The Legitimacy of Urban Things:
Cuenca Between Heritage and Modernisation

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The construction of a tram in Cuenca, Ecuador, has sparked a wide-ranging controversy. The tram embodies ideals of modernity, but the implementation of the project turned out to be deeply problematic, not least because it was seen by inhabitants as a threat to the city's built heritage. In light of this conflict, I explore issues of urban governance, belonging and change, and consider how they are linked to (de)legitimisation processes. I focus on how urban things, like heritage and the tram, shape legitimate rule, belonging and identity. The materiality of the city provides the terrain for the encounter between the rulers and the ruled, as well as the issues which stimulate this encounter and the tools for material participation. I argue that, in Cuenca, the relationship between authorities and city dwellers takes the form of a particular kind of populism, articulated around *obras* (public works). *Obras* constitute the leaders' material engagement with the city and, as such, involve a risky legitimising strategy. Material engagements need to align with the things and values which have become iconic in the city. The tram project, I suggest, has been so controversial because it seems to threaten Cuenca's iconic heritage, both symbolically and physically. Yet, the tram carries its own iconic potential thanks to its spectacular modernity. Iconic things, I conclude, turn out to be important and contested sources of legitimacy for both authorities and city dwellers.
Keywords: Urban governance, legitimacy, materiality, populism, belonging.

Introduction

In 2013, the tram project in Cuenca, Ecuador, was presented by Mayor Paúl Granda as a revolution for the city. According to him, this modern technology would make Cuenca 'a model for mobility in the country'[1] and would mean that Cuenca was 'on a par with the great cities of the planet'.[2] This discourse seemed to appeal to many of the half a million inhabitants of the Andean city. However, as the construction work began, conflicting voices became increasingly loud. The tram project was clashing with the city's historic heritage, as the tram route went right through the old town. This clash was both very physical, as the construction progressed through the narrow historic streets, and symbolic, suggesting an attack on the value of heritage. The latter is central to the place identity of *cuencanos* (as Cuenca's inhabitants are called), not least since the city centre was declared world heritage by the UNESCO in 1999.

In this article, I take this conflict as a point of departure for a discussion on urban things and their role in processes of urban governance and belonging. My aim is to contribute to the debate on legitimacy in anthropology, initiated by Italo Pardo in the 1990s (1995, ed. 2000) and developed in recent years in the *Urbanities* Journal (Pardo and Prato eds 2018, 2019b) and in Pardo and Prato eds (2019a). I focus on the relationship between city dwellers and their authorities (Pardo 2019, Prato 2019, Krase and Krase 2019), with a special focus on materiality. As Boucher (2019) suggests in her contribution to *Legitimacy. Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights* (Pardo and Prato eds 2019a), 'not everybody in the city is legitimate nor every piece of the city is viewed as legitimate' (Boucher 2019: 201). She refers to the discrimination of homeless people and their use of Viger Square in Montreal, a decaying

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location that became the target of reconstruction plans. These plans did not only delegitimise the design and users of the square, they were coupled to local authorities' attempts to increase their own legitimacy by 'anchoring [their] name, identity and work in the physical landscape of the city' (*ibid.*). I shall pick up on these observations to develop my argument.

Urban governance, belonging and change involve an infinite number of continuous, interrelated processes of legitimisation and delegitimisation. These processes are often framed as part of the relationship between rulers and the ruled. As Boucher (2019: 203) argues, rather than a neat empirical categorisation, the rulers/ruled duality is an analytical tool to study such (de)legitimisation processes. Here, I will develop a triangular analytical view in order to grasp the relationships between rulers, ruled and urban things; or, to be more specific, between local authorities, city dwellers and things like the tram project and the built heritage. I use the word *things* to mark a category separate from autonomous, clearly delineated *objects* (Latour 2005). The urban things under consideration in this discussion are relational, multiple and shifting, and they come into being through their relations with other things and people. Likewise, in agreement with Pardo and Prato (2019; Pardo and Prato eds 2018), legitimacy is treated as relational and processual, not as absolute or fixed. I understand legitimacy broadly as a relationship of approval — of the other's actions, power, belonging or identity — that is susceptible to constant renegotiation. In this triad of rulers, ruled and things, each variably legitimises and delegitimises the other, and is a source of or lacks legitimacy. Including urban things as agents in these negotiations allows us to *ground* the discussion on urban governance. The rulers and the ruled are no preconceived groups facing each other in an abstract political space. They are shaped through concrete issues, things and spaces. In the case of Cuenca, I will address the ways in which urban things shape a specific kind of populism around *obras* (public works) as a dominant rationale for interaction between rulers and the ruled. Moreover, by accumulating legitimacy, certain urban things can become *icons* of the city and can thus significantly shape the values and projects of the authorities and of city dwellers.[3] First, let us take a look at the development of the tram project.

