary preaching. According to Justo, representative of the butcher's fraternity to the Association in charge of the festival, the Lord of Gran Poder was pleased by this spilling out of resources in his name. The exaggerations in the celebration would be a way to make the *tata* 'reverberate' in every street and corner of the city and also magnify the faith and the devotion amongst the urban dwellers. The more abundant and louder the parade, the wider the reach and penetration of the Lord of Gran Poder into the urban fabric.

I suggest that this abundance becomes the constitutive principle of a form of 'material theology', which avoids the modernist divide and contradiction between the material and the transcendent, the economic and the religious. There is something in this idea of abundance that is at one and the same time both theological and material. Indeed, through material abundance the individual may gain access to certain social and spiritual domains, therefore acquiring the ability to extend their influence in time and space (cf. Munn 1986). Simultaneously there is a clear economic and utilitarian aspect in the production and reproduction of this abundance.

This approach to and understanding of abundance enables us to pin down another important misunderstanding between the religious ideology of the clergy and that of the *cholo* community. If the religious authorities' attempt to separate the material exaggerations of the parade from religious worship suggests an understanding of spiritual practice as a predominantly immaterial project of sublimation from 'all that is material and physical', *cholos* place material abundance at the core of both their economic and spiritual activities as simultaneously constituting a means to God and to prosperity. For *cholos*, material plenty instantiates the contact with spiritual forces and activates an exchange between these domains. The ascetic and individual renunciation of the material as a pathway to God is here paralleled by an exaggerated, collective participation in the production of abundance. It is not *cholos*' incapacity to abstract from the material that is at stake here but rather the understanding of the material and the transcendent as an extension/encompassment of each other.

Cholos' postulate of abundance extends beyond purely religious concerns as it also seems to contribute an alternative perspective to the functioning of the market. The discourse of Western political economy has been centred on the earthly scarcity of means

and resources as the element forcing individuals into exchange for the sake of their own survival. As suggested by Marshall Sahlins (1994), this economic postulate of scarcity instead of being a universally valid principle seems to find its roots in a 'religious premise' of the Christian worldview. It is the foundational Christian myth of the banishment of humans from the presence of God and the consequent tension between human–material wickedness and God's ethereal truth and perfection that consolidate an understanding of the material world as characterised by finitude and scarcity. Therefore, the new science of economics becomes a rationalising process, based on limited means and rational choice.

In the case of the highland cosmology, neither scarcity nor abundance are the predefined conditions of human existence. Both scarcity and abundance are constantly negotiated with spiritual forces. As we have observed, things happening in the material world tend to have a quite direct reflection and influence in the spiritual, and vice versa. In the case of *cholos*, due to their economic affluence, abundance has been brought to the forefront of economic activities. Indeed, this continued and repeated statement of material abundance stimulates spiritual forces to reciprocate and reproduce plenty and instantiates that constant circulation between human, material and spiritual domains. *Cholos*' different perspective on the ontological divide between the religious and the economic, as well as on scarcity (cf. Harris 2000; Himpele 2003) as the destiny of the human condition, provides an insight on a market economy where abundance rather than scarcity constitutes the 'religious premise' defining economic activity and drawing people into relations of exchange. Values such as thriftiness, modesty and individuality, which are crucial for the postulate of scarcity, are paralleled by ostentation, participation and exaggeration, in a context where the motive for engaging in economic activities is the participation into, maintaining and reproduction of material abundance. In this sense the mystical power of money and the market economy, attributed to their invisibility and capacity for abstraction (Simmel 1990; Graeber 2001), is complemented by their role as agents of expenditure, materialisation and as mobile media facilitating exchange, movement, abundance (cf. Holbraad 2005) and relationality.

Conclusions

In this paper I have addressed a common misunderstanding between *cholos* and non-indigenous elites regarding the relation between the spiritual and the material, the religious and the economic. First, I have shown how the supposedly radical contradiction between market economy and traditional religious practices can be a false premise. *Cholo* market economy and religion not only are based on common cosmological principles but their practices are so interconnected as to make any attempt to separate them for analytical reasons impracticable. This is an important factor for another point I have presented about material abundance as the principle governing *cholo* market economy and religion. Although this idea needs to be explored in more depth, I believe there are some important elements that could be brought to attention. As shown, *cholos*' abundance postulate cannot be reduced to a failure to understand the capitalist ideology of accumulation or to an irrational anti-economic endeavour. Excessive spending and display of abundance are not simply 'practices of destruction' (Veblen 1994 [1899]; Bataille 1988; de Boeck 1998) of resources, but for *cholos* are techniques of self-making, religious and economic strategies (cf. Gell 1986). *Cholos*' postulate of abundance brings the material centre stage but not as a domain in

contradiction with or withdrawn from human relations and spiritual forces but rather as a domain that creates and encompasses them.

Nico Tassi
Department of Anthropology
University College London
London WC1H 0BW, UK
altoplanico@googlemail.com

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