

WATER, COMMUNITY, AND PRIVATIZATION IN COCHABAMBA BOLIVIA

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Abstract

When the Bolivian government privatized water in Cochabamba in 1999, a broad-based, widespread resistance movement emerged. What accounts for the unprecedented scope and scale of this resistance when compared to responses to earlier reforms? How do we explain the cross-class, cross-ethnic, cross-urban-rural, and highly diverse nature of the movement? To answer these questions we must pay close attention to the meanings with which water was imbued in the Cochabamban context. In the context of a history of irrigation, agriculture, drought, and conflict, water helped to produce and reproduce imagined communities of nation, region and ethnic group as well as quotidian communities revolving around water's routine production and consumption. It was not just material understandings of water, but also conceptions of community that were at stake. These meanings help to explain the dynamics of the resistance that emerged.

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In January 2000, thousands of Bolivians took to the streets to protest the privatization of the Cochabamban water supply. While Bolivians had been voicing their opposition to economic policy shifts that began almost 15 years earlier, the protests in Cochabamba grew to a scope and scale that had been without precedent. The following events led up to the protest: the Bolivian government sold the right to the water of Bolivia's third largest city, Cochabamba, to the private firm, Aguas del Tunari, in June 1999. The firm gained rights not only to Cochabamba's municipal water system but also to water collected through private and communal wells. By the time ownership was formally transferred five months later, a cross-class, cross-ethnic social movement demanding access to affordable water had taken hold in the region. In January when bills came due for water that had, in some cases, doubled in price, the water wars began, shutting down the city for days at a time.¹ Protests spread throughout the country and the government was forced to re-nationalize Cochabamban water by April. Although protest politics quickly quieted in the region, the Cochabamban movement was arguably the beginning of a period of political unrest that drove presidents from office and helped propel Evo Morales to the presidency five years later.

The 1999 privatization of water in Cochabamba brought Bolivians from every class, occupation, age, and ethnicity to the streets; it was not just those who suffered from rate increases who joined the protests. Bolivian researcher Rocío Bustamante argues that "almost the

¹ Some accounts of these events describe them as the "water war" in the singular. Others use the plural. I adopt the plural, "water wars" as there were multiple protest events, each of which can be understood and described as its own "war." Interestingly, most participants in the water wars call the entire set of events the "*guerra del agua*," using the singular. However, when they discuss different episodes of protest, they use the "*primera guerra del agua*" (the first water war) to refer to the January protest events, the "*segunda guerra del agua*" (the second water war) to refer to the February protest events, and so on. The plural, therefore, although not a literal translation of the ways in which most participants name the events, remains true to how they describe them.

² Regardless of the actual numbers on the streets, it is clear that participation was not limited to any one class or identity group.

³ See McAdam et al. (1996); McAdam (1999); Tarrow (1998); McAdam et al. (2001); Aminzade (2001); and

entire population of the region participated [in the water wars], no matter what their social class” (2005, 72).² Social scientist Robert Albro observes that, during the water wars, “diverse popular sectors and their respective cultural tactics combine[d] as a plural political subject” (2005, 254). But why did this mass protest occur when it did, and why was the composition of the social movement so diverse? How and why was the formation of this “plural political subject” possible?

Dominant approaches to the study of social movements provide an important foundation to understanding the events of the water wars.³ Mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and frames all undoubtedly played a role at various stages in the movement’s emergence and growth. Most notably, Cochabamba was home to a number of mobilizing structures—networks, unions, and neighborhood organizations in particular—that proved critical to the emergence of resistance in the region. Yet we can explain neither the dynamics of movement emergence nor the movement’s plural composition by looking at resources alone. Associational resources available to local organizers varied little in the late 1990s, and in spite of a variety of grievances, large-scale, widespread protest did not emerge until the privatization of water. Furthermore, similar organizational networks existed in other regions of the country that also endured significant material hardship throughout the neoliberal era, yet broad-based protest did not emerge in the rest of the country until after Cochabambans had been in the streets for over three months.

² Regardless of the actual numbers on the streets, it is clear that participation was not limited to any one class or identity group.

³ See McAdam et al. (1996); McAdam (1999); Tarrow (1998); McAdam et al. (2001); Aminzade (2001); and Goodwin and Jasper (2004) for overviews of dominant approaches to social movements as well as critiques of those approaches.

Attention to changes in political context offers similarly limited leverage to explain the events in Cochabamba. Local changes in the political opportunities available to social movement organizers in late 1999 do not appear to be unique to the water movement and national changes in political opportunities were not unique to Cochabamba. Analysis of the movement's growth once protests were underway does bring the importance of political opportunities to the fore, as a combination of government concessions and repression worked together to strengthen the movement. Yet attention to this dynamic cannot explain the mechanisms at work in bringing a diverse group of Cochabambans to the streets in the movement's early months.

Frames were undoubtedly critical to the movement's emergence and its ability to attract so many Cochabambans to join the cause.⁴ The threat to water resonated with Bolivian, Cochabamban, and indigenous nationalist master frames, allowing the issue to appeal even to those not severely affected by the rise in water rates. However, framing cannot explain the initial broad appeal and organizing activity of the movement. A small group of movement leaders did not strategically develop and deploy frames at the movement's outset to ensure widespread participation. Furthermore, attention to frames alone cannot explain why the water movement was able to create and capitalize on such a resonant master frame while earlier reforms did not. Why did nationalist, ethnic, and regional frames resonate so powerfully when water was at stake while they had been unable to motivate a similarly large coalition of Cochabambans to protest around, for example, education or pension reform?⁵

⁴ I use the term "frame" in the way in which it is generally deployed in social movement scholarship. See, for example, Snow and Benford (1988) who describe a frame as an "interpretive schema that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action (137). Framing processes refer to "the process of defining what is going on in a situation in order to encourage protest" (Noakes and Johnston 2005, 2). While these understandings draw on Goffman (1974), it implies a far narrower conceptualization of the term.

⁵ I also explored threshold effects, demonstration effects, prior history of mobilization, and charismatic leadership as potential alternative explanations. None offered satisfactory accounts of the events.

To answer these questions we must look to the claim at the center of the movement—water. Water helped to resolve what had been, in Schelling's (1960) terms, a coordination problem. Water emerged as a focal point, something that brought together diverse groups with diverse interests to fight for a common goal. But why and how did water play this role? Is there something unique about the physical properties of the good itself—its biophysical characteristics or role in securing human physical survival? Or was there something more at stake? While these aspects of water's materiality play a role in how and why water worked the way it did in Cochabamba, a focus on materiality alone would leave us wondering why threats to water provoke resistance in some times and places and not others. To understand why water worked the way it did we must pay attention to what water meant in the Cochabamban context.

Water helps to produce and reproduce these conceptions of regional rights and communal identity for many Cochabambans, regardless of their occupation or place of residence within the Valley. Not surprisingly, the meanings that water has taken on in Cochabamba are multiple, varied, and sometimes apparently contradictory. The particularities differ according to time, place, and person. Yet for many Cochabambans water symbolizes something more than its biophysical characteristics. Cochabamba's history of, and contemporary experiences with scarcity combine with both irrigation practices and understandings of an agricultural past to imbue water with meanings tied to local and regional identities. The privatization contract evoked a resistance rooted in broad community needs and relationships, which were expressed in familiar, long-standing discourses. To many Cochabambans, water was not only a critical component in their continued livelihood, but also a good that took on national, regional, and ethnic significance. The Aguas del Tunari contract not only threatened relationships with a critical material good but also imagined communities of nation, region, and ethnicity as well as

quotidian communities—communities constituted by face-to-face interactions where the members know each other directly—created by everyday social interactions and relationships. As a result Cochabambans from every age, barrio, class, sector, and ethnicity came together around the “material and symbolic urgency of water” (Albro 2005, 255) to voice their opposition.⁶

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. First, the paper offers the economic and political context for the Aguas del Tunari contract. The paper then analyzes the emergence of resistance in a largely chronological fashion, starting with the coalition of urban professionals responsible for initial organizing and moving onto the early blockades that bridged urban-rural divides as well as the growth of urban participation. The paper then focuses on the emergence of the Coordinadora—the central organizing vehicle for the large-scale protests that began in early January. The paper closes with a closer look at the ways in which understanding of nation, region, neighborhood, and ethnicity surfaced in the protest events. Throughout each section the paper both establishes the broad-based and widespread nature of participation in the social mobilizations and shows how water’s meanings in the Cochabamban context help to explain the process through which such a broad coalition came together in political protest. The analysis that

⁶ I am not proposing that every movement leader or participant mentioned in the pages that follow was motivated either partially or entirely by the variety of community-related meanings of water. A host of other factors was undoubtedly at work, as both leaders and participants saw the moment through opportunistic lenses. For some it may have been a chance to finally fight the forces of neoliberalism, while for others it may have been an opportunity to demand increased regional autonomy or seek personal recognition. Local leaders had personal interests and investments at stake and no doubt they kept those interests in mind as they encouraged, discouraged, or participated in the resistance movement. Yet prior to the water wars these kinds of claims and aggregations of interests had been unable to motivate resistance to market-driven threats of the scope and scale of the water wars. Water provided the grievance around which various interests could unite, even if it was understood to be a vehicle and not an end in itself. Ultimately, as Wedeen (2008) has warned, it is impossible to ascribe intentionality to actors—motivations are never truly known, either because actors do not themselves understand what was behind a particular action or because they may misrepresent, misremember or embellish their own accounts. Yet we can look to the work performed by the discourses—both the discourses used during moments of protest and the discourses of actors as they recall them—to attempt to make the contours of the movement intelligible.

follows allows me to make both particular claims about the events in Cochabamba and advance propositions about the ways in which markets might be perceived as particularly threatening when a subsistence resource is at stake.

