The Politics of Access to Potable Water in a Marginalized Neighbourhood of Cochabamba, Bolivia.

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In many marginalized areas of Cochabamba, Bolivia, access to potable water cannot be taken for granted. In most of these areas, people must generate their own strategies to gain access to this resource. This is the case of Villa Chaquimayu, a neighbourhood where people established a Water Committee to provide potable water for the area. This article explores the dynamics of communal water governance in Villa Chaquimayu through the analysis of its meetings. By using ethnographic data, this article shows that in Villa Chaquimayu communal meetings do not follow the conventional rules associated with western democratic institutions. Instead, they are a complex articulation of performativity, conflicts and affective ties that enhance communal values and legitimize the actions of communal leaders.
Keywords: Local politics, communal meetings, basic services, marginality, political performativity.

Introduction

Cochabamba is a Bolivian city located in the Andes mountains at an elevation of 2500 meters above sea level. Nowadays, it is the fourth largest city in Bolivia, with a population of 632,013 people (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2012). From a sociological standpoint, one of the most distinctive characteristics of this city is its spatial segregation. Indeed, in the city's northeastern area most neighbourhoods have optimal infrastructure, whereas people in the southern zone have limited access to basic services and often live in precarious conditions (Ledo 2013, Durán 2008, Cielo and Céspedes 2010). Access to potable water is clearly shaped by Cochabamba's spatial segregation,[1] as in the southern zone of the city only 22% of people have access to the public system of potable water distribution (Marston 2015).

In most of the neighbourhoods where the state does not provide people with access to potable water, people collectively generate their own strategies to get access to this resource, such as drilling water wells or buying from water trucks. Simply put, in these zones access to water is communally managed. Although scholars such as Hurtado-Tarazona (2018) have shown that often citizens resort to private governance schemes due to lack of trust in the government, in the case of Villa Chaquimayu, the communal management of water must be understood as a direct response to the absence of the state. In the academic literature, the Bolivian schemes of communal management of water are a constant subject of debate. For some scholars, these communal mechanisms represent alternative and sustainable models of water distribution, whereas other authors are skeptical about the sustainability of these systems (Linsalata 2014, Marston 2015, Walnycki 2015). Lucia Linsalata (2014), for instance, argues that communal management of water in Bolivia is more democratic and fair than public or private administration because communal institutions are not oriented to create economic or political profit but to improve people's lives. On the other hand, Andrea Marston (2015)

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[1] During the early 2000s, Cochabamba gained international attention for the 'Water Wars' events. The Water Wars were a series of protests, road blockades and riots that forced the government to stop a plan to privatise Cochabamba's water supply. Many scholars consider these events as an example of collective action able to stop neoliberal globalisation (Kruse 2005, Lazar 2007).

considers that marginalised communities in Bolivia cannot successfully provide people with access to water due to environmental problems and economic constraints.

Villa Chaquimayu is one of the illegal neighbourhoods where the state does not provide people with access to potable water. To cope with this situation, in 1992 the inhabitants of Villa Chaquimayu founded a Water Committee,[2] an institution solely oriented to find their own mechanisms to get access to water. Nowadays, Villa Chaquimayu's Water Committee (henceforth V.C.W.C.) provides water to 140 households.[3] To become members of this committee, residents must buy an (approximately) 1000 dollars membership (Mantilla 2018). In 2014, the members of V.C.W.C. decided to build a communal water well. Today, this well enables members to get access to this resource on a regular basis. In practice, however, water distribution through this well faces numerous technical and economic problems. For instance, the quality of water is far from optimal, the amount of water provided is not enough to suffice people's demands, and caretaking activities are constantly needed. Thus, administering this water well is not an easy or straightforward task. To deal with these problems, the Water Committee has a directive board consisting of a president, a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer and three counsellors.

The organization of V.C.W.C. largely depends on a series of general meetings, which are held once every two or three months. During these events both leaders and regular members can participate in decision-making processes, communal leaders are held accountable for their actions, and the most relevant issues of this institution are discussed. By using ethnographic data, this investigation analyses the role of communal meetings in the way people in marginalized neighbourhoods get access to water. The study of Villa Chaquimayu meetings is used to shed light on the dynamics and rationalities of local politics, legitimacy and governance in illegal urban settings. In this context, this article contributes to a corpus of current urban anthropology that discusses 'the relations between ordinary people and their rulers and the legitimacy of governance' (Prato and Pardo 2013: 98; Pardo and Prato 2018). The results show that meetings in Villa Chaquimayu are a complex articulation of unwritten rules, performativity, conflicts and affective ties that allow communal leaders to legitimize their decisions in the eyes of the rest of the community.