The Legitimacy of the Tram
In 2009, the idea of a tram for Cuenca made its first appearance in the election campaign of the candidate for Mayor Paúl Granda (Rumé 2022). It was proposed as a solution to the city's increasing traffic congestion and as a stimulus for the economy. The victory of Paúl Granda might be partly ascribed to this proposal, but it also needs to be seen in the larger national context. Granda belonged to the left-wing political movement Alianza PAIS. Headed by President Rafael Correa, this movement was consolidating its power throughout the country. It was winning over voters because it claimed to represent a break with the corrupt

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3 My focus on urban things, and particularly what it means for them to become icons of the city, was inspired by a panel at the 2021 IUAES Congress in which I participated. The panel, convened by Giuliana B. Prato and Subhadra M. Channa, was titled 'Power Games and Symbolic Icons in Evolving Urban Landscapes'.

partidocracia and neoliberal governments that had preceded it (de la Torre 2013; see Prato 2019 on *partitocrazia* in the Italian context). This new political movement, with its project of a Citizens' Revolution, ran on a platform of sweeping modernisation, social justice and national autonomy — promises which seemed to be materialising in myriad infrastructure projects across Ecuador, from roads and dams to hospitals and schools. The Cuenca tram project was part of this national modernisation project of a Citizens' Revolution. Therefore, focusing on the tram project might help to understand more general social and political processes in Ecuador.

Beyond the aforementioned broader ideological justifications, any infrastructure project involves concrete calculations. These are used as evidence of the practical benefits that are supposed to derive from the infrastructure. For the Cuenca tram, various European companies were hired to undertake feasibility studies and produce these calculations. Such expert knowledge, which is generally involved in legitimising infrastructure projects (Harvey 2017), was exalted by local authorities as coming from world-leading professionals, surpassing any local judgement (Cardoso 2017). The alignment of powerful actors behind the tram project, from the national government to international experts, made the project — and local authorities — particularly persuasive. The calculations of the tram project made the tram appear as a promising infrastructure that would help to restructure urban traffic and reduce pollution, thus making the city more liveable and economically prosperous. Specifically, for instance, the numbers 60 and 120,000 became highly publicised as evidence of the tram's convenience. Excavations in the streets to implant the tram lines, it was claimed, would need to be only 60 centimetres deep, making the construction unobtrusive. The number 120,000 referred to the number of passengers whom the tram would allegedly transport daily, thus proving its logistical efficiency and economic viability.

However, public discontent with the project became visible as soon as construction works began, in 2013. The work going on through the city centre and the main traffic arteries was causing much inconvenience to city dwellers. In 2014, mayor Granda was voted out of office, defeated by the experienced local politician Marcelo Cabrera, who had distanced himself from the tram project (see Table 1). As mayor, Cabrera halted the construction in order to revise the details of the project, but, persuaded by the national government, he soon ordered the resumption of the work. The construction unfolded in increasingly problematic ways, leading to the prolonged ruination of streets and, eventually, to its suspension (Gupta 2018). The reasons for these complications were not entirely clear to the public and gave rise to much debate. Did the problem lie in mismanagement by the municipality, in a lack of planning or of funds, or in the construction companies' irresponsible actions?[4] The legitimacy of the tram project seemed to shrink with each passing day, as the uncertain reality of the construction contradicted official plans, numbers and the authorities' ability to manage the situation. The stalemate in the construction paralysed parts of the city. Commercial and social activities ground to a halt, generating the protest of the people affected. Streets that were

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4 See Pardo (2011) on attempts to attribute responsibility for the rubbish crisis in Naples.