Bolivia's Neoliberal Experiment

Bolivia was arguably one of Latin America's earliest experiments with market-oriented economic reforms. Suffering from large foreign debt, negative GDP growth, and inflation that reached 8170 percent in early 1985, Bolivia seemed the perfect test case for a package of economic adjustments later labeled the "Washington Consensus."

Bolivia's President, Victor Paz Estenssoro, initiated the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1985, reducing trade barriers, slashing public expenditures, devaluing the currency and privatizing national industries. Over 24,600 public employees lost their jobs between 1985 and 1986. Between 1986 and 1987 the workforce of the Mining Corporation of Bolivia (COMIBOL) shrank from 30,000 to 7,000 (Silva 2009, 107). The Policy was met with significant opposition, but Paz Estenssoro averted sustained resistance through the imposition of a state of siege (Klein 2003, 245). Government officials arrested union leaders and strikers, undermining already weak public sector unions. While the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (COB), Bolivia's umbrella union organization, continued to call strikes, it proved unable to mobilize large numbers of people and government officials successfully contained whatever protests did take place. The quick collapse of a strong opposition movement is particularly surprising in light of the high levels of mobilization that characterized Bolivia in the years prior to Paz Estenssoro's presidency (see Dunkerley 1984; Klein 1992, 2003).

Throughout the 1990s, Paz Estenssoro's successors deepened their commitment to "Washington Consensus" policies. Jaime Paz Zamora (1989-1993) further reduced public sector employment and passed legislation permitting the privatization of most remaining public sector firms (Grindle 2003). President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993-1997) breathed new life into Paz Estenssoro's reforms and pursued privatization policies with "enthusiastic abandon" (Shultz 2003, 34). At the center of Sánchez de Lozada's reform efforts, the *Plan de Todos* (Plan of/for Everyone) called for sweeping structural and economic changes, including constitutional reforms that paved the way for continued privatization. By the end of 1997, Sánchez de Lozada had privatized Bolivia's oil and phone companies, the national airlines, the national electric company, the national train system, and the water in La Paz-El Alto (where, notably, there was relatively little protest once the private firm took over). In total, Sánchez de Lozada oversaw the privatization of 56 public companies, and Supreme Decree 24716 officially recognized concessions as the mode of transfer of water to the private sector (Crespo Flores 2003a). He also successfully overhauled the education system and reformed pensions to create privately managed funds and individual accounts (Grindle 2003).

As the 1990s drew to a close, fourteen years of neoliberal economic reforms had arguably yielded impressive results. Growth averaged 4.8 percent from 1995 through 1998 (Inter-American Development Bank 2006), and inflation was no longer a primary concern. However, the benefits of the impressive growth rates were not evenly distributed. In 1998, the real urban minimum wage in was 37 percent of what it had been in 1980 (Kurtz 2004). By the time Hugo Banzer (who became Bolivia's president in 1997) privatized Cochabamba's municipal water company in 1999 over 70 percent of the national population remained below the poverty line,

with 35 percent in extreme poverty (Nickson and Vargas 2002, 110).⁷ The Gini Index hit 57.9 the same year. Furthermore, Bolivia's growth rates took a dramatic turn, slowing to less than half a percent (Inter-American Development Bank 2006).

Privatization of the Cochabamban water system began in 1997 when the Bolivian government announced that SEMAPA, the Cochabamban municipal water company, would be offered to private bidders. The government entertained no serious bids until 1999 when it "made the conditions more "flexible" and Aguas del Tunari—a subsidiary of the American company Bechtel—showed interest (Assies 2003, 21). The final contract granted Aguas del Tunari a 40-year concession and what amounted to monopoly rights over the region's water. Law 2029, signed by President Banzer on October 29, 1999 served to legitimate the contract itself, granting private control to any wells that had been locally paid for, built, managed, or run.⁸ On November 1, Aguas del Tunari assumed management of community-based water resources and residents were expected to pay accordingly. By January Cochabambans from every class, age, and occupation were in the streets protesting the contract.⁹

The water wars were not the first time Bolivians took to the streets during the neoliberal era; the late 1980s and early 1990s were not without contention. An indigenous movement emerged in the Amazon in the early 1980s (prior to the adoption of the New Economic Plan), focusing on concerns of indigenous autonomy and territory (see Yashar 2005). The movement garnered significant national attention in 1990 with a March for Territory and Dignity, which

⁷ See also World Bank (2006) which estimates that 62.7% of the national population (81.7% of the rural population and 50.6% of the urban population) was below poverty in 1999. While the figures do not agree, the point is clear—poverty was widespread.

⁸ The contract required the changing of Bolivian law (the passage of Law 2029) for it to be legal.

⁹ Protests remained contained to Cochabamba until April when mobilizations began to occur throughout the country, most notably in La Paz. However, while water remained at the center of the Cochabamba movement, the protests that took place in other regions adopted other demands rooted in their own grievances. There was little coherence to the mobilizations outside of Cochabamba; I would argue that they were not part of the "movement" even if national mobilizations were clearly feeding off of the events in Cochabamba.

helped to secure a number of indigenous territories via executive decree. In 1994 coca growers mobilized to resist Sanchez de Lozada's Zero Coca plan, coordinating a "March for Life, Coca, and National Sovereignty" that began in Villa Tunari and ended in La Paz (see Yashar 2005). Teachers took to the streets in large numbers to protest education reform in 1995 (see Gill 2000). Road blockades were also regular occurrences throughout the country and residents of La Paz and El Alto repeatedly demonstrated their ability to shut down both cities for 24 hour "*paros*" (stoppages) to draw attention to any number of issues, from garbage collection to road construction.¹⁰

With the mobilizations in Cochabamba, however, the patterns of resistance changed. Blockades were not singular events but rather part of a sustained series of actions coupled with massive street mobilizations. Furthermore, protesters did not represent a particular group of Bolivians (e.g. miners, coca growers, or indigenous communities) but rather were drawn broadly from Cochabamban society. The coalitions that formed in Cochabamba cut across long-standing cleavages and socio-political divisions, bringing former adversaries together, side-by-side during protest meetings, events, and negotiations. The scope and scale of these mobilizations were without precedent in the neoliberal era.

Early Opposition: the Formation of CODAEP

¹⁰ Silva (2009) groups these movements into three "waves" of anti-neoliberal contention. The first occurred in response to the NEP's initial adoption and was quickly shut down (mentioned earlier in this paper). The second occurred under Sánchez de Lozada and included limited resistance on behalf of the COB and the CSUTCB to the Capitalization Law and the Popular Participation Law, as well as the more extensive resistance to education reform and to the Zero Coca program. The third began with the water wars discussed here.

Resistance to the privatization of water in Cochabamba began long before the first large-scale protests in January 2000. This early opposition foreshadowed the diverse nature of the movement that was to come. Throughout 1998 and 1999, a handful of local politicians and activists worked behind the scenes to raise doubts about Law 2029 and the Aguas del Tunari contract. But there was little public unrest (Maldonado Rojas 2004, interview with Mauricio Delgadillo, CODAEP founder, 2010, Cochabamba). With the formal approval of the Aguas del Tunari contract on June 11, 1999, however, a small group of professionals, including environmentalists, engineers, teachers, lawyers and economists began to meet to discuss how best to organize opposition (Herbas Camacho 2004). They created the Committee for the Defense of Water and the Popular Economy (CODAEP)¹¹ and began to work to inform Cochabambans of the impending changes to their water supply. Beginning in mid-June, Committee members met twice weekly in the Plaza Principal to distribute fliers and speak with residents (Herbas Camacho 2004; interview with Maldonado Rojas 2010)). According to early leader Marcelo Delgadillo, the movement was “all impulse driven at this point, there was little strategy...but it was clear that there was far more going on than an environmental threat. This was about survival; a resource of life was under threat” (interview, Mauricio Delgadillo, January 21, 2010, Cochabamba).

It is impossible to explain the emergence of CODAEP without engaging the role that water had played in Cochabamba’s recent and extended history, and what it meant to Cochabamba’s professional sector in particular. A diverse group of individuals, associations, and interests joined CODAEP (and later the Coordinadora). But it is hard to explain their participation if we understand water only in material terms. While CODAEP’s founders

¹¹ Also called the Committee for Defense of Water and the Family Economy.

anticipated that rates would rise, most members would not have to make life-altering material trade-offs to pay their bills; members were largely comfortable middle-class Cochabamban professionals. The “point of recognition” (Albro 2005) that brought them together came through the central role that water had played in the region and the conception that privatization meant far more than potential rate hikes. Instead, the contract was a betrayal of a long regional effort to secure and distribute a sustainable water supply.

For nearly fifty years, Cochabamban engineers, architects, economists, environmentalists and lawyers had been researching and advocating for various solutions to the region’s limited access to water. The debates about the benefits of Misicuni or Corani—two extensive construction projects proposed to help alleviate water shortages—had raged within meetings of the Engineers’ Society and inside the Mayor’s office for almost two decades. Communities commissioned studies on water-table depth and debates took place over well construction. Studies about water loss and water quality, as well as corruption within SEMAPA, made front-page news. And every year, as the dry-season reached its final weeks, conversations revolved around water—how many days a week people were receiving it, how much sediment came in it, and whether they would make it until the rains without a massive shut-down.

