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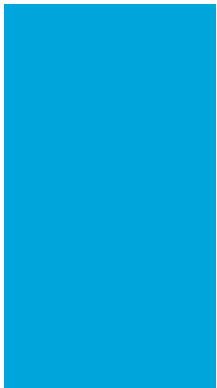
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**Authors**

Hines, Sarah
Shanks, Michael
Cielo, Cristina

**Publication Date**

2009-02-27

Center for Latin American Studies
University of California, Berkeley

After the Water War:
Contemporary Political Culture
in Cochabamba, Bolivia

Sarah Hines: History
Michael Shanks: Latin American Studies
Cristina Cielo: Sociology
University of California, Berkeley

WORKING PAPERS

# CONTENTS

# The Parameters of Peri-urban Popular Participation in Cochabamba

Cristina Cielo
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Sociology
University of California, Berkeley

What are the realities and challenges of urban popular participation in Bolivia when top-down legislation seems to encourage it and grassroots mass mobilization seems to attest to it? Bolivia's 1994 Ley de Participación Popular (Law of Popular Participation, LPP) sought to increase political participation through decentralization and the devolution of resources and authority to the local levels, while mass mobilizations throughout the last decade have battled for more inclusive participation in the country's social, political, and economic life. Nevertheless—and despite the importance of the law's role in the rise of indigenous leaders (including Evo Morales, the current president), as well as the success of such mobilizations as the 2000 Water War—institutional mechanisms implemented to promote popular participation in the determination of public priorities have failed to do so (PIEB 2007).

These dynamics are particularly evident in the marginalized peri-urban neighborhoods of Cochabamba that I study, where high levels of mobilization and participation are critical to articulating collective demands for basic needs such as water, electricity, education, and health services. The neighborhoods where I have been conducting research are located in Cochabamba's Zona Sud, a vast area in the southern part of the city. The Zona Sud, which today makes up nearly a third of the city, began to be settled in 1985 when national neoliberal economic restructuring led to mass urban migration, as Sarah Hines notes in her paper on miner migration. Not without reason, the Zona Sud is also seen as an indigenous, migrant stronghold—the January 11 race wars discussed in Michael Shank's contribution were also territorial wars that pitted newcomers against established urban residents.

In this paper, I explore how the institutional and grassroots frameworks designed to encourage participation have at times had the opposite effect, given the realities of urban policy and development in the city of Cochabamba.[1] In particular, I am interested in how the

informality of land tenure makes it possible for local authorities to take advantage of both institutional mechanisms and social expectations of participation to maintain their dominant positions in the neighborhoods.

These dynamics are evident in a neighborhood I'll call Lomas de los Mineros. Established in about 2001, the neighborhood was begun by a *loteador*, a derisive term in Spanish for someone who profits by subdividing apparently unclaimed land and selling lots with no legal titles at very low prices. The massive migration to urban areas of Latin America, combined with the lack of documentation of apparently uninhabited parts of urban peripheries, paved the way for the rise of the informal land settlements and loteadores throughout the region. According to a recent report for the UN Population Division on peri-urban growth in Latin America, informally or illegally settled land represents over 30 percent of the total urban population (da Gama 2008: 5) in a region that is the most highly urbanized in the developing world.[2] The settlers of peri-urban neighborhoods throughout Latin America turn to these areas given the dearth of other affordable housing or credit options.

In Cochabamba, the loteador of Lomas de los Mineros began to advertise free lots in an undeveloped area in the south of the city. Because there were other loteadores who also sought to profit from bringing groups to the area, however, the initial settlement of the neighborhood was a military-like encampment where rival groups could attack at any point. As one neighbor comments:

> The people from over there, by Villa San Andres, wanted to take over this land, and then there were other people from Ushpa Ushpa also trying to take over. They wanted to dislodge us… It was terrible that day, fighting them off with dynamite and rocks. From nine in the morning until eleven [at night] we fought. We then rested a short while. They were exhausted, too, but then they got together again, and came after us again.[3]

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[2.] A UN Population Fund study (2007) estimates that up to 78 percent of Latin America's population are urban residents.

[3.] All quotes from Lomas de los Mineros residents are the author's translations (from Spanish) of interviews conducted in the neighborhood.