In this research, data was collected through the application of a set of qualitative methods, mainly interviews, participant observation, document analysis and small talks. The application of ethnographical-qualitative methods was the most suitable approach to collect this type of information, as these methods are 'intrinsically sensitive to the subtlety and complexity of human social life in a way that a quantitative approach cannot be' (Della Porta and Keating

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[2] It is important to note that around 200 similar organisations exist throughout the city of Cochabamba (Linsalata 2014), and it is estimated that between 56 and 67 percent of water provision in the city depends on these institutions (Walnycki 2015).

[3] Many people in Villa Chaquimayu cannot afford or are not willing to become members of this Water Committee. For them, gaining access to potable water is far more difficult. These people depend on the work of aguateros (water trucks) that sell water in marginalized areas throughout the city. The service provided by aguateros is far more expensive than that provided by the Water Committee. Furthermore, the quality of water provided by aguateros is often extremely bad.

2008: 300). Participant observation was the main method of data collection in this investigation. The relevance of this technique is that it allows researchers to analyse social dynamics directly at the scene. In the words of Tylor et al.: 'no other method can provide the depth of understanding that comes from directly observing people and listening to what they have to say at the scene' (Taylor et al. 2015: 104). In this research, participant observation was used to collect data about language, space and power relations during, before and after general meetings. Extensive information about the ideas, narratives and practices people use to get access to water in the neighbourhood was also collected.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, I discuss the relevance of studying communal meetings in illegal urban settings. Second, I analyze the cultural rationalities and unwritten rules that shape people's participation in Villa Chaquimayu general meetings. Third, I analyse how general meetings are used for legitimizing the actions of communal leaders. Fourth, I discuss the main characteristics of people's agency within these meetings. Finally, I analyse the role of conflicts and affections in the dynamics of communal meetings.

The Analysis of Meetings in Illegal Urban Settings

Villa Chaquimayu is a neighbourhood located in the southern zone of Cochabamba. The urbanization process of this neighbourhood was mostly promoted by a series of land traffickers who sold land and houses without title deeds in order to satisfy the housing requirements of poor people, thus this area is considered an 'illegal settlement' (*asentamiento ilegal*). Similar processes of informal urban development can be found around the world. According to Mukherjee and Chakraborty 'capital has had a tendency of appropriating resources that seem to be vague in terms of ownership. So, appropriating resources that do not have a defined individuated right acquires legitimacy' (Mukherjee and Chakraborty 2016: 78). For instance, in her analysis of post-communist Albania, Prato (2017a) has shown that informality leads to the creation of dual cities characterized by differences between legal and illegal areas. Cochabamba is a dual city where formal and informal zones are clearly segregated. Villa Chaquimuyu belongs to the informal part of the city.

Given its legal status, the state has never directly taken the responsibility for providing potable water to Villa Chaquimayu's citizens. The state, however, indirectly supports the work of Villa Chaquimayu Water Committee through two mechanisms. First, the state labels V.C.W.C. as a 'legal institution', which facilitates the participation of this institution in bureaucratic processes. Second, the state has indirectly supported some of the Water Committee's projects for providing potable water to the zone (Mantilla 2018). Simply put, this committee operates in an illegal neighbourhood, but it is recognized by the state as a legal institution. V.C.W.C., therefore, operates on the boundaries between formality and informality.

Authors such as Walnycki (2015) and Medina-Zarate (2018) have shown that the distinction between formality and informality in South American cities in many cases is unclear. For instance, Medina-Zarate (2018) in an analysis about the characteristics of entrepreneurship in Colombia, shows that labour exploitation transcends the binary separation between formality and informality. In his own words, 'workers in both the formal and informal sectors face similar demands on how they can be desirable to the neoliberal labour market' (Medina-Zarate 2018:

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56). Similarly, Walnycki has noted that in Cochabamba the state regularly allows informal institutions to flourish in order to fill the absence of formal basic services (Walnycki 2015). The boundaries between formality and informality in Cochabamba, therefore, are weak. The case of Villa Chaquimayu also illustrates the difficulty of using binary oppositions to conceptualize institutions in South American urban settings. This neighbourhood is considered by the municipality as an illegal settlement, yet the state indirectly supports its Water Committee.