Contemporary drought intersected with idealized notions of a verdant, paradise-like past to heighten water’s role in the Cochabamban imaginary. In the post-glacial period, the valley of Cochabamba was a large lake. Indeed, the name “Cochabamba” is itself a combination of the Quechua words for “lake” (*kocha*) and “plain” (*pampa*). The name is a reflection of what made the Cochabamba valley such a popular place for early settlers—the combination of water and plains made for a particularly fertile region.¹² Here, understandings of water intersect with

¹² See Larson (1998) for a detailed history of the region including attention to water and agricultural practices.

connections to land and agriculture. Water takes on meanings, in part, because of the ways in which it not only shapes daily life and practice, but also because of the way it gave life to crops. Indeed, Cochabamba's water served to help turn the region into the breadbasket of the country, fueling Bolivia's growth by providing grains to the miners that drove the country's development through both the silver and tin mining booms.¹³ Cochabambans speak of this role with great pride and nostalgia—the region's history of cultivation produces notions of regional self-worth and recollections of it are infused with national pride.

Every CODAEP founder interviewed for this research offered lengthy treatments of how water had been a constant reference in both personal and professional life. Engineer Antonio Siles remarked, “We had been the bread basket of the country, of course water was central in our lives...when they published the [Aguas del Tunari] contract the Engineers' Society *had* to do an evaluation. And it was simply a bad project. After all these years, we deserved a better project” (interview with Antonio Siles, January 28, 2010, Cochabamba). The contract evoked strong attachments to region—to what Cochabambans “deserved.” The extended struggle for water made these conceptions of what the region “deserved” particularly powerful. While Cochabambans speak of themselves as the “breadbasket” of Bolivia in the past-tense—they clearly no longer envision the region as providing for the rest of the country—the language they use suggests that, because Cochabamba had used its water for so many years to fuel the country, and the region had suffered disproportionately under the New Economic Plan, it now deserved better where water was concerned. Delgadillo, an architect, commented that “we all shared an interest—water was affecting each of us” and the foundation of CODAEP was simply a logical outgrowth of that overlap (interview with Delgadillo, 2010). For many of these early activists,

¹³ On the silver boom and agricultural production in Cochabamba see Larson (1998).

opposition to the Aguas del Tunari contract provided common ground. They did not need to debate the merits of Misicuni or Corani, or propose solutions to SEMAPA's failures. Instead, they could unite around common claims that privatization would exacerbate the region's water struggles.

The creation of a new organization linking previously disparate professional sectors was by no means a forgone conclusion. Yet Delgadillo and others speak as though there was no other possible outcome, as if the formation of CODAEP was the next, inevitable step on the path towards large-scale opposition to the Aguas del Tunari contract. As we will see later in the paper, movement leaders use similar language to describe the formation of the Coordinadora. Yet as social science scholars are keen to point out, obstacles to coordination are high—collective action is usually the puzzling outcome we seek to explain, not an inevitable outcome we have learned to expect. For participants in CODAEP, however, there appeared to be nothing puzzling at all about the alliance that formed. Members understood not only that water was important to them, but also that it was grounded in a shared set of experiences that worked to make it important to the broader community. Water affected not “me,” but “us,” and participants spoke as though they expected everyone else to understand the threat in similar, communal terms. Environmental activist and CODAEP founder Gabriel Herbas Camacho recalled, “We knew this was important to every Cochabamban. We each fought in different ways, but it was our shared fight” (interview, September 3, 2008, La Paz). Even if the particularities of how water affected environmentalists, engineers, or architects were different, a sense of a communal “us” emerged.

These understandings quickly translated into collaboration. Water became an issue around which groups that had worked together little in the past—environmentalists, teachers, engineers, economists, and architects, to name just a few—could easily unite, even if the

particular meanings drawing participants into the coalition were different. For Herbas, the central issues revolved around the environmental community's long history of commitment to water-related issues. The Valley's search for water had raised environmental concerns and groups had formed to evaluate the potential Misicuni and Corani projects, as well as advocate for sustainable water policies (interview, 2008). For many of Cochabamba's professionals, water was part of regional identity both with respect to a historically grounded pride in cultivation and recent efforts to overcome shortages.

CODAEP's founding was a fundamental first step in the emergence of the broader social movement. Yet its initial efforts did not immediately translate into widespread unrest; early actions in the Plaza received limited attention from the broader Cochabamban community. Nevertheless, CODAEP did draw attention from additional, already established Cochabamban organizations. Mid summer, the leadership of Pueblo en Marcha (PUMA), a small organization of political activists, joined CODAEP's bi-weekly meetings in the Plaza (interviews with Victor Gutierrez January 21, 22, and 26, 2010, Cochabamba; and Delgadillo, 2010). PUMA had already been organizing politically against neoliberal reform; the fight against Aguas del Tunari was a natural fit, and PUMA leadership claims to have believed there was potential for widespread participation. PUMA activist Victor Gutierrez recalls, "I knew it could be big—campesinos, *regantes*, families in the city—everyone cared about water. Maybe for different reasons, but it was important to everyone" (interview, 2010). While early leadership noted the potential for unity around water as a grievance, and began to frame their message, discourse, and outreach accordingly, the frames themselves cannot explain the protests that followed. Instead, it is attention to the ways in which water indexed community, and how individuals understood those communities to be threatened by the Aguas del Tunari contract, that explains why these frames

were not only possible, but also successful. Water provided an opportunity for unity that earlier reforms had not.

Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide

Even with the combined efforts of CODAEP and PUMA, resistance remained marginal and largely urban in nature through the end of September. However, with the passage of the legal prerequisite for the Aguas del Tunari contract—Law 2029—in October, the dynamics began to shift. On October 27, one day prior to the official passage of Law 2029, the Cochabamba Federation of Irrigators (FEDECOR) joined CODAEP in Vinto, a Cochabamba suburb, to block the highway connecting Cochabamba to Oruro and La Paz—a central national artery—and demand the repeal of the Law.

The cooperation between urban Cochabambans, many of whom had migrated to the region in the wake of the privatization of the mines in the mid 1980s, and rural groups was particularly noteworthy. Urban-rural differences—both in policy concerns and organizational structures—ran deep. Political Scientist Susan Spronk writes that, “despite their common indigenous heritage, miners tended to view peasants as ‘backwards’ politically” (Spronk 2007, 12). These understandings appear to be rooted in conflicts that arose during the 1970s when political leaders used “anti-worker policies” as a wedge issue to divide the two groups. Policies towards unions, and miners in particular, had little impact on campesinos’ daily life; campesinos were largely supportive of the political leaders’ efforts to curtail the miner’s power and received their own benefits in exchange for political support (see Cusicanqui 1990, 105). The war of the wells had brought the two sectors into conflict only a few years earlier; cooperation was largely unprecedented, particularly on the scope and scale seen during the water wars.

Yet at the same time as the blockade bridged regional divisions, it also literalized a divide between Cochabamba and the nation's functional capital.¹⁴ This common contemporary protest tactic cut off all road travel and commerce between Cochabamba and La Paz. The blockade was a physical manifestation of the ideational divide between the Valley's inhabitants and the officials in La Paz who had made, and would continue to make, policies with little understanding of local meaning and practice.

Like many other groups, the *regantes*' (irrigators') participation in opposition to the Aguas del Tunari contract and Law 2029 seems logical—both policy changes struck at the core of the *regantes*' daily life on personal and professional levels. For *regantes*, the Aguas del Tunari contract and the accompanying Law 2029 threatened imagined and quotidian community in fundamental and tangible ways. For *regantes*, water is the core of their professional lives. To threaten their well-established practices for constructing, regulating, and monitoring rural irrigation systems was to threaten the strong professional ties that formed not only through daily work, but also through the organization of FEDECOR itself. The utility of an organization that had served to channel collective grievances, unite disparate groups throughout the valleys of the Department, and cultivate empowerment and independence was threatened.

However, *regantes* not only make a living controlling and conducting water to irrigate fields; they also develop spiritual and personal connections with the resource. The *usos y costumbres* (loosely translated as traditions and customs) vary from region to region, and the practices associated with “the” Andean cosmovision are not uniform. Yet throughout Cochabamba's rural areas, water is more than simply a source of income or a component of physical nourishment (field notes 2010, 2008; see also Peredo et al. 2004).

¹⁴ The legal capital of Bolivia remains Sucre, yet most matters of national government take place in La Paz. The only major exception is in the country's supreme court, which continues to be housed in Sucre.

Usos y Costumbres and “the” Andean Cosmovision

For many Cochabambans, the concept of *usos y costumbres* functions as a short-hand way of referring to any number of “traditions” (*tradiciones*) relating to water. Similarly Cochabamban scholars and community residents often describe water-related rituals as part of “the Andean cosmovision.”¹⁵ *Usos y costumbres* are a “symbol of traditional, place-specific and often culturally distinctive resource use practices” (Perreault 2008, 840). Connections to land and place manifest themselves in water which both flows through land and is inextricably tied to particular geographies. In rural and peri-urban settings (both are places where irrigation practices are common) “*usos y costumbres*” might refer to the specific rules of a particular community governing who has access to how much water and when. Water is the fundamental organizing principle for many of these rural and peri-urban communities; elaborate, complex, and highly structured systems of obligations, rights, responsibilities, and justice govern relationships with water sources. Water literally produces and reproduces quotidian communities, serving as the *raison d’être* for governance structures and regular comunal interactions.