critical for local commerce remained closed for long periods of time, threatening the survival of hundreds of small businesses. The project's calculations were proved wrong, as the construction sites exposed holes of various metres instead of the promised 60 centimetres, and new estimates of potential users were nowhere near the originally estimated 120,000 passengers. Furthermore, the broader socio-economic scenario was no longer favourable. In 2015, as the country entered an economic crisis, the Citizens' Revolution government with its lavish investment programme started losing support (Conaghan 2016). Instead of a revolutionary modernisation project backed by international experts, the tram increasingly appeared as the fancy of an arbitrary mayor, feeding into the growing critique of national infrastructure projects as wasteful, authoritarian and corrupt. Of course, this view of the tram project had existed from the start — showing that the legitimacy of a project is never absolute — but it became more powerful over time, gaining legitimacy in light of the listed construction problems. Towards the end of mayor Cabrera's mandate, various construction problems were solved by raising more public funds and closing a construction deal with a different company. But although some people appeared to regain faith in the project, Cabrera's administration did not recover from the crisis and was voted out in 2019. The tram finally went into operation in May 2020, five years later than originally planned, and under yet another mayor. Today, pride for the tram as a symbol of modernity has become widespread again. But the tram still faces questions of legitimacy as it struggles to attract sufficient passengers and become financially viable.

Mayors:	Paúl Granda 2009-2014	Marcelo Cabrera 2014-2019	Pedro Palacios 2019-present
Tram project:	Tram as campaign proposal; Construction begins in 2013	Complications in the construction of the tram route and subsequent year-long suspension in 2016	The tram becomes operational in 2020

Table 1. Timeline of the municipal administrations and the development of the tram project.

The tram constitutes an urban thing whose contested legitimacy mirrors its uncertain development. The project became a public issue (Marres 2012) involving, in one way or another, the whole city and many external actors. Over time and across social groups, it varied in form, meaning and legitimacy. Presented as a revolutionary technology, it was justified by political leaders, foreign experts and companies, meeting local desires for modernity. However, while the idealised tram reinforced the legitimacy of politicians, experts and companies, disapproval of the project affected both the tram and the actors associated with it. This process became especially clear as the problems with the construction corresponded to increasing problems of governance. Two mayors lost their re-election after failing to reassure city dwellers who saw their livelihoods threatened by the construction work. The initial image of expertise drowned in the gaping holes of the suspended construction. The conflict around the tram's legitimacy is linked to different *values*, which constitute alternative sources of

legitimacy (Pardo 2000, Pardo and Prato 2019, Boucher 2019). Therefore, the next section will examine two central values which played into the tram controversy.

The Modern Tram and the Heritage City

Since its implementation, the tram project has come into contact with other urban things, the legitimacy of which is far less contested; specifically, Cuenca's built heritage. The tram route goes right through the historic city centre, with its narrow, cobbled streets and its architecture dating from different historical periods. The checkerboard pattern of the city centre, as well as various buildings, date back to the colonial foundation of Cuenca by the Spanish. Many other buildings, with their more sumptuous facades, are a product of the influence of French neoclassical architecture in postcolonial times. Today, this historic architecture is central to inhabitants' representations of their city. It plays a crucial role in local feelings of pride and identity. When talking with my interlocutors about Cuenca, I was impressed by their generalised and deeply felt attachment to the city, to its history, culture and people. One often comes across expressions such as *mi linda Cuenca* (my beautiful Cuenca) or *mi Cuenquita* (my little Cuenca), which bring out people's fondness and sense of belonging. The city's nickname *Atenas del Ecuador* (the Athens of Ecuador) refers to its longstanding claim to be the country's cultural capital. This involves a collectively constructed image of Cuenca as cultivated, orderly and peaceful — a picture which inhabitants paint with much pride, and often in contrast to other parts of the country. Mónica Mancero Acosta (2012) shows how such feelings of pride and identity developed throughout the twentieth century as part of an elite project of establishing distinction from the city's lower classes as well as from Ecuador's larger cities, especially the capital Quito. This sense of local exceptionalism was increasingly adopted by *cuencanos* across the social spectrum, especially since the city's inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1999. By then, the city's promotion of its heritage had started to include popular and indigenous cultural expressions (handcrafts, traditional dresses and festivities, archaeological sites), so that a broader sense of identification with heritage — a hegemony Mancero Acosta argues (2012) — could be built.