It is important to note that in Villa Chaquimayu the activities of grassroots organizations such as its Water Committee are highly regarded among the population. In other words, the legality of these institutions does not affect their legitimacy. Scholars such as Pardo and Prato (2018) and Atalay (2018) have shown that people often tend to separate the legal from the legitimate. In the words of Pardo and Prato, it is necessary to distinguish between 'the philosophical concept of legitimacy — intended as the basis of authority, founded on ruling by consent rather than by coercive power — and a sociological analysis of its diverse sources; that is, of ideological views and everyday-life apperceptions […] of legitimacy' (Pardo and Prato 2018: 3). The fact that Villa Chaquimayu is considered as an illegal neighbourhood does not mean that its inhabitants perceive the actions of grassroot institutions such as its Water Committee as illegitimate; on the contrary, in this zone the Water Committee has a lot of legitimacy and symbolic capital, whereas other official bureaucratic institutions are poorly regarded.

Understanding the way in which people get access to water in illegal neighbourhoods such as Villa Chaquimayu requires novel methodological perspectives. Considering the characteristics of this neighbourhood it becomes necessary to think beyond the formal-informal and legal-legitimate dichotomies. As Pardo notes, often 'the boundaries […] between the formal and the informal are blurred' (Pardo 2012: 33) thus it is imperative to move beyond these dichotomies. Medina-Zarate argues that in order to reach this goal, it is necessary to shift to an analysis based on people's experiences, as they shed light on the relation between 'socioeconomic practices, individual and collective identities and global macro systems' (Medina-Zarate 2018: 57). Ethnography is the best tool to achieve the goals proposed by Medina-Zarate, as it provides in depth understanding of people's experiences and practices from their own point of view (Krase 2018). In the case of Cochabamba's Water Committees, the ethnographic analysis of communal meetings presents a unique opportunity to analyse people's experiences and ideas, going beyond the formal-informal and legal-legitimate dichotomies. As it will be shown in this article, the analysis of communal meetings allows us to comprehend the unwritten rules, conflicts and affections that underlie the way in which people get access to water in illegal neighbourhoods. The analysis of meetings, therefore, is a useful tool to understand cultural dynamics, local politics and legitimacy in illegal South American urban settings.

The Unwritten Rules of Communal Meetings
The anthropological literature shows that communal meetings are not random or unimportant events. On the contrary, the analysis of meetings is a powerful tool to understand and analyse

cultural rationalities (Bailey 2008, Nuijten 2003, Schwartzman 2013). According to Schwartzman (2013), an anthropology of meetings conceptualizes meetings as 'communicative events that must be examined as they are embedded within a sociocultural setting […] as both a constituting and constitutive social form' (Schwartzman 2013: 35). In other words, the way people behave in these events is shaped by cultural rationalities and, at the same time, communal meetings also help to construct cultural patterns. Understanding this double helix process is essential for analysing people's practices, activities and narratives during communal meetings. In this section, I focus on the study of the cultural rationalities and rules that shape general meetings at Villa Chaquimayu. I argue that these meetings depend on a series of unwritten cultural rules related to space, language and people's participation.

Villa Chaquimayu is located in the District 9 of the south zone of Cochabamba, one of the poorest areas in the city. The inhabitants of this neighbourhood have different origins and cultural backgrounds, nevertheless, they share quite a few general characteristics in terms of traditions and language. For instance, local people are bilingual, speaking both Quechua and Spanish in their everyday life, traditional Bolivian rituals are commonly practised, and autochthonous Bolivian clothing is widely used in daily life by females (men usually use more westernised clothing). As in most peripherical Cochabamba neighbourhoods, Villa Chaquimayu has serious problems in infrastructure, sanitation, living conditions and access to basic resources. Indeed, schools and medical centres in the zone are not enough to meet the requirements of the population, there are high levels of pollution, most inhabitants do not have legal property rights over their houses or land, most roads are dirt paved and steep, and the public system of potable water distribution is not present in the neighbourhood (Mantilla 2018). In order to cope with the lack of potable water distribution, the inhabitants of this neighbourhood founded a Water Committee, a self-managed institution that currently provides water through a water well to around 140 households. The organization of Villa Chaquimayu Water Committee depends on a series of communal meetings.