But water may also index a connection to the past or a broader irrigator or “Andean” community. The concept of *usos y costumbres* is grounded in a connection to the past—many Cochabambans (irrigators and otherwise) claim that *usos y costumbres* reflect the actual practices of generations of Cochabambans. The particular systems and management practices to which *usos y costumbres* refers remain important, but the concept has also come to signify a connection

¹⁵ “The” Andean cosmovision has become a category of scholarly practice that works on the ground to inform many Cochabambans’ understandings of what it means to be Cochabamban. To what, exactly, Cochabambans intend to refer when they invoke “the Andean cosmovision” as it relates to water is often ambiguous. The pronoun “the” is a misnomer—there is no singular conception of what “the” Andean cosmovision entails. For some, an Andean cosmovision appears to refer to a collection of specific practices relating to how water is discussed and treated. These practices often overlap, but do not always; some sources had narrow conceptions of the practices that did or did not qualify as being part of “the” cosmovision, while others had a more expansive understanding.

with Andean custom, cultural autonomy, and independence from state intervention in communal governance. *Usos y costumbres* simultaneously refers to physical practices surrounding water use and management and broader claims of perceived water rights, autonomy, or self-governance. The concept has gained powerful political force, both among irrigators and within the wider Cochabamban community. The disruption of *usos y costumbres* has, for many Cochabambans, come to mean the disruption of both a contemporary way of life and “long held” cultural practice.

Importantly, conceptions of *usos y costumbres* and “the” Andean cosmovision also shape practices in Cochabamba’s urban areas. Perceptions of rural practices have become almost synecdochic for both the regional and the national. In a short film on the water wars, the narrator declares that Law 2029 prohibited campesinos from using water as they had since “time immemorial...the law *pretendía* [aspired to or attempted to] eliminate peasant tradition” (Rioja Vasquez 2002). The violation is described as something in which not only peasants, but also Cochabambans and even Bolivians more broadly had a stake. To undermine conceptions of a rural “way of life” was to threaten Cochabamba and Bolivia.

Even for those Cochabambans who do not practice irrigation, *usos y costumbres* have become an idealized element of regional identity—a central piece of what it means to be Cochabamban. In Cochabamba’s more urban areas, “*usos y costumbres*” tends to lose its referent to the specifics of water distribution or management. Yet the words still have meaning beyond serving as a simple description of how a particular community might manage local access to water. *Usos y costumbres* can operate discursively to refer to ethnic heritage, ideals of local governance, attachments to region and land, or a connection to the past. Invoking *usos y costumbres* might identify the speaker as someone for whom Bolivia’s indigenous “heritage” is

important, as someone who cares about a particular environmental ethic, or, perhaps as someone who supports local self-governance. Many urban Cochabambans understand the practices to be a way of preserving a connection “Andean ancestry.”¹⁶ They have become a “cultural signifier” (Perreault 2008) that often suggests a highly essentialized conception of “Andeanness” and indigeneity. This discourse of *usos y costumbres* provides “a sense of cultural continuity and social stability” (ibid., 840). *Usos y costumbres* have become a “thing” to which irrigators, other campesinos, urban, and peri-urban Cochabambans refer, working to create commonalities in the Valley, and serving as piece of Cochabamban “culture” worthy of reification and protection. Reference to them provides an easy way to conceptually capture, essentialize, and preserve “*lo andino*.”

These conceptions of connections to the past work to help produce identifications in the Cochabamban present. They help to create a collective imagining of shared history that then works to inform notions of the self and the collective. Many Cochabambans describe “the” Andean cosmovision as rooted in “ancient” practices; they seemed to adhere to an idea that that the practices connected with “the” cosmovision continue working to preserve the region’s connections to an idealized notion of what it means to be “authentically indigenous.” Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff capture the coming together of past and present nicely with their definition of heritage. “Heritage,” they argue, “is culture named and projected into the past, and, simultaneously the past congealed into culture. It is identity in tractable, alienable form, identity whose found objects and objectifications may be consumed by others and

¹⁶ Jake Kosek notes a similar phenomenon in his analysis of Truchas, New Mexico. Kosek describes how, when the US government tried to persuade residents to adopt a more “efficient” system than the irrigation ditches already in use, one resident called the ditches the “lifeblood” of Truchas. Yet the resident also admitted that he had never relied on the ditches himself. He told Kosek, “whether I use the water or not, the *acequias* are still a part of who I am” (Kosek 2006, 112).

therefore delivered to the market” (2009, 10). While the Comaroffs are concerned specifically with the marketization of ethnicity, their comments also shed light on the ways in which heritage can work to mobilize identities for political protest. Conceptions of a shared connection with Andean heritage worked throughout the water wars to summon groups both into being and onto the streets.¹⁷ Movement leaders and participants during the water wars repeatedly claimed that the Aguas del Tunari contract violated “the” Andean cosmovision. Many Cochabambans perceived the contract as an affront to past, present, and future—to a shared heritage that was “authentically” Cochabamban. Defense of “the” Andean cosmovision and *usos y costumbres* that govern Cochabamban irrigation served as a central rallying cry from the first organized protests that fall.

Omar Fernández, President of FEDECOR, recalls the organization’s initial involvement in opposition to Aguas del Tunari and Law 2029: “From the start we were worried about how we would be affected. And then we learned more. We saw that *usos y costumbres* were not being respected, that they weren’t even a part of the contract. So we knew we had to act” (interview, September 3, 2008, La Paz). Throughout the summer the *regante* leadership organized seminars and workshops, developing alternative proposals and informing constituencies throughout the Cochabamba Valley (Peredo et al. 2004, interviews with Peredo and Fernandez, 2008). Echoing the language leaders used to describe the emerge of CODAEP, Fernandez recalled that the October and November blockades seemed like “logical results” of the summer’s seminars (interview, 2008). They wanted to see “how far [they] could go” (ibid.). While the *regantes* from Valle Alto did not participate to the same extent as the other Cochabamban valleys, *regante*

¹⁷ See Bourdieu (1991), Brubaker (2004), Butler (1997), and Wedeen (2008) for discussions of this performative aspect of identity mobilization.

leadership was overwhelmed by the turnout.¹⁸ One participant reflected, “they were taking away our rituals, our way of relating to the water, of managing it. It was our lives we were defending.” This participant’s observation, that the *regantes* were defending “our lives,” references far more than defending physical life—it was, instead, a way of life. Water evoked, at once, attachments to imagined and to quotidian communities representing perceived ties to a past, a way of life in the present, a neighborhood, a region, and an ethnic group.

Leaders from both CODAEP and FEDECOR considered the October 27 blockade successful as it garnered significant attention from the national government and raised awareness among the general population. But the negotiated outcome was unsatisfactory to movement participants and leaders alike; government representatives agreed to vague language surrounding the revision of both Law 2029 and the Aguas del Tunari contract (interview, Delgadillo 2010).

Growing Urban Participation: the Civic Committee and Juntas Vecinales

The coalition continued to grow, now largely through increased urban participation. Most notably, the Cochabamban Civic Committee officially joined the ranks of the opposition and *juntas vecinales*, acting largely through neighborhood-by-neighborhood leadership, increased their involvement. On November 1 Aguas del Tunari officially replaced SEMAPA and on November 4 Cochabamban *regantes* led a second blockade, this time on a larger scale and with increased participation from both urban and rural groups. The *regantes* were joined now not only by CODAEP, but also the Cochabamban Civic Committee and local *juntas vecinales* (Peredo et

¹⁸ Omar Fernandez cites poor organization among Valle Alto’s *regantes* as the explanation for the low turnout. His observation points to the importance of the factors included in a resource mobilization argument—without strong organizational structures already in place the movement could not have succeeded—but why those resources were marshaled effectively for this grievance and not others remains the central question.

al. 2004).¹⁹ Omar Fernández called this urban-rural alliance “a peculiar characteristic” (Peredo et al. 2004, 126) of the November blockades, clearly alluding to the unique nature of the collaboration and recalling the divisions that had surfaced so clearly only a year earlier during conflicts over proposed wells in peri-urban areas. The coalition successfully blocked both the highway linking Cochabamba to Santa Cruz and Sucre (the second major artery that passes through Cochabamba) and the Cochabamba-Oruro-La Paz connection.

The participation of both the Civic Committee and the *juntas vecinales* demonstrated the broad, urban resistance to Aguas del Tunari’s arrival. Civic Committees emerged throughout Bolivia in the 1950s and 60s to articulate and represent regional interests. While not officially tied to the government, they achieved local recognition as “legitimate” representatives of civic interests and were often included in government plans and negotiations. The Aguas del Tunari contract was no different. Edgar Montaña, President of the Cochabamba Civic Committee until August 1999, participated in the contract negotiations (García et al. 2003; “Reyes Villa, Montaña, y otros aprobaron tarifazo” 2000; interview with Barrientos, 2010, Cochabamba). Both Montaña and Mauricio Barrientos, his successor as Civic Committee President, initially favored both the concept and the contract (“Reyes Villa, Montaña, y otros aprobaron tarifazo” 2000; interview with Barrientos, 2010). It was not until the extent of the rate hikes became clear that Civic Committee leadership began to call for widespread resistance; participation of the Civic Committee in early protests was a reflection of popular demand, not the result of top-down instigation or leadership. Even years later Barrientos declared his commitment to water privatization as the only way to “modernize” Cochabamba (interview, 2010). Yet as his

¹⁹ Juntas Vecinales (or OTBs) are small neighborhood-based organizations that gained political power and prominence as a result of the 1994 Law of Popular Participation.

constituents were pushing for opposition, Barrientos brought the Civic Committee officially into the movement's fold.