From the start, the heritage process developed in relation to a perceived threat of modernisation. Cordero stated: 'Since 1950, in the name of modernity and technology, an attack has taken place against the urban architectural forms of the historic city that had developed over 400 years' (cited in Mancero Acosta 2012: 78; my translation). Ever since, the tension between conservation and modernisation has produced numerous conflicts. The construction of the tram has been the clearest illustration of this tension in recent times, which flared up especially when, instead of the promised 60-centimetre excavations, large holes were dug in the narrow historical streets. As the old cobblestones were removed, many inhabitants felt that their cherished heritage had fallen victim to an outrageous attack. During construction, the heavy machinery unleashed vibrations throughout the built environment, in some cases causing cracks in heritage buildings. When the construction was stopped, the remaining holes, rubble and fences in the streets conjured up an atmosphere of devastation

and abandonment. This perceived damage to the city's heritage was an additional, particularly severe, argument for withdrawing legitimacy from the tram project. And the damage was not only understood as material and limited to the construction period; it was also seen as symbolic and irreversible: for many critics, the tram's modern outlook would spoil the city's traditional atmosphere. Worse, according to a local engineer, it was a 'foreign object' that was imposed on the city and blurred its identity.

However, although in this and many other cases, conservation and modernisation enter into conflict, these two processes are not necessarily always opposed, nor is modernisation always represented as a threat. If heritage conservation has become a widely shared, even hegemonic, value in Cuenca, so has modernisation — and, arguably, for much longer (Kingman and Goetschel 2005). Both these values can be seen as crucial sources of legitimacy in Cuenca.[5] Although they seem to oppose each other, they do *not necessarily* enter into conflict. They can coexist and even be mutually supportive, unless their concrete objects clash, as in the case of the tram and the heritage architecture. The idea of modernisation linked to notions of development and progress has been deeply anchored in Latin American society and politics since colonial times (García Canclini 1995, Quijano 2013). The desire to be modern routinely transpires from everyday conversations, although what modernity actually means can vary greatly. Therefore, an infrastructure project which promised to put Cuenca 'on a par with the great cities of the planet', as mayor Granda claimed, resonated with a pervasive developmentalist worldview according to which Cuenca, Ecuador, and the Third World in general need to catch up with the modern world (for comparison, see Prato 2020). At the same time, it spoke to the local idea of Cuenca's exceptionalism.

The conflict between the tram and the historic architecture obscures various underlying parallels between modernisation and heritage. The notion of heritage turns historic buildings into elements of local identity, as something that belongs to all *cuencanos*. This resignification contrasts with the exclusionary past of these buildings, when they were inhabited by the colonial (Spanish) and postcolonial (creole) elites. Just like the tram is viewed by many city dwellers as imposed from above (by the municipality or the state) and from outside (Spanish and French companies), the colonial city was imposed by the Spanish rulers and much of the postcolonial architecture was influenced by the French. Just like the tram is considered today as a major modernisation project — a means to make Cuenca resemble modern, western cities — the geometrical city plan of colonial Cuenca was designed to embody the modernity and rationality of the 'civilised world' (Jamieson 2002). Moreover, for authors like Hayes (2020), the tram project is perfectly in line with heritage conservation, as both would contribute to making the city attractive to tourists and wealthy expats. As has happened elsewhere (Graezer Bideau 2018, Prato 2020), once restored, the decaying heritage buildings would be increasingly turned into exclusive hotels, restaurants and apartments for foreigners. The history of segregation in the postcolonial city would thereby be replicated in this kind of transnational gentrification. This latter point is only partially obscured in the official discourse

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5 See Graezer Bideau (2018) on the relationship between heritage and modernisation in China.

on heritage and the tram, as tourism and the growing North American expat community are generally represented as desirable for all inhabitants; as, indeed, signs of progress and international recognition of Cuenca's exceptionalism.

The *Obras* Dilemma

The bleak accounts of heritage and modernisation processes in Cuenca might be pertinent, but I argue that an overly determinist view can be nuanced by means of two points. First, the symbolic democratisation of heritage (Mancero Acosta 2012) turns heritage into a contested terrain on which struggles for belonging are fought out (Cervinkova and Golden 2020, Pardo 2020); this point will be developed in the next section. Second, changes to the built environment rarely happen without city dwellers engaging in persistent observation, enquiry and debate.