Because of these imminent threats, Lomas settlers were required both to be present at any time the loteador called the roll, including in the middle of the night, and to patrol the area twenty-four hours a day. Another neighbor told us that "they often came at night, so… it was impossible to sleep. The roll was called at one in the morning. There was burning all around, and we patrolled all night long." For the first year or so, most settlers lived in tents. A Lomas resident recounts:

> We had our tents, and every lot had a tent where you had to sleep, because they came to check on us. At any moment they came, and if they didn't find you sleeping there, it didn't matter what you had done, how much you'd worked to clean up the area, immediately they took away your lot, with new people there the next day. Some people suffered to keep their lot; they chose to leave their work, good work in factories, because we always had to be here.

Despite the threat of expulsion, settlers looked to the loteador for leadership in the conflicts. Furthermore, given his provision of lots to an increasing number of families, the loteador initially enjoyed a grateful submission to his authority. Within a few months, however, he became an increasingly abusive and tyrannical leader. Neighbors remember that:

> You couldn't say a single thing against him. When he was hitting the little old man who lived in front of me, I started to yell, "How can you hit him that way, you brute!" And my husband's cousin grabbed me and said, "Don't say anything; they'll expel you too."

Others remember the gun that he carried, how he entered the unmarried women's houses and left them sobbing, the time that he humiliated an old woman, making her crawl and beg to him on her knees.

What is most surprising about this dramatic neighborhood history is that the authoritarian rule of the loteador lasted for over two years, with the loteador even being voted by a majority as the neighborhood's first *dirigente,* the official community leader and representative of the settlement. What processes made such extended and intensive local power possible? Urbanists decry the lack of urban policies and planning in Cochabamba that have accorded such sovereignty to locally based leaders, but I argue that it is precisely the combination of national and municipal policies currently in place that have given dirigentes such unrestrained authority.

Along with other decentralization measures enacted throughout Latin America at about the same time, Bolivia's Law of Popular Participation returned resources and functions to the municipal level. The idea of popular participation was institutionalized through the legitimization of even more local representation known as Organizaciones Territoriales de Base (Territorial Base Organizations, OTBs), covering far smaller territorial areas than municipalities. There are, for example, over 300 OTBs or neighborhood groups in the process of becoming OTBs in the municipality of Cochabamba alone. These OTBs share in the financial and legal authority of the municipality through the LPP's legislated "co-participation" funds. Analysts of the LPP generally agree that it generated opportunities for the emergence of indigenous officials and strengthened rural organization (Bazoberry et al. 2006). However, its effects, especially in peri-urban areas, have been increasingly criticized (CEDIB and CVC 2004, Ayo 2003). As Espósito and Arteaga (2007) among others note, one result has been the fragmentation of social organization by naming one institutionally legitimate local group to channel financial resources to the exclusion of other social organizations. Furthermore, because the law sought to respect local forms of organization that did not necessarily follow state-sanctioned norms, it did not distinguish between neighborhoods with legal land titling and those without. In the Cochabamba peri-urban context, these conditions created the backdrop for the corrupt, clientelistic relationships which are now endemic in those neighborhoods.

According to municipal policies, a developer's only obligation is to open access routes, with no specification regarding the quality of these routes. New urban developments therefore lack basic services, forcing local leaders to develop dependent relationships with public institutions to obtain resources for these much-needed public services and weakening their capacity for independent or critical political participation. Clientelism is further encouraged by the ambiguous legality of granting an official designation like "Organización Territorial de Base" to neighborhoods lacking legal land titles. This contradictory status makes it possible for

the neighborhoods and the public institutions to negotiate at the margins of the legal (Achi and Delgado 2007). For example, the regional electrical company requires legal land titling in the areas in which it provides services. Nonetheless, as a formally recognized collective, Lomas de Santa Bárbara was able to bargain with departmental (equivalent to state or provincial) authorities for a project to bring electricity to the community in exchange for their support in upcoming elections.

In addition, given the individualized nature of lot acquisition in informal neighborhoods established by loteadores, these areas are heterogeneously populated. Despite its name, Lomas de los Mineros residents include not only ex-miners but also migrants from both rural and other urban areas. As such, there is little initial collective agreement as to structures of local authority and organization. One neighbor commented that it was very different from the rural town that she came from, where the position of community leader was obligatory and rotated among community members. But "[w]hen the miners arrived, they took over. They're well organized. The people from the Valle Alto [rural areas in the nearby province] didn't say anything." This lack of shared understanding in terms of local organization and authority, combined with the insecurities of land tenure in informal settlements, makes residents exceptionally dependent on and vulnerable to the whims of the landlords who are empowered by the Law of Popular Participation and their particular relationships with public institutions.