Cochabamba's *juntas vecinales* participated under similar circumstances. FEJUVE (the regional federation of *juntas vecinales*) President José Orellana was in favor of the contract and did not encourage or support the participation of his member organizations (interviews with Orellana, 2010, Cochabamba; and Olivera, 2008, Cochabamba); individual *juntas*, without region-level direction, decided to work together with the *regantes* to mount the blockades. The Barrio Petrolero *junta vecinal* (located in the southern part of Cochabamba city) was one of the first to become actively involved in resistance. Its President, Raúl Águilar explains the involvement of his neighbors with "had-to" ("*tenía que*") language. "We had to organize. And to organize other OTBs [Territorial Base Organizations—a largely rural label for *juntas vecinales*] as well. We went door to door explaining the problems to come" (interview, January 28, 2010, Cochabamba). Águilar's language of necessity works to make a moment of political contingency seem like a moral imperative. He suggests that no other course of action was imaginable, yet resistance was far from inevitable. The language describes the origins of Águilar's participation, yet it also took on a life of its own as the protests grew. By continuing to argue that they "had to" organize, the ability of participants to imagine another course of action became increasingly difficult. His language was not unique. Even a short film on the water wars uses similar discourse as the narrator says that "what they did in the water war was what they had to do" (Rioja Vasquez 2002).

Águilar's reflections also reveal understandings of the role of the state in water provision, and draws our attentions to SEMAPA's shortcomings. SEMAPA's did not reach a majority of Cochabamba's residents, fundamentally shaping local relationships with water in the process.

The failings of the SEMAPA services tied many Cochabambans together, either intimately through quotidian communities, or in a mediated fashion through a shared knowledge that Cochabambans throughout the region's urban and peri-urban areas face similar daily challenges as they seek access to reliable, affordable water. In 1999, only sixty-four percent of the city's population had access to a SEMAPA connection in their homes (Laurie and Marvin 1999, 1405), most of which were in the city's Northeast and Central zones. Much of the South and the Northwest were left unconnected. Furthermore SEMAPA did not appear to be in a rush to reach them; at the time of the concession, SEMAPA had gone nine years without any network expansions.

Those without coverage had to develop alternative means of accessing water. Many poorer communities relied on a combination of local water vendors who visit communities with water trucks (*aguateros*) to fill private cisterns and/or communally constructed and managed wells. These alternatives became the core of local community relationships, shaping both daily life through the efforts exerted to obtain water, and communal governance through efforts to manage it. Aguilar argues that, "it was the obligation of the state to provide affordable water. They didn't, so we made our own wells. Then [with the arrival of Aguas del Tunari] they were going to take away these wells. With them we would lose our dignity, our community" (interview, 2010). The comments expose a tension in what is expected of the state while directly invoking water's community-related meanings. There is both a longing for the state to fulfill the basic needs of the community and a lack of trust when the state travels down a path that could result in the provision of those very needs. The state had never provided water to most communities in the Southern Zone, and part of the promise of the Aguas del Tunari contract was that the company would have sufficient capital to invest in new connections. Whether these

connections actually would have happened is a subject of debate, yet even for many of those Cochabambans who did not have reliable water connections (or any connection at all, for that matter), an absent state was preferable to a private company.

The water cooperatives that had formed throughout the Southern Zone offer an excellent example of the ways in which water helped to construct and, in turn, symbolize community for many of Cochabamba's poorest.²⁰ While each cooperative functioned differently, most operated under the same general principles. Residents of a given community contributed time and money to establish, maintain, and govern a communal system of water collection and distribution. The water comes either from a communally constructed well or from a communally managed connection to SEMAPA, where the cooperative bought water in bulk from the municipal agency and then managed its distribution. In exchange, resident members had the opportunity to access water at appointed times or for predetermined amounts. Most cooperatives had a system of punishment, usually comprised of fines, in place for those who violate the communally agreed upon rules for water collection and management. These water cooperatives served not only as a source of water, but also pride for the communities that have developed them. The cooperatives reflected hard work, commitment, and entrepreneurship. Water then took on these meanings—it became a symbol of the power of communal cooperation intimately tied to ideals of communal governance and neighborly relations. Through these local cooperatives, water came to mean independence and dignity, to signify ideals of reciprocity and collaboration. Carlos Oropeza echoed the sentiments of other Southern Zone interviewees when he said, “thanks to water we are organized...we have dignity. Water gets us to work together...The contract would have taken that away so we all participated” (interview, February 10, 2010, Cochabamba). The Aguas del

²⁰ The cooperatives recall Elinor Ostrom's (1990; 1994) work on common pool resources.

Tunari contract threatened not only those who would pay increased rates, but also those whose hard-won structures of local governance and reciprocity would be put in jeopardy. Because of water's *material* role in survival, local communities had formed to help ensure reliable access. Through these communities, water took on the meanings that Oropeza cites—dignity, organization, and participation. Another resident commented, “thanks to water we are organized, we have access, dignity. Water dignifies people. Water brings us together. It gets us to work together. There aren't political divisions with water. It doesn't have a political color. It brings everyone together” (interview, February 2010, Cochabamba). The language of this interviewee is at once global and highly grounded in the context of those communities in Cochabamba without regular access to the municipal water network. Water brings everyone together and is without political color—yet it brings everyone together in this particular context because its absence presents a challenge that the community can best meet by working together.

Notions of community became directly tied to water management and the practice of maintenance and management produced and reproduced community ties. In coalescing around water, communities made new claims for themselves, and water took on new meanings in the process. To threaten water was to threaten these communities, it was to challenge the independence and the gains for which they have fought. The Aguas del Tunari contract put these ties at risk—it was not only the physical need for water that was at stake, but also a critical foundation of communal interaction, a sense of independence, and a culture of reciprocity. It did not require leadership from the FEJUVE or Civic Committee Presidents to tap into these anxieties; from the beginning, participation was truly a bottom-up phenomenon driven by the meaning water had taken on in each of these communities.

But even for those Cochabambans with water connections, SEMAPA's miserable performance was a constant source of conversation; the water authority's failings created a sense of shared suffering (even if the degree and type varied greatly) among urban and peri-urban Cochabambans of all classes. Prior to the concession, SEMAPA was synonymous with poor quality and coverage. Users experienced problems with cloudy water and excess iron content, particularly during rainy months. Sediment came frequently out of Cochabamban taps. Furthermore, water provision through SEMAPA was insufficient to meet demand. In 1999 SEMAPA provided only seventy percent of the water demanded by the region's residents and businesses (figure calculated from Laurie and Marvin 1999, 1405); only twenty-three percent of the connected population received water for a full twenty-four hours a day (Crespo Flores 2003a, 114), regardless of the season. In neighborhoods in Cochabamba's Northwest, water came as infrequently as twice per week for periods of up to five hours. To make matters worse, the system was also inarguably inefficient, with water losses estimated at over thirty percent (Laurie and Marvin 1999, 1405). Many wealthy residents boasted not only SEMAPA connections, but also private wells. One resident of Cochabamba's wealthier, northern zone commented, "have faith in SEMAPA? I don't think so. We knew we needed our own water so we built a well. We could usually rely on the well, but things would have been easier without it" (interview, February 2010). Whether rich or poor, Cochabambans have been left "on their own" to ensure daily access to water for their families and their businesses.

For rich and poor alike, SEMAPA's failings helped to produce perceptions of shared challenges. This sense of shared struggle surrounding water that helped to produce and reproduce regional connections and identifications. It was something about which everyone can talk—it created a shared, regional vocabulary. SEMAPA's shortcomings were a shared experience that

helped to define the Cochabamban community. As a result, the Aguas del Tunari contract was perceived as a threat both to the quotidian communities that formed through the daily struggle to access water and to a regional notion of Cochabamban patrimony and independence.

SEMAPA's shortcomings also worked to produce broadly shared regional language through large-scale efforts to overcome the Valley's water shortages. The Misicuni project was the star of these efforts. After years of fighting and waiting for the construction of the Misicuni plant which was to bring water to the valley through a 30m tunnel, the dream was now dead. With Aguas del Tunari at the helm Misicuni—a project that had been touted as the region's savior, taking on a mythical status as the vehicle through which the region could be reborn—would never come to be.²¹ Signs on placards during the protests read: “*No al tarifazo, sí a Misicuni.* [No to the rate hikes, yes to Misicuni.]” The contradictory hopes in the statement are clear—Cochabambans did not want to pay more for water through the current privatization scheme but did want an enormously expensive water development project that they had been expecting the state to deliver for decades. The Aguas del Tunari contract would end the region's quest for a utopia that both returned Cochabamba to its verdant past and promised to bring it into the “modern” world.

The Formation of the Coordinadora

On November 5, twenty-four hours after the Vinto blockade began, leaders of the various participating *juntas vecinales* and FEDECOR agreed to sit down with representatives of regional

²¹ For a discussion of Misicuni's mythical status in Cochabamba see Crespo Flores (2003b); Laurie and Marvin (1999).

and national government to negotiate an end to the protest.²²The negotiators came to various agreements, including the commitment to maintain the *regantes*' access to established water sources in accordance with the *usos y costumbres* of each valley (Peredo et al. 2004; Delgadillo 2010). The blockade was called off and movement leadership claim to have believed they had achieved a significant victory. In spite of participation in the negotiations by high-level government officials (including the Minister of Housing and the Cochabamban Superintendent of Water), however, the validity of the agreement was immediately called into question. CODAEP's legal experts were quick to point out that the concession contract took legal precedence over the agreement signed at Vinto. Omar Fernandez observes that "what we had accomplished in Vinto was a step, but it was necessary to modify or annul the Contract of Concession with Aguas del Tunari and Law 2029" (Peredo et al. 2004, 130). Empowered by the impressive participation in mounting the blockades, FEDECOR, CODAEP, and various neighborhood groups continued to inform Cochabambans about the pending changes to Cochabamban water.