Here I wish to develop an approach to political legitimacy based on what I call an *obras* logic and its intrinsic dilemma. *Obras públicas*, or often just *obras*, is the Spanish expression for public works and is at the heart of much political debate in Cuenca. For instance, in a discussion I had with Nelson, one of my artisan friends based in the old town,[6] he complained that thus far the current mayor, Pedro Palacios, had done nothing for the city. Later, Nelson specified that by 'nothing' he meant no *obras*; that is, no roads, no markets, no new football stadium or airport. Yet, Palacios had promised some of these things in his campaign. It was not that Nelson had liked the previous mayor, Cabrera, whose management of the tram project had turned many people, including Nelson, against him. But, Nelson argued, Cabrera had at least accomplished something, like renovating some markets and building some parks. My friend was not alone in this assessment of the two mayors, nor in his focus on *obras* as the central criterion for assessing their performance.

This focus on *obras* reveals a specific material politics. If Nelson equates a lack of *obras* with sheer political inaction, *obras* become the very embodiment of political action and other less 'material' or visible policies are thereby taken out of the equation. Perhaps it is precisely the materially palpable, durable and fixed which turns *obras* into this political locus. Unlike other political achievements, completed *obras* are there to stay and their reality can be seen by anyone. *Obras* embody change, work, care and political will in physical structures. They stand for social improvement. This might sometimes lead to a conflation of *obras* in lists that give importance to quantity, rather than quality. In Nelson's argument, any *obra* is better than none. Enumerations of *obras* that have been built, or have not, or should be, are uttered not only by commentators like Nelson but also by campaigning politicians. Thus, *obras* become a moral value, a campaign instrument and a means for people to evaluate their leaders. This relationship between people and their leaders mediated by public works could be understood as *populist*, but in a very specific sense.

Politics in Ecuador has long been described as populist (de la Torre 2013, Burbano and de la Torre 1989), with reference to the way in which politicians publicly identify with 'the people' and the 'popular' and represent themselves as the saviours of the people in the fight

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6 Part of my fieldwork was conducted among artisans in the old town, who have a specific understanding of the place linked to heritage and claim of being part of the city's tradition.

against the elites. This has led to a political situation where, instead of representing clear ideologies, political parties and movements multiply as platforms for particular leaders (Conaghan 1996) and the democratic debate is said to succumb to social polarisation. Leaders' personalism also shapes the *obras* logic, converting *obras* into the leaders' gifts to the people. But if in this context public works are criticised simply as spectacles aimed at turning the masses into 'blind followers', we may overlook how these very construction projects politicise people in other ways. Although *obras* can play a persuasive role, they also provide people with the tools to engage in public debate. This is true at different levels, but the local, municipal one makes perhaps the clearest example. Ecuadorian municipalities are said to be pervaded by the same populist and clientelist tendencies that mark national politics (Burbano and de la Torre 1989); yet, the shift in scale brings out interesting elements at the local level. On the one hand, the local government is restricted in its competencies and is dependent on higher instances of government; on the other hand, it works in close proximity to its constituents. These restrictions and proximity seem to be crucial in shaping a very specific kind of populism.

In Cuenca, personalism becomes apparent in candidates for mayor routinely switching from one political movement to another and even founding new political movements, while clear ideological projects fade in favour of the leader's image. Once he[7] is voted in, the new mayor usually replaces municipal employees with his allies and puts his name and face on municipal projects. *Obras* are at the centre of mayors' political performance. It is with construction projects that they try to win elections and show their political will to care for the city and make it prosper. And it is often on these projects that city dwellers focus, too. Less palpable projects are easily dismissed as '*solo para la foto*' (just for the photo opportunity) — a common argument about authorities staging political actions to bolster their image, instead of engaging in more substantial work.[8] Personalism, in this context, is not so much about passionate voters following their charismatic leader as about cautious voters giving candidates a chance and making them personally responsible not only for the municipality's achievements but also for its failures. At the last municipal elections, in 2019, city dwellers like Nelson gave the outsider candidate Pedro Palacios a chance, but soon withdrew their support. If populism involves Manichean representations of the people versus the elite, populist leaders themselves are constantly at risk of being exposed as part of the elite. As Pardo and Prato argue, 'citizens grant — or do not grant — legitimacy by constantly assessing the actions and motivations of their rulers' (2019: 11; see also Prato 2019 on politicians' integrity). The proximity and immediacy of the municipal level might reinforce this aspect, requiring the mayor to perform permanently in satisfactory ways under the eye of vigilant city dwellers. As Pardo points out, 'credibility is heavily dependent on the observable management of responsibility' (Pardo 2019: 58).