The confrontational history of Lomas de los Mineros and the institutional frameworks that shaped this history are the basis of the neighborhood's present social and organizational dynamics. There is certainly a feeling of unity due to the intense shared experiences during the settlement of the neighborhood. Yet that sense of identification has been fragmented into smaller units grouped by blocks, the site at which the neighbors meet. This division into smaller block groups took place when the original loteador was still the community authority and was done quite clearly to prevent the groups from becoming too united and powerful. One neighbor relates:

> In my block group, there were 150 people then, and what happened was that [the dirigente] heard that we were going to stop his car. That's why he came to divide us up into three groups, to undermine us. We held meetings. We were all organized, there were so many of us, and we didn't like what he was doing. But someone told him, and the next day he came. Now we're going to divide this area in three block groups [he told us], from here to there is one group, from here to there another. That's how he divided us up.

Block meetings now include representatives from about twenty to forty families and are intimate spaces which tend to still be the only places where neighbors vocalize their concerns. Ideally, the representative of the block group should take these concerns to the next level: the neighborhood board of directors. Yet, there continues to be an extremely hierarchical relationship between block representatives and the board of directors, in part as a legacy of the neighborhood's history. One group representative noted that, "Sometimes when we speak up we're marked. 'Why do you have to talk so much?' they ask us, 'even if what you're saying is true.' " Neighbors' concerns, therefore, rarely reach representation at a neighborhood-wide level and so remain unaddressed. Some of these concerns have had to do with the transparency and accountability of the board of directors. Other issues—mostly vocalized by women residents— include protecting their homes from break-ins and their property from seizure by the dirigentes themselves.[4]

This partitioning into block groups at the neighborhood level is reproduced across the Zona Sud. Although the area as a whole shares many of the same demographics, conditions, and needs, the municipal structure fragments social organization and concentrates participation in separate organizations that are related to the municipal or state government. The neighborhoods of the Zona Sud are separated from each other politically as well as economically and physically. As was the case with U.S. cities when suburbs first began to develop, the work and transportation linkages—that is, where people go to work and how they get there—exist between the periphery

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[4.] Dirigentes in Lomas de los Mineros have used their inordinate local power to expel vulnerable residents, often in order to be able to resell their lots.

and the center with few connections among peripheral neighborhoods themselves. This separation of neighborhoods is exacerbated by the fact that many neighboring communities literally began as enemy camps.

How can these divisive patterns of organization be the background for collective mobilizations of the neighbors and of the Zona Sud as a whole? Neighbors of Lomas de los Mineros frequently march together to protest, to form blockades, and for the holidays. They meet regularly, once a week, for a mandatory block meeting and up to five or six more times a month for scheduled neighborhood-wide meetings. Evo Morales even mentioned Lomas de los Mineros in a 2008 speech, holding it up as an example of a place where neighbors mobilized to demand their rights to basic services.

In a survey I conducted with a local organization in Lomas, over 90 percent of the respondents participated regularly in meetings and mobilizations. Yet that same survey found that the majority of respondents merely attended these gatherings; they neither voiced their opinions nor joined in discussions. Less than 5 percent of the respondents felt they wielded any influence. In neighbors' discourse, the words "abandoned" and "forgotten" appear surprisingly often. How can such high levels of palpable participation and presence in collective events coexist with such low levels of neighbors' self-perceived involvement and representation in neighborhood concerns and wider municipal priorities?

To speak of participation assumes a framework within which that participation takes place. Varied definitions of that framework are expressed in theories of the constitution of civil society. As we will see in the brief overview that follows, the apparent incongruity of high popular participation and low self-perceived involvement is better explained by certain models of civil society than others. There are three basic ways that civil society and participation in civil society can be typified and understood.[5] One of these is the liberal approach, which understands civil

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[5.] The academic literature clearly distinguishes liberal and republican approaches to civil society and publics (see for example Edwards 2004; Weintraub 1997). I have added the third approach, based on my readings of Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michael Warner.

society as voluntary associational activity outside the scope of the state. The second of these is the republican approach, in which civil society is understood as the definitive site of political participation, and public deliberations constitute the authority that legitimizes the state. Finally, what I call the hegemonic approach understands civil society as an arena of contested meanings, by which domination is legitimized and consequently institutionalized. Below, we briefly examine each of these approaches and their ability to shed light on our case study.