With a variety of social groups now mobilized to protest the Aguas del Tunari contract and Law 2029, movement leaders worked to better coordinate their strategies for how to proceed. The organization that grew out of this coordination effort served as the center of the movement through the final April protests. The Coordinadora brought together strong pre-existing organizations to work together in common cause—something they had not done when faced with market reforms in the prior fifteen years. In response to a broad call from FEDECOR, leaders of

²² Importantly, CODAEP did not participate in the negotiations. Their participation could have averted the disappointing outcome insofar as a CODAEP legal expert may have been able to alert movement leaders to the non-binding nature of the final agreement (Delgadillo 2010, Gutierrez 2010).

the movement met on November 12 to discuss their next steps.²³ That evening, those in attendance founded the Coordinator for the Defense of Water and Life (*Coordinadora por la Defensa del Agua y la Vida*—Coordinadora). The Coordinadora brought FEDECOR and CODAEP together with the Departmental Federation of Factory Workers of Cochabamba (*Federación Departamental de Trabajadores Fabriles de Cochabamba*—Fabriles), the Departmental Worker's Union (*Central Obrera Departamental*—COD), the teachers' union, the transportation workers' union, the peasant union and others. The alliance spanned not only urban-rural divides, but also social and class boundaries. Local leaders who had never met before were now seated around the same table, determining how best to work together. Omar Fernández recalls, "it was in this meeting that I first met the leaders Oscar Olivera [Fabriles executive secretary] and Walter Antezana [COD executive secretary], I didn't know what type of leaders they were, if I could trust them, etc., but this is how the activities of the Coordinadora began" (Peredo et al. 2004, 131).

Without prior experience working together, or any foundation for mutual trust, Cochabambans from various walks of life came together to form the Coordinadora. While urban-rural alliances bringing together peasants and professionals were evident in the October and November blockades, it was not until the formation of the Coordinadora that a truly broad based movement began. Social scientist Willem Assies credits the shift to connections made between FEDECOR and the FDTFC (the transportation union) (2003). My interviews, however, suggest that the Coordinadora's founding can be explained by the combination of widespread distrust of the Civic Committee (by signing the Aguas del Tunari contract, the Committee lost the credibility to represent Cochabamban dissatisfaction with the privatization) and the broad appeal

²³ García et al (2003) cite the Coordinadora's founding date as November 19. I have not seen this date cited or referred to elsewhere.

of water as a shared claim (interviews with Antezana, 2008; Delgadillo, 2010; Gutierrez 2010; Herbas Camacho, 2008; Maldonado Rojas 2010; Olivera 2008). Notably, neither Civic Committee nor FEDJUVE leadership attended the November 12 meeting—even while their membership participated in Coordinadora-convoked marches, the leadership of both organizations distanced themselves from the Coordinadora’s activities.

Community leaders in attendance on November 12 recall that unity seemed like the obvious choice.²⁴ Oscar Olivera’s comments echo those of his peers. “Before, we tried to resist the pension reform, but it was only us—just the workers. But water is everywhere. It belongs to everyone and no one...It is part of our history, part of who we are, all of us in Cochabamba...it was like giving a piece of our territory away. So of course we came together” (interview, 2008). Like Aguilar, Olivera invokes language of necessity. There is no “of course” about what happened in Cochabamba in 1999 and 2000. But for Olivera, the unity was inevitable; no other path was imaginable for him. Omar Fernández remarked that “water made unity, it is an element that reaches everyone, this is what made the Coordinadora” (interview, 2008). Water brought engineers, teachers, economists, factory workers, peasants, irrigators, university students, the unemployed, heads of households, and business owners together to fight for the same cause. Their reasons may have been different, but it was what water meant to them that brought them to that first Coordinadora meeting. Water’s historical and contemporary roles in the region combined, allowing water to be perceived as shared by groups as disparate as *regantes*, factory workers, and business owners.

²⁴ A “horizontal” leadership structure, naming only rotating “*portavoces*” or “spokesmen” as Coordinadora members tried to maintain a “collective authority” appears to have emerged in an equally smooth fashion (Herbas Camacho 2004).

Even as the Coordinadora mobilized for larger marches, neighborhood affiliates continued to organize on a local level. The movement was not simply a product of a central or prominent leadership structure; it emerged from the neighborhoods themselves. Fejuves across the city began to convoke independent marches. On December 13, Fejuve-Pueblo rallied close to 199 *juntas vecinales* from the Cercado province (which includes Cochabamba City) to march against what they understood to be the impending 35% rate increase ("Fejuve-Pueblo: Resistencia civil contra del tarifazo" 1999). With little traditional social movement leadership, Cochabambans were taking to the streets.

As soon as the scale of impending rate increase became clear, the Civic Committee and the FEDJUVE leadership joined the Coordinadora in opposition to the Aguas del Tunari contract. The Committee and FEDJUVE, however, focused on possibilities for renegotiation, not annulment, and stayed largely away from discussions of changes to Law 2029 (interviews with Barrientos 2010; Orellana 2010). On December 20, the Civic Committee called an Assembly of the "*Cochabambinidad*" and approved plans for a city wide shutdown on January 11. The purpose was to oppose rate increases for services that hadn't improved ("Cochabamba en emergencia exige rebaja de tarifas de agua" 1999). A photograph that appeared in *Opinión* showed "businessmen, authorities, and leaders" all in attendance at the meeting and the article quotes the "representative of private business to the Civic Committee," Carlos Olmedo, as saying "we have to adopt protest tactics to defend the interest of the Cochabambans" ("Cochabamba en emergencia exige rebaja de tarifas de agua" 1999).

The Coordinadora, however, did not want to wait until January 11, and organized its first demonstration for December 22. Approximately 50 organizations participated in a march to the center of Cochabamba, where they called for a renegotiation of the Aguas del Tunari contract

and of Law 2029 ("Cochabambinos protestarán hoy contra subida de precios" 1999). The participation of the transport union was particularly notable. Local newspaper *Opinión* reported that the transportation union participation came after nineteen years of silence. Maclovio Zapata, the union's leader, said they hadn't joined past marches addressing other economic reforms "because there were misunderstandings with the other labor organizations; but now the problem affects all Cochabambans" ("Cochabamba unida, rechaza reajuste de tarifas de agua" 1999). The threat to water created a perception of shared destiny. In spite of shared grievances in the past, Cochabamban unions had been unable to unite to fight for shared goals. The education workers, the Fabriles, and the transportation union, for example, had each fought on their own for individual goals, often antagonizing other unions in the process. Water was a common language that each union could speak. A threat to it led many to put divisions behind them in an effort to fight for "all Cochabambans."

When Cochabambans saw their first rate hikes in early January, perceptions of unity manifested themselves in calls for large-scale protest. In some cases, hikes were as high as 200 percent (Shultz 2003; Peredo 2003; García et al. 2003), though average increases appear to have hovered closer to 60%.²⁵ For those Cochabambans paying the lowest possible rate for their water (categorized as R2 users) the average cost of water went from 7% to 11% of the minimum monthly wage (355 Bs or \$60.01 USD/ month).²⁶ For the approximately 55 percent of the Cochabambans living below the poverty line (293 Bs/month or \$41 USD) (INE 2006), the minimum monthly payment would have exceeded 35 percent of income, not including additional meter fees. The Coordinadora called for a popular refusal to pay. COD executive secretary

²⁵ See <http://democracyctr.org/bolivia/investigations/bolivia-investigations-the-water-revolt/bechtel-vs-bolivia/> for sample water bills. These figures reflect the increase in rates for R2 households—homes with indoor toilets but no showers.

²⁶ Figures are normalized for 2002.

Antezana echoed the Civic Committee's earlier call when he urged Cochabambans not to pay their water bills arguing that the rate increases were "an increase for nothing because we are not receiving more water or better service" ("Comenzará hoy resistencia civil por el 'tarifazo' de agua potable" 2000). On January 4 the Coordinadora, including representatives from CODAEP, the COD, FDTFC, FEJUVE, and the Federation of Auto Transport (FEDAT), among others, called for protests against the rate increases ("Coordinadora definió acciones contra el 'tarifazo' del agua" 2000). At a January 10 meeting the Coordinadora decided to call for a shut down of the City to coincide with the Civic Committee's actions scheduled for the following day ("Comité Cívico no busca anual el contrato, sino modificarlo" 2000).

While rate changes varied dramatically, with some residents claiming as much as a 200% increase, users throughout the region appear to have experienced systematic increases of over 60% ("Nueva tarifa pone en apuros a Aguas del Tunari y gobierno" 2000). Many interviewees cited the rate increase as the "*detonante*" (detonator) for the large-scale protests in December. With the higher bills arriving at their door, Cochabambans who had remained on the margins of the movement "woke-up." I do not seek to undervalue the importance of the material claim. Yet there is clearly something more at work. As one participant put it, the reform "affected everyone, it did not matter what salary or sector" (interview, Aguilar 2010); in the days to come, those who could afford the rate hikes, as well as those who were not connected to the municipal water system could be found holding banners and flags in the streets and invoking a violation of *usos y costumbres* and "the" Andean cosmovision. The rate hike hit Cochabambans in more than simply their *bolsillo* (pocket/wallet), providing opportunities to both the leaders who had battled for years to oppose neoliberalism and to those who had never imagined themselves at the center of a political campaign. Ultimately, whether opportunistic or not, the ways in which water

simultaneously threatened perceived material interests and indexed some combination of nation, region, ethnicity, heritage or local community brought Cochabamba's disparate groups together, apparently united in a single cause.