In the contest of Villa Chaquimayu Water Committee, community meetings are a space in which the most relevant issues of this institution are discussed, communal leaders are held accountable for their actions, and decisions are taken. General meetings are usually held once every two or three months. Assistance to these events is compulsory for every member of the committee. These meetings are usually divided into five different sections. First, the Water Committee's secretary reads an attendance list, as members who do not attend must pay a penalty fee. Some people attend these events just to avoid the fine, whereas other members send a relative in their representation.[4] In the second section of the meeting, the president of the Water Committee gives a summary of the activities developed by this institution during the last months. The third activity of the meeting is called '*Rendición de Cuentas'* (Accountability). This section is intended to make community leaders accountable for their actions by requesting

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[4] To facilitate people's assistance, these meetings are held early on a Sunday morning, when people are usually free of other obligations. In March, 85 members attended the meeting, whereas 55 were absent. This was considered a 'good attendance' (*buena asistencia*), which is important for the actions and the decisions taken during the meeting to be considered legitimate.

that they give a detailed description and justification of their activities. The fourth activity is the collection of the monthly and penalty fees that each member of the committee must pay. The final section of the meeting is denominated as *Sección Orgánica*. In this part of the meeting the most relevant issues of the Water Committee are discussed and voted on.

People's routines and actions during Villa Chaquimayu general meetings are not random or arbitrary. On the contrary, participants perform their actions following a series of unwritten rules related to space, language and people's participation. First, space is not arbitrarily used but it is an instrument to represent the power relationships that exist in the Water Committee. Indeed, during community meetings the leaders of the committee occupy the centre of the stage, whereas all the other members are dispersed throughout the field.[5] People considered as important persons, such as former leaders, also occupy central spots. Second, people's participation in these events revolves around the symbolic figure of the Water Committee's president. During the meetings, the president is the one responsible for conducting the event. People willing to participate must ask the permission of the president to talk by raising their hands. Third, language is a relevant symbolic element. In the meetings, the Quechua language predominates, and Spanish is used just occasionally. This, however, has not always been the case. In the past, Spanish was the predominant language in these events. The switch from Spanish to Quechua follows a trend of revitalization of the Quechua language and identity that came after the election of Evo Morales as president of Bolivia (Hentschel 2016, Gustafson 2017). In this context, people in Villa Chaquimayu constantly interpret rules regarding what is possible and what is not in the context of communal meetings. In other words, there are certain cultural barriers that prevent regular members from occupying the centre of the stage, conducting the event or speaking solely in Spanish.

The Meeting as a Formal Game

In the academic literature, the political implications of communal meetings are a constant subject of debate. According to scholars such as Wolford (2010), nowadays most communal meetings are based on an ideology of governance which privileges ideas of deliberation, equality and democratic decision-making processes. In this sense, communal meetings would be a space for democratic deliberation, in which every member of the community potentially has an important role in decision-making processes. Other scholars, such as Bailey (2008) and Nuijten (2003), have nevertheless shown that communal meetings are not necessarily spaces of democratic deliberation, as decisions are usually not made during the meetings but before and after these events. In this context, meetings would be a 'formal game' not centered in democratic decision-making processes but in performative practices designed to give

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[5] It is important to note, however, that during the *Rendición de Cuentas* section, the meeting follows slightly different rules. While the distribution of space in the general meeting reinforces the power relations between leaders and other members of the committee, in the *Rendición de Cuentas* this distribution of space does not reinforce power relations, as people who are in peripheral spots can freely criticize the work of community leaders and even request the dismissal of a leader. During the *Rendición de Cuentas*, therefore, the spatial distribution temporarily inverts the power relations existent within the Water Committee.

legitimacy to the organisations and to the people who participate in these events (Nuijten 2003: 53). Following Nuijten, I argue that Villa Chaquimayu's communal meetings function primarily as a 'formal game', where performativity, symbolic elements, and affective ties are used to legitimise the actions of community leaders.