The first approach—the liberal conception of civil society—is most popularly represented by the recent and influential work of Robert Putnam. In his book, *Bowling Alone*, he focuses on civic activity, particularly voluntary associational activity, which cultivates the traits that are the social requisites of a liberal representative democracy. The starting point for Putnam's understanding of civil society is a liberal democracy in which the public is the comprehensive association of self-interested individuals separate from, but collectively represented by, the American government.

Civic activity in this sense includes economic activity, and the defense of citizens' private interests constitutes their participation in civil society. The propertied citizenship that this liberal approach assumes, however, is challenged by the informality of the settlements examined in this paper. That is, while the liberal approach can explain informal settlers' vigorous civil society activity as a collective defense of their individual properties, it cannot account for their lack of perceived representation by their leaders. As we have seen, the very ambiguity of these settlers' ownership of their lots—they've paid for them in various ways, yet they have no legal titles— underlies their dependence on the dirigentes. This dependence, in turn, makes it impossible for them to fully exercise their rights as individual citizens.

A second conceptualization of civil society, often termed the republican approach to civil society due to the central role of the public in government,[6] was revived with the 1980s

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[6.] The Oxford English Dictionary defines "republic" as: "A state in which the supreme power rests in the people and their elected representatives."

emergence of the anti-statist Eastern European "civil societies" and their consequent analysis. Under this perception, civil society is seen as the definitive site of political participation, since it is the public sphere of the people that is vested with the authority to legitimize or oppose the state. The most representative theoretician for this perspective of civil society and participation is Jurgen Habermas, whose foundational work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* places critical debates within the public sphere at the very root of the legitimacy of the modern state. In this republican conception, social movements are necessary expressions of opposition in these public deliberations. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the case of Lomas, this leaves out the question of the very unequal terms by which public deliberations take place. Lomas residents may indeed be important players in the social movements and contentious publics that have challenged hierarchical social, political, and economic relations in Bolivia. There is no doubt that peri-urban movements in Latin America more generally have been critical to the reconfiguration of political and public priorities, as witnessed in Cochabamba by the part that Zona Sud residents played in the 2000 Water War and the January 11, 2007, "race war." Yet while the republican approach can help account for the power of Lomas de los Mineros' collective participation within civil society, it does not help us understand their concurrent self-perceived lack of representation in the public sphere.

This is because both the liberal and the republican approaches to civil society pay little attention to the inequalities and antagonisms that might complicate such constructions of collectives. As Michael Foley and Bob Edwards write, such perspectives "presuppose precisely the sort of political peace that [they] imagine civil society providing" (1996: 7). There is, however, a third approach to civil society that underscores issues of power in the constitution of civil society and thus better explains the seeming paradox of Lomas residents' mass participation and low perceived involvement. This third approach, one I call the hegemonic perspective of civil society, is best represented by Antonio Gramsci's definition of civil society as the arena of contested meanings in which dominant definitions justify hierarchical social orders.

That is, the power to define the parameters of legitimacy is the symbolic power that vests the dominant with authority. The dominated, in turn, internalize the social order by their consent to governing systems of values, attitudes, beliefs, etc. It is in this sense that Gramsci understands civil society—and its institutions such as schools and churches—as "non-coercive" sites of domination.

It is through this hegemonic conception of civil society that we can best understand the dynamics at play in peri-urban popular and political participation. The case of Lomas de Mineros shows us that while peri-urban residents can form powerful unities in their demand for collective rights within civil society, the very constitution of such local collectives is also founded on hierarchies of legitimacy and power. The dirigentes are the undisputed local authorities in these neighborhoods, regardless of the abuse of their authority, since they embody the alternative definitions of property and the right to land that residents seek to defend.

Sites like Lomas de los Mineros thus show us that what civic engagement means and the effective participation it can channel, shifts as the context of that engagement changes. In other words, effective popular participation that articulates the needs of marginalized citizens cannot be achieved by simple direct or representative presence in public and political spheres. The hegemonic approach to civil society reminds us that the very parameters that define participation and civic engagement imply hierarchies of legitimacy and authority. This approach helps us understand how residents of neighborhoods like Lomas de los Mineros have been able to influence national events through their participation in vigorous civil society activity, while living in oppressive situations that challenge the capacity of that participation to represent their individual interests. The contradictions that peripheral residents of Cochabamba live with daily show us that the dynamics of participation and civil society cannot be studied independently from the historically and institutionally shaped positions of its actors in the politics of power.

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