Nation, Region, Ethnicity and Neighborhood in the First Water War

On January 11, the “blockade for dignity” began. For three days, irrigators’ associations effectively blocked “strategic” roads and neighborhood associations on the periphery set up barricades. The Civic Committee joined the Coordinadora in rallying thousands of Cochabambans to the streets. The center of the city was closed off to vehicle traffic and stores were closed for the day—photographs show the central Plaza filled with people and signs (“Tarifazo: una semana de conflicto en Cochabamba” 2000). *Regantes*, factory workers, architects, engineers, environmentalists, students, transportation workers, COD members, teachers, students, neighborhood organizations, and local water committees all came out to participate. The Civic Committee officially withdrew after 24 hours, but under the Coordinadora’s leadership the protests continued for three days, shutting down the regional airport as well as the two major highways into and out of the city (Shultz 2003). According to local newspaper, *Los Tiempos*, the “the blockade was total” (“Tarifazo: una semana de conflicto en Cochabamba” 2000). Furthermore, Cochabamba was not the only city affected—the blockades of major highways served to paralyze transportation and commerce throughout the country (García et al. 2003). City officials called in hundreds of police officers to control the march to the central Plaza and attempted to re-open the roads, but protesters stayed put. In direct defiance of Law 2029, Cochabambans burned hundreds of water bills in the main plaza (Olivera

2004, 32; "Queman centenares de facturas del tarifazo de Aguas del Tunari" 2000) and called for the annulment of the Aguas del Tunari contract and a rejection of Law 2029.

In seven months, the movement had grown from a small group of professionals to include department-wide unions, neighborhood associations, and even previously unorganized Cochabambans. As a leadership structure, the Coordinadora effectively served to bridge the gaps that could have made coordinated struggle impossible. Anthropologist Robert Albro argues that the appeal to water made the Coordinadora “at once rural and urban, multi-class and multiethnic, straddling what have historically been often been fractious divides” (2005, 251). From the early moments of the struggle, the Coordinadora brought together farmers, factory workers, white-collar workers and members of the informal economy. The protest events saw “a new world of work [come] out into the streets: the unemployed, the self-employed, the young and the women” (Olivera 2004, 47). Anecdotes describe children creating roadblocks out of bicycles and sticks, elderly women lying across the streets, and bank employees offering aid to protesters (fieldnotes 2010, 2008; Olivera 2004; Shultz 2003). Even José Antonio Gil, the commander of the army unit stationed in Cochabamba, recalls “my wife, my child, my *empleada* [household employee]—they were all in the streets” (interview, 2010, Cochabamba).

Attention to the meaning of water in the Cochabamban context not only explains the origins of the movement, but also its diverse composition. The significance of water to the livelihoods and identities of the Cochabambans allowed the Coordinadora to explicitly call on a collective Bolivian and Cochabamban identity, underscoring collective vulnerability without trying to distinguish the needs or interests of distinct groups within a broad framework of citizenship. Regional and national imaginaries did not appear to be in competition with one another. Albro argues that the Coordinadora effectively “acted to create an alternate significance

to citizenship in Bolivia around explicitly collective cultural heritage or property rights” (2005, 252). In doing so, the Coordinadora began to “reconstruct solidarity in a society that had been fragmented and atomized by neoliberalism” (Olivera 2004, 47). A critical ingredient in the Coordinadora’s ability to “deepen citizenship” (Albro 2005) in Cochabamba and, as a result, create a large scale social movement was the ways in which local residents perceived the threat to water.

The rapid rise of the Committee for the Defense of Water in June 1999, and the subsequent emergence of the Coordinadora suggest that water did not need to be framed in any particular way for it to serve as a powerful organizational force. Once initial organizations were in place, however, the possibility for frames to build on appeals to imagined communities (e.g. nation, region, ethnic group) allowed movement leaders to broaden and strengthen their appeal. Already established understandings of water are what made the highly resonant frame possible.

Perceptions of the contract were clearly rooted in conceptions of both nation and region. Maria Esther Udaeta, who later helped to negotiate agreements with the government in February, recalls that she felt as though to violate water “was to violate our sovereignty” (interview, 2010, Cochabamba). Nelly Yañez, a member of the Women’s Civic Committee and self-defined member of to Cochabamban upper-middle class, says that she participated because “water is *patria*”; to sell it or make it unaffordable for anyone was simply a “violation of the *patria*” (interview, 2010, Cochabamba). Cochabambans marched behind the Bolivian flag and images of it held in the air dotted the photos of the protests. The highly regional Misicuni myth also took center stage. Placards held by protest participants read “No to the *tarifazo* [rate increase], yes to Misicuni.” The Aguas del Tunari contract was perceived as the end to the promise of Misicuni—

both the modernization that Misicuni was to bring and the past it was to recall were both somehow made impossible with the arrival of Aguas del Tunari.

But even as Cochabambans invoked national patrimony and promises of regional “progress” they also deployed decidedly “ethnic” symbols; the indigenous *wiphala* appeared on the streets almost as frequently as the Bolivian flag. The perceived threat to water tapped into not only national, but also clearly ethnic identifications. COD leader Walter Antezana’s recollections echo those of other participants. Both the Bolivian flag and the *wiphala*, he recalls, “brought more energy to the streets. They reminded us what was at stake, what we were fighting for” (interview 2008). For many participants, the *wiphala* appears to have simultaneously symbolized *usos y costumbres*, “the” Andean cosmovision, and conceptions of regional heritage. One participant told me, “the *wiphala* was about respect; respect for our past, respect for who we are, for our beliefs and customs” (interview 2008).

Aguas del Tunari contract clearly meant far more than simply increased water rates. For Raúl Aguilar, protesters took the plaza “in the name of Bolivia...The state forfeits the flag when they don’t do their job. The people raised the flag because they were defending the country” (interview 2010). To defend water was to defend the country, the region, and cultural practice. Nationalist and ethnic imaginings came together, in addition to associations with region, alongside one another without conflict. Water had tapped into powerful imagined communities that were, for this moment, able to bring people to the streets and to exist together apparently seamlessly.



Foto: Los Tiempos
A “water warrior” carries a stick with both the Bolivian flag and the *wiphala* attached (photo courtesy of *Los Tiempos*).

That conceptions of Bolivian national patrimony appealed to both strictly Bolivian nationalist sentiments and to indigenous nationalist sentiments allowed for a powerful, overlapping identification. National ties to Bolivia as a whole, to the Cochabamban region, or to smaller ethnic groups were not in opposition—all three could be used to call for the annulment of the Aguas del Tunari contract. The kind of plural nationalism that emerged during the water wars was available to organizers because the conception of water as national or regional patrimony resonated simultaneously with national political and indigenous claims. Furthermore, neither claim competed with the other.²⁷ Indeed, many interviewees that did not identify as Aymara or Quechua claimed that their heritage was at stake as well. One college student in her mid-20s who

²⁷ In some cases, as I am arguing here, national patrimony may overlap with indigenous patrimony. Others may consider their national and indigenous roots as highly distinct—they are at once Quechua and Bolivian but do not consider the two identities as overlapping. Robert Albro (2005) suggests that the water wars brought indigenous and Bolivian conceptions of nation together under the banner of “popular ‘citizenship.’”

participated in the water wars told me, “*usos y costumbres* can’t be lost. They are an important part of where we come from” (interview with the author, 2008). Even Walter Antezana, the union leader claimed that part of what was at stake was “*lo andino*” (interview 2008).

While the availability and use of the nationalist or regional frames alone cannot explain the water wars, the frames captured the imagination and drove the participation of many of the protesters. While previous fiscal and monetary reforms took a significant immediate toll on the livelihood of the poor,²⁸ few could be framed in such starkly nationalist or regional terms. Water could be described as belonging to Bolivians, as a particular right of Cochabambans, or a reflection of perceived Andean or regional customs in ways that cuts in teachers’ salaries or decreased provision of social services could not.

This potential for national, regional, or ethnic imaginings served not only to unite a variety of sectors and regions, but also a variety of income levels. While Cochabamba’s upper-middle and wealthy classes did not participate en masse to the same extent as their poorer neighbors, many did participate. The central role the CODAEP professionals played in providing key organization and information, as well as their motivation to do so, has already been described above. But that their peers and colleagues also took to the streets—individuals for whom a rate increase had little financial impact—is puzzling. A focus on water helps to solve the puzzle. Some local business associations did maintain opposition throughout the wars (“Cochabambinos protagonizaron un paro cívico contudente” 2000), yet it appears that there were few to whom the movement’s goals did not appeal.

²⁸ This paper does not take a position on the long run outcome of neoliberal reforms on economic growth. It is not controversial, however, to assert that many of them had immediate negative consequences for Bolivia’s poor. Whether the reforms will prove to have been a “good” decision for economic growth is heavily contested.

When questioned, every interviewee present for the events in January recalled that participation was not correlated with class. Olivera observed that “even the rich owners of the condominiums in the city of Cochabamba joined” (“The fight for water and democracy: An interview with Oscar Olivera” 2000). Victor Gutierrez, PUMA founder but also an upper-class lawyer, explains the participation of his peers: “The upper class joined because it was a problem of dignity. An unjust, anti-patriotic contract. They felt solidarity with the people. They identified with the fight of the rest of the people. The government wasn’t considering the *patria* of the country” (interview 2010). For Gutierrez, water created the potential for national associations—solidarities between people who had never met were forged because the concept of *patria* was at stake. One upper-class participant echoed other interviewees when she recalled, “I joined because this was about defending all of us—water was important to each of us and should not be taken away from any Cochabamban” (fieldnotes, 2010). A language of solidarity grounded in region and country permeated interviews and informal conversations. Furthermore, notions of class itself need to be understood in relational terms—even those who may have been of a financially privileged class in the Cochabamban context may consider themselves to be part of a class that has been ignored or marginalized by national elites. Water tapped into the imagined communities of nation and region, motivating even Cochabamba’s wealthy to participate and revealing shared perceptions of marginalization.