First, the meetings of Villa Chaquimayu's Water Committee are supposed to be a space of democratic decision-making processes, where each member of the community is able to freely participate, criticize and vote. This system tries to emulate the practices of Bolivian miners' organizations, which are supposed to be democratic-based institutions. In practice, however, most decisions are taken solely by community leaders before the meetings. For example, during March's general meeting a debate took place about whether the water well's pump should be replaced or not. During the meeting, the president of the Water Committee explained to the other members the benefits and costs of replacing the old pump with new hardware. After a brief discussion, a voting process took place and the president's motion was approved by the community. In reality, the leaders of the committee had already arranged all the necessary details to replace the pump a couple of weeks before the general meeting took place. According to some community leaders, replacing the pump was a priority for them, given that the flow of water coming from the well had been diminishing. The main purpose of the debate and voting that took place in the meeting, therefore, was not to democratically decide what actions should be taken, but to legitimize the decisions taken by community leaders outside the meeting. The work of community leaders is legitimised by projecting an image of meetings as a space of deliberation and democratic decision-making processes.

The unwritten cultural rules that shape these meetings prevent leaders' decisions from being seriously contested. The importance of general meetings in Villa Chaquimayu, is therefore not only associated with the decisions that are taken during the meetings, but mainly with the fact that the activities and performances of these meetings give legitimacy to the decisions taken by community leaders outside these events. Simply put, the general meeting is a space used to consolidate and legitimise the work of community leaders. In this sense, Villa Chaquimayu's general meeting has several similarities with what Nuijten (2003) has called a 'formal game'. Nuijten (2003) shows that the meetings of *ejidos* in Mexico are usually a chaotic space, with little or no deliberation. Nonetheless, whenever members of external organisations attend these meetings people create a formal setting oriented to project a good image. Hence, the meeting itself becomes just a 'formal game'. In the case of Villa Chaquimayu, the general meeting is also a formal setting designed to legitimise the actions of community leaders in the eyes of the other members of the Water Committee.

It is important to note, however, that on rare occasions people can effectively participate in decision-making processes inside Villa Chaquimayu meetings. Indeed, people's voice is relevant during the *Rendición de Cuentas* section, when leaders are held responsible for their actions. This flexibility responds to a series of norms about what people can and cannot do during the meetings. The dynamics of the *Rendición de Cuentas* allow people the freedom to participate and criticise communal leaders. Villa Chaquimayu meetings are a formal game, which only on rare occasions allow people to participate freely on decision-making processes.

This point of view about communal meetings is quite relevant to the debate about the characteristics of local politics and governance in marginal urban settings in Latin America. Some scholars such as Lucia Linsalata (2014) argue that Cochabamba's water committees are very democratic institutions, as their organisation is the outcome of deliberations and democratic decision-making processes. In Villa Chaquimayu, however, these processes of debate and democratic-decision making are limited to rare occasions, as most of the decisions are taken directly by communal leaders outside the meetings. This does not mean that V.C. meetings should be labelled as chaotic or authoritarian events. As Youngs argues, certain forms of democracy that 'differ from prevailing Western norms should be encouraged rather than simply dismissed as a cloak for illiberalism or authoritarianism' (Youngs 2015: 140). Villa Chaquimayu's meetings represent a different form of governance which emphasize decisions taken directly by communal leaders outside the general meetings.

Meetings, Agency and Accountability

It is important to note that although Villa Chaquimayu meetings are not a completely democratic space, the inhabitants of this neighbourhood are active agents who constantly try to find solutions to cope with the absence of potable water in the neighbourhood. People's agency, however, is shaped by some cultural rationalities that prioritize communal values over individual or democratic choices. People, in other words, have some degree of agency to change their living conditions, but this agency is shaped by cultural rationalities that prioritize communal work over individual choices and democratic decision-making processes.