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7 I use the male pronoun because there has yet to be a female mayor in Cuenca.
8 This critique resonates with Pardo's description of a '"bread, circus and gallows" approach to rule' in Naples (2019: 68).

But it is also at the local level that the dilemmas of the *obras* logic are felt most vividly. If, on the one hand, the lack of public works is equated with political inaction, on the other hand, actually executing *obras* is likely to imply pitfalls. While the resulting material structures might be the most visible and straightforward evidence of an administration's achievements, their construction is an intricate process which can be viewed by city dwellers as not transparent. Construction plans give the impression of a thoroughly controlled endeavour, clearly delimiting the time, space, costs, actors and outcomes of the project. However, the execution of the project usually conflicts with the orderly fiction of the plan, as social, political and material contingencies are brought to bear (Harvey 2017, Pinker and Harvey 2015). In the light of these problems, city dwellers may quickly grow critical of the project management. The initial trust — if there really was any — easily wanes in the face of a perceived lack of accountability. The mayor, who had capitalised on the project, might suddenly face accusations of incompetence, irresponsibility, authoritarianism and corruption. Suspicions of corruption are, indeed, commonplace in the region (Harvey 2017, Gledhill 2004) and constitute a powerful counterpart to populist allegiance, explaining people's cynical view of politics. Such mistrust is understandable given the numerous precedents, for corruption is systemic in large public works projects.[9] In the case of the Cuenca tram, these critiques — of incompetence, irresponsibility, authoritarianism and corruption — gained traction during the construction period. The proximity of the municipal level not only implies that city dwellers are closer to the authorities — to their offices and official meetings — and have direct access to ubiquitous rumours, it also means that people are closer to the *obra* itself. As the tram case shows, the construction suddenly invades people's everyday spaces, exposing the problems in the construction process in a very corporeal way. The greater the construction project, the greater the fascination might be, but also the more likely it is to entail profound disruptions of ordinary life. The fact that people directly suffer the disruption brought about by the construction process adds further complication to the *obras* dilemma.

Rulers face a dilemma between being seen as weak or uncaring if they do not undertake *obras* as opposed to attempting to show their strength through public works, with the risk of igniting debates about mismanagement and corruption. But city dwellers face this dilemma, too. On the one hand, they desire change and material participation; on the other hand, they risk feeling excluded from and afflicted by construction projects (see also Krase and Krase 2019), which reinforces their political cynicism. *Obras* constitute a terrain where people may see, evaluate and discuss politics, while experiencing opacities and a sense of being left out of the decision-making process. Even then, however, people participate in the process in various ways, as they may publicly criticise, protest, organise counter-initiatives, sabotage the construction and, ultimately, vote authorities out. In this sense, the dynamics around public works that I have described are important to understand local processes of legitimacy, for they

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9 See, for instance, Campos et al. (2021) on the Odebrecht scandal in Latin America. See also Prato (2019) on similar issues of corruption in public works in Italy and Albania, and Pardo (2019) on clientelism in public contracts. For an anthropological overview on corruption see Pardo ed. (2004).

put rulers and the ruled in a specific relationship whereby the legitimacy of the former depends on whether and how they deliver *obras* to the latter.

In short, populist strategies to achieve legitimacy are highly risky. Any legitimacy achieved through an electoral victory and a construction agenda is put at risk by the construction proceedings. Certainly, there are many other factors that play into local voting intentions. However, in our case, it would seem that the Cuenca tram had an important impact on Paúl Granda's electoral victory in 2009, on his electoral defeat in 2014 on the back of the increasing difficulties in the tram construction, and on the electoral defeat in 2019 of his successor, who was accused of mismanagement of the construction.