However, as already discussed, it was not just imagined communities, but also their face-to-face counterparts that brought people to the streets. For those who seek to explain the water wars simply as a reaction to increased water rates, the participation of those who did *not* receive municipal water bills is even more puzzling than the participation of their wealthy neighbors. While many of these participants also reference national, regional, or ethnic claims when

explaining their actions, they uniformly emphasized the perceived violation of the small communities that had developed to facilitate access to water. The Aguas del Tunari contract allowed the company to place meters on community-constructed wells or water networks. These meters would not only charge for systems that had been privately developed. They would also disrupt the community structures developed for regulating, maintaining, and charging for water services.

While it is impossible to tell how many people without consistent access to the municipal water system took to the streets, it is clear that they participated in large groups and that movement leaders consider their participation critical to favorable movement outcomes (interviews, Gutierrez 2010; Antezana 2008). The participation of these groups is particularly striking—as they did not have hook-ups to the SEMAPA network, none of them had to contend with the increase in water rates that accompanied the switch to Aguas del Tunari. Residents of Barrio Petrolero, as well as Valle Hermosa, both regions either without SEMAPA hookups or without regular service, recall that “all” of their friends and neighbors joined them in the plaza (interviews, Aguilar and Oropeza 2010). For Carlos Oropeza, a resident of the Southern Zone community of Valle Hermosa, water “makes the community organized...we had to fight to keep that organization” (interview 2010) . “The water was ours,” he recalls. “We had worked for it, it gives us community, dignity” (ibid.). Abraham Grandier, also a Zona Sur resident who went on to found an NGO devoted to water communities in the region, argues that, “our social structures were built around water. It was a necessity so we organized for it. We had taken control and it became the foundation of our community. Aguas del Tunari was taking that community away” (interview 2010, Cochabamba). Something beyond material connections to water was clearly at

stake—it was the community-related meanings that water had taken on that drove these Southern Zone residents to action.

Signs held by protesters during the protests in February also suggest that some Cochabambans perceived the Aguas del Tunari contract as a threat to local community autonomy and organization. A film of the events shows hand-written placards reading, “Long live the self-organization of the *pueblo* [people/town/community],” “The *pueblo* organizes alone and without parties,” and “Popular support can more than any state” (Rioja Vasquez 2002).²⁹ All three statements are indicative of the perceived divide between “the people” and the state. But they also reveal water’s local connection to self-determination. References to self-organizing, organizing alone, or the effectiveness of popular action without the state speak to pride both in the very protests themselves *and* in Cochabambans’ history of providing for themselves where water was concerned. The events of the water wars exemplify the self-reliance invoked in these phrases. But the statements also speak to the perception of the Aguas del Tunari contract as a threat to the local, community-based organizational efforts that dominated relationships with water in both urban and rural areas throughout the Valley.

Throughout the January protests, Cochabambans appeared as a single group in the streets, their connection to country, region, and local community heightened by the perception of a shared threat. Regardless of the kinds of challenges individual Cochabambans faced as they sought to access water daily, or the personal or spiritual connections they claimed with the good, for many, the Aguas del Tunari contract was understood as a threat to the collective. Movement slogans like “*nosotros somos la Coordinadora* [we are the Coordinadora],” “*El agua es del Pueblo* [the water is of/belongs to the people/town/community],” “*El Pueblo decide y no necesita*

²⁹ In Spanish, the signs read: “*Viva la autoorganización del pueblo*,” “*El Pueblo organiza solo y sin partidos*,” and “*La resbalda popular puede mas que cualquier estado*.”

ordenes [the people/town/community decides and doesn't need orders]" and "*El agua es nuestra ¡Carajo!* [The water is ours, damnit!]" summoned a collective "we" into being in the very moments in which they were uttered or written. Cochabambans became a group in the streets, brought together as members of a *pueblo*, as members of the Coordinadora, as part of a "*nuestra* [ours]" to which they all could collectively belong. During the final days of protest in April, graffiti had crossed out "Aguas del Tunari" on a company sign and replaced it with "Aguas del Pueblo."



“THE WATER IS OURS, DAMN IT!”

The sign hung outside of the Fabriles offices in April, but illustrates a slogan used throughout the water wars (courtesy of Tom Kruse)



“THE WATER IS OF THE PEOPLE, DAMN IT!”

The image comes from the final days of protest in April 2000 but the slogans were deployed throughout the water wars (courtesy of Tom Kruse).

On January 13, at the end of the third day of protests, government representatives and movement leaders were ready to sit down to negotiate. The archbishop agreed to mediate and participants left the streets. While there was much more to come, the water wars had undoubtedly begun. The disparate identities and interests that protested the water contract had become part of what Bustamante calls “a single group in the streets” (Bustamante et al. 2005, 80), difficult to isolate, divide or undermine. It is hard to explain why Cochabamba erupted when it did without specific attention to the mobilizing power of the meanings with which water was imbued. Cochabambans took to the streets because they understood far more to be at stake than simply their material relationship with water—local communities and regional, national, and ethnic identifications were perceived to be at risk. While other dynamics took hold as Cochabambans took to the streets again in February and April, what water meant to them explains why they came together to form a movement in late 1999 and early 2000.

Concluding Remarks

For many Cochabambans, water is a critical component of daily life and practice. For some, like the residents of the southern zone, it is at the center of local governance, imbuing it with meanings related to local pride, reciprocity, and dignity. For others, water is directly related to professional livelihood—it is a source of income and organization for *regantes*. For many Cochabambans, including *regantes* and some in the southern Zone as well as others, its meanings are also rooted in long-standing conceptions of water as a critical component of an Andean cosmovision. Water was also directly related to a regional identity, with Cochabamba's history of cultivation and drought serving to bring it to the center of daily life and politics. Finally, water was imbued with national significance, understood as something that belonged to the Bolivian people and could not be bought, sold, or made somehow inaccessible. When the Aguas del Tuanri contract threatened not only to raise rates to prohibitive levels, but also to alter long-standing relationships with water, Cochabambans organized to resist the policy change. The notions of “us” that emerged through shared conceptions of water's importance bridged traditional regional divisions, bringing professional workers, unions, rural communities, and previously unorganized Cochabambans together to fight for a common cause. Attention to the ways in which both imagined and quotidian communities were perceived to be at risk helps explain why it was a threat to *water* that sparked sustained, broad-based collective action when other threats to material wellbeing did not.

The water wars were also one of the most influential events in recent Bolivian history. Often given partial credit for current trends in Bolivian popular politics, they have been identified as one of many factors culminating in the election of indigenous activist Evo Morales

to the presidency in 2006 (see Petras and Veltmeyer 2005). Yet analysis of the events not only helps us to better understand this critical moment in Bolivia's political history, but also suggests broader lessons for our understandings of contentious politics.

Three potential avenues for further research and theoretical work emerge from the Cochabamba case. Most broadly, the analysis suggests that paying attention to the meanings with which a social movement's claims are imbued can add leverage to our explanations of the dynamics of contention. When we understand claims as more than a material set of "things" we can better explain how and why apparently similar grievances in different contexts might work differently to produce political resistance (see Simmons 2011). More specifically, the ways in which water indexed community in Cochabamba suggests that broader theorizing on the intersection of water and contention is warranted. There might be systematic ways to understand where and when a threat to water might work to produce mobilized resistance and when it might not. Most basically, we might expect threats to water to produce broad-based contention (assuming that there are strong mobilizing structures on which a movement can draw and that movement leaders understand political opportunities to be open)³⁰ in places where spiritual connections to water pervade both urban and rural conceptions of cultural heritage and where clean water does not simply arrive at people's homes on command through a tap but rather accessing water requires daily effort. Regular droughts or shortages might also help to construct the kinds of broadly shared community identifications that appeared in Cochabamba. The events in Cochabamba suggest that broader theorizing when and where water will come to index community, making threats to it particularly likely loci for widespread resistance, is possible.

³⁰ I do not mean to reproduce the vagaries and ambiguities of the political opportunity concept here. I acknowledge that the debate and concept are poorly defined.

Furthermore, the research suggests that we can think about other kinds of claims that may work to symbolize community in similar ways, generating comparable episodes of contention as a result. In particular, the practices through which Cochabambans imbued water with meanings suggest that any good at the center of daily life and livelihood might come to work in similar ways. The daily practices that have emerged around water in Cochabamba are rooted in the good's crucial role in historical and contemporary subsistence. It is because of water's role in material life that it plays a central role in daily practices and cultural imaginings. This suggests that any subsistence resource—a good at the center of routine, communal, material practices—might come to symbolize neighborhoods, regions, nations, or ethnic groups in the way that water did in Cochabamba. While this discussion clearly calls for further comparative research, literatures on moral economies and contention (e.g. Thompson 1971; Scott 1976) suggest we are not remiss to think broadly about connections between material livelihood and social mobilization.³¹ When people perceive a subsistence good is at risk, material and symbolic worlds are both at stake; citizens take to the streets not only to defend their pocketbooks, but also their conceptions of community. We might expect these kinds of threat to be particularly likely to produce mobilized resistance.

³¹ In spite of the emphasis on moral economies, Thompson and Scott remain focused on the material qualities of subsistence. The general references to necessities and food beg disaggregation, as not all food is likely to be encompassed by a subsistence ethic. In particular, Scott's focus on the nourishment that subsistence goods provide overlooks the ways in which the material and the symbolic work to constitute each other when subsistence is at stake. Although rice plays a prominent role in his story, its particularities and the potential meanings with which it is imbued remain unexplored—the “indignation and rage which prompted [the peasants] to risk everything” (1976, 3)—that he discusses may not simply be a product of rice's nutritional value. Neither author takes up the ways in which subsistence goods might symbolize neighborhood, nation, region, ethnicity, etc. Yet even if these authors' emphasis on subsistence appears confined to a commitment to the material, it does suggest that such threats may play a systematic role in social mobilization.

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