The academic literature provides valuable theoretical concepts to understand this phenomenon. In his classic book *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, Giddens (1979) showed that agency is embedded within certain social structures. Ever since the publication of this book, the relationship between agency and structure has been a central element in academic debates. From a contemporary ethnographic perspective, the relationship between agency and structure has been studied through the microlevel analysis of social practices. In this regard, Ortner (2006) demonstrated that individuals have the agency to reach their goals regardless of social structures, but their goals are culturally-established and shaped by power relations. In recent years, scholars such as Lindsay (2018), Prato (2018) and Spyridakis, Dalkavoukis and Kokkinou (2018) have used ethnographic data about mundane practices to understand the complexity of social agency in contemporary urban settings. This type of data is a useful tool to understand the relationship between agency and structure from a microlevel perspective. In the words of Lindsay, the 'documentation of microlevel processes […] extends our insights and allows controlled speculation on the processual relationship between agency and structure' (Lindsay 2018: 316). Following these authors and based on my own ethnographic data, I argue that people in Villa Chaquimayu have the agency to challenge certain social structures and cope with the absence of potable water in the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, people's agency is still shaped by a set of different cultural ideas and rationalities.

One of the elements that better illustrates how agency works in Villa Chaquimayu meetings is the *Rendición de Cuentas*. This section of the meeting is specifically oriented to

hold community leaders accountable for their actions. During the *Rendición de Cuentas,* leaders have the obligation of presenting a report and a justification for their actions.[6] In March's general meeting, the treasurer was the first leader presenting his report, which basically was a description of the Water Committee's incomes and expenses over the last four months. The treasurer brought all the committee's money in cash to the meeting and made all his calculations manually in a book. Occasionally, other members asked questions and requested explanations, but, in the end, the report presented by the treasurer was accepted without major discrepancies. Once the treasurer's intervention ended, the president explained that the secretary (*secretaria de actas*) was not present in the meeting, and that she had been neglecting all her responsibilities by delegating her tasks to her daughter-in-law. This announcement was not well received among people, 'This is shameless, a complete disgrace', 'Each leader must work by himself *compañeros.* Nothing of replacements. If that's not the case, we should elect a new secretary', some said. The (delegated) secretary intervened to explain that her mother-in-law had asked her to take care of all the secretary responsibilities as a 'personal favour'. Then, she gave a brief report of the activities she developed as (delegated) secretary. The prolonged absence of the secretary caused discomfort among most members of the Water Committee, 'she has lost her authority as secretary, there is no more trust', 'According to our regulations if someone acts against our institution or the grassroots, she automatically loses her rights', other people said. Finally, the members of the committee agreed that a new secretary should be elected.

As can be seen, the *Rendición de Cuentas* is a space where regular members can express their demands and discomfort. It is even possible for people to request the dismissal of a leader who has not managed to fulfil people's expectations. Nevertheless, the *Rendición de Cuentas* is not only about accountability but also about processes of legitimisation. First, very often the reports given by community leaders are not a thorough explanation of their actions, but just a vague description. The treasurer's intervention in the March's meeting illustrates this point: even though he is the main person responsible for financial management, his intervention was quite short and vague. Second, in theory, all members of the committee have the right to question community leaders while they present their reports. Nonetheless, people usually take for granted whatever leaders say. Only in extreme occasions do people dispute communal leaders' actions. For instance, despite the fact that the treasurer manages the committee's finances manually (he does not use any software but brings the committee's money in cash to the meetings), people usually take for granted whatever he says, without deep criticism. Deep criticism is only present in certain occasions, for instance, when community leaders neglect their activities or are suspected of corruption. In these occasions regular members have the agency to change the structural conditions of this institution. Most of the time, however, people act in a collective way by accepting communal leaders' directions.

To sum up, from a microlevel perspective, people in Villa Chaquimayu have some degree of agency to change their living conditions, but this agency is shaped by cultural rationalities that prioritize communal work over individual choices. These reflections about agency are

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[6] The *Rendición de Cuentas* is only limited to general meetings. Accountability, in other words, does not take place in the field of everyday practices but in the formal setting of the general meeting.

important to understand urban governance in South American cities. According to Koechlin and Förster's definition, governance is related to 'relatively stable social spaces where actors, based on their respective agency, identify and address social problems through creative interaction' (Koechlin and Förster 2018: 365). In the case of Villa Chaquimayu, people's collective agency during meetings is what allowed for the construction and upkeep of the local water well. Urban governance and people's agency are closely interwoven.