Navigating Values, Negotiating Legitimacy

With reference to our discussion of heritage and modernisation, we could say that in Cuenca — as probably in many other places — public works need to be framed in relation to the values of tradition and modernisation. The legitimation process of an *obra* requires it to be accommodated within this value landscape, aligning it with tradition or modernisation, perhaps even with both. Regeneration projects of historic urban areas, such as for instance the renovation of a heritage building, should meet the requirements of heritage preservation but may also involve considerations on how to empower heritage to meet 'modern' needs, including business and tourism. The tram, on the other hand, was presented as *the* avatar of modernisation. Criticism based on the tram's threats to heritage was met by official arguments on how the tram would, in fact, *help* to preserve the city's heritage. It would reduce motorised traffic in the centre and thus the pollution that was blackening the facades of the historic buildings. The tram would contribute to a more comfortable, less congested and hectic, urban space, thereby helping to improve people's experience of heritage.

The successful — that is, the widely accepted and temporally stabilised — alignment of urban things and values allows these things to become *iconic*. Instead of struggling for legitimacy, they become sources of legitimacy for other urban actors and undertakings. The heritagisation process in Cuenca involved the mutual reinforcement of the values and objects of tradition, resulting in the reification of the historic architecture and certain traditional practices (popular festivities, handcrafts such as hat weaving, and so on) as icons of the city. The tram, despite its struggle for legitimacy, has been presented by its proponents as not only legitimate, but iconic. As a spectacularly modern technology, with pioneering value in the region, it would add to Cuenca's exceptionalism, balancing the traditionalism of the city's other icons.

An icon, much like the notion of heritage, acquires a certain autonomy through its legitimacy: it does not need to be justified; rather, it justifies. This implies that criticism becomes more difficult, because the icon is, to an extent, exempt from liability. It is more legitimate than other actors and elements of the city, which are encouraged to act for the benefit of the icon, rather than the other way around. From this perspective, developments such as the gentrification described by Hayes (2020) might become acceptable for some — even for some of those who suffer from it — as instrumental to the well-being of heritage. So,

if the tram were to achieve the status of an icon, a convenient effect would be that the criticism against it would become less legitimate. Certain municipal strategies can be understood in this light. For instance, low ridership of the tram becomes represented as an issue of public commitment rather than as a miscalculation in the project. Municipal campaigns encourage people to ride the tram, be proud of it and take care of it, as if it was part of the city's heritage.

The efforts to elevate the tram to the status of heritage and of an icon became explicit, for instance, in a photography contest organised by the tram department in 2020. The contest was named *Somos patrimonio* (We are heritage) and participants were asked to take pictures of the tram together with some heritage element of the city. Although legitimacy can never be absolute, the icon constitutes a strong pole around which struggles for legitimacy are fought out. It is certainly difficult for a new icon to emerge, but the tram's spectacular modernity already lends it a quasi-iconic aura. Yet, contrary to historic icons, the icons of modernity wane as they age. At some point, they either turn into historic icons or are discarded as outdated and replaced by new signifiers of modernity. Processes of self-legitimisation by political actors can be observed from the viewpoint offered by this focus on urban things, values and icons. To boost their own standing, politicians try to align themselves and their projects with these sources of legitimacy. What I have not yet addressed is how city dwellers navigate this landscape of urban things, values, icons and quasi-icons. The question arises, what about *their* claims to legitimacy?

There is a substantial literature on how infrastructures are aimed at shaping subjectivities. Kingman and Goetschel (2005), for instance, depict Andean heritage cities as disciplinary *dispositifs*, while Larkin (2013) addresses the affective powers of the modernity of infrastructures. Authors like Marres (2012) argue that such descriptions of material politics often focus on infra-politics; that is, the surreptitious influence that materials have on society. Marres describes instances of explicit experimentation and negotiation with material structures. The discussion that I have developed so far is in line with the latter approach, in that *obras* are political experiments by authorities which involve constant negotiations of legitimacy. It brought up certain disciplinary implications for the proponents of public works rather than for their 'receivers'. Populism involves 'the people' as the already legitimate entity judging the legitimacy of those pretending to lead them. 'The people' are understood as legitimate but unrightfully repressed by elites, in need of a leader to save them. In a campaign video in 2019, the then candidate for mayor Pedro Palacios said: 'Cuenca is beautiful, but less beautiful than yesterday: it has been hijacked