Conflicts and Affections

Communal meetings are not only limited to the meeting itself but also depend on a series of collective political practices and routines developed in the sphere of daily life. In the case of Villa Chaquimayu's Water Committee, meetings depend on the daily interactions and affective ties that members of this organization have before and after the meetings. Communal meetings, thus, are a form of everyday politics. In the academic literature, the notion of everyday politics is often used to analyse the daily activities that are somehow related to the control, allocation or use of resources (Vasudevan 2013). According to Kerkvliet, everyday politics involve 'people embracing, complying with, adjusting and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane and subtle expressions' (Kerkvliet 2005: 220). In the case of Villa Chaquimayu, people's everyday politics encompass the activities that are directly related to access and distribution of potable water. This includes meetings, daily interactions and affective ties. In the following, I analyse the role of everyday politics in Villa Chaquimayu meetings.

One of the most striking events in the March's general meeting was the dismissal of the Water Committee's secretary and the subsequent election of a replacement. Since late 2016, the secretary started to neglect her obligations and stopped paying her monthly fees. During the March's general meeting, the absence of the secretary caused anger among most members of the Water Committee, as they considered that her actions did not match with the community service and self-sacrifice that is expected from neighbourhood leaders. Many people even suggested taking further actions against her, like cutting her water service and even suing her on the basis of fraudulent management while in office. The president of the Water Committee explained that her water service was already cut, but that she was possibly getting water through an illegal bypass. This announcement created more disconformity among people. Finally, the members of the water committee decided to dismiss the former secretary, giving her an ultimatum to present a report of her actions and return the Water Committee's money that was in her possession and electing a new secretary.

A couple of months prior to the March's meeting, the former secretary started to delegate all her secretariat responsibilities to her daughter-in-law, an 18-year-old girl. This fact can partially be explained because the responsibilities people acquire in communal institutions are not only assigned to individuals but also to families (Linsalata 2014). The secretary's replacement attended the general meeting. She explained that her mother-in-law asked her to take care of the secretariat activities as a 'personal favour', without giving her any explanation. The work of the secretary's replacement was well received by the neighbours. Some people thanked her for helping the community under the circumstances. Others even offered her the

position of secretary for good (she rejected the offer, stating that she was about to start classes at the university, so she could not handle the responsibility). A new secretary had to be elected. Two men were proposed as candidates for replacing the secretary. The first candidate was a former leader of the Water Committee who was eager to come back to office. The second candidate was a young man without any experience in neighbourhood politics. The election took place immediately, a show of hands was the voting mechanism, and neither of the candidates had the chance to speak or explain why they were the best candidates. In other words, people chose their candidate based only on their previous personal experiences with each contender. The result of the election was overwhelming. The former politician got only two votes, whereas the young man got the votes of all the other members of the committee. After being elected, the new secretary said that he did not have any experience related to this type of work. Some people responded that eventually he would learn. The new secretary and the former secretary's replacement held a series of meetings for the transition process.

When asking people why the results of the election were so overwhelming, the answers indicated that the former politician was very strict, meticulous and was not very tolerant of defaulters when he was in office. The new secretary, on the other hand, did not have any experience but he had a reputation as a good neighbour and as a tolerant man. The results of this election, therefore, show that neighbourhood politics in Villa Chaquimayu are widely determined by the affective personal ties existent between leaders and members of the committee. In her ethnographic study about the Sewŏl ferry disaster in South Korea, Sarfati argues that there is a strong tendency to construct public opinion 'on assessments of morality, humanity and responsibility, rather than on legality and formal conduct codes' (Sarfati 2018: 71). The ethnography of Villa Chaquimayu brings out similar issues, as it shows that people construct their opinions based on affective ties. As one of my informants said, 'One must know how to deal with people. Here you cannot be very strict, because people would get mad at you. Politics is also about that'.

The affective side of politics has been well documented in the literature on local politics in Bolivia. For instance, Sian Lazar (2004), in a study about local elections in El Alto, found that when choosing a candidate, affective ties and personalist calculations are often more important than ideological positions or programmes of government. In a European context, Prato (2018) has argued that the legitimacy of rules cannot be reduced to a 'set of technical rules to be applied according to impersonal principles' (Prato 2018: 10); on the contrary, legitimacy depends on shared norms and values. In this context, 'the credibility of rulers builds on relations of reciprocal trust' (Prato 2017b: 118). In Villa Chaquimayu, family, friendship, cooperation and other affective ties among neighbours play a key role in neighbourhood politics. Local politics in Villa Chaquimayu's Water Committee, therefore, is not detached from the affective ties, practices and behaviour people have in their everyday lives.

This affective side of neighbourhood politics, for instance, plays a key role in the work of the treasurer and the technician of the Water Committee, as they are responsible for charging monthly fees and cutting water service to defaulters, respectively. In practice, these activities are not easily performed, as they can create conflicts and tensions between the treasurer/technician and other neighbours. These conflicts are not limited to the sphere of the

Water Committee, but they also have an impact on people's everyday relationships. In the words of the treasurer, 'If you try to do your job in a strict way, people get angry with you. They stare at you in a strange way when you are walking on the street'.

The results of the secretary's election also show that a neighbourhood leader can easily lose all his influence or popular support. In other words, the influential position communal leaders have inside the neighbourhood cannot be taken for granted. As Prato notes: the 'legitimacy of political and social order is not static; it is complex and changes over time' (2018: 13-14). In the case of the former politician who wanted to be back in office, his loss of support was determined by his rigorousness while in office. Due to his previous action as a communal leader, people were reluctant to have him back in office. In an article about politics and brokerage in Recife, Brazil, Martijn Koster has illustrated how a community leader can be 'burnt' or 'discredited for errors made in the realm of politics' (2012: 491). In the case of Villa Chaquimayu, it is also quite possible for a communal leader to 'get burnt' if he does not understand the affective foundations of local politics. Indeed, the election of a secretary clearly illustrates how dramatically communal support can be lost if a neighbourhood leader does not understand the cultural and affective links that surround meetings and communal politics in general. Friendship, family and other affective ties, therefore, are key elements in the way people in Villa Chaquimayu do local politics. Considering that one of the main challenges of current democratic systems is the 'increasing gap between rulers and the ruled' (Pardo 2018: 16), the case of Villa Chaquimayu illustrates that the academic literature cannot neglect the affective side of politics.

Conclusions

The analysis presented in this article has focused on Villa Chaquimayu Water Committee's communal meetings in order to shed light on the dynamics and rationalities of access to basic services, local politics, legitimacy and governance in illegal urban settings. This article shows that the analysis of meetings is a powerful methodological and theoretical tool in understanding the intricacies and rationalities associated with communal politics, especially in areas where the binary separation between formality and informality is unclear, as the analysis of meetings allows us to understand people's perspectives and ideas about this phenomenon. While in the academic literature Cochabamba's water committees are often depicted as exemplary democratic institutions, through the analysis of communal meetings this article shows that the organization of Villa Chaquimayu Water Committee is far more complicated as it is influenced by a set of different cultural ideas and rationalities, which are not always directly related to democratic decision-making processes. Indeed, unwritten cultural rules, power relations, legitimization processes, conflicts and affective ties are often more important than individual or democratic values.

The social function of Villa Chaquimayu's Water Committee should not be neglected, as this institution plays a key role filling the gaps the state has left in potable water distribution. Indeed, people in Villa Chaquimayu use their Water Committee to find their own mechanisms to get access to this resource and cope with the absence of the state in potable water distribution. This article has shown that in Villa Chaquimayu communal meetings are a key element of the

way people organize their access to potable water. The analysis presented in this article shows that in Villa Chaquimayu meetings are shaped by four interwoven elements: First, a series of unwritten rules, practices and routines, which reflect both the power relations existent within this organization and macro processes such as the policies of the revitalization of the Quechua language. Second, community meetings function as a 'formal game' (Nuijten 2003), in which an image of meetings as a space of democratic decision-making processes is projected to legitimize the actions of community leaders. Third, people's agency within meetings is not individual or democratic, but collective. Finally, conflicts and affective ties among neighbours also play a key role in the way people do politics in communal meetings. Friendship and family ties shape people's expectations and actions both in and outside communal meetings. Neighbourhood leaders who do not consider these elements will lose their political legitimacy. In this context, Villa Chaquimayu meetings are an articulation of different political practices, performativity, conflicts and affective ties that enhance communal values and allow communal leaders to legitimize their decisions in the eyes of the rest of the community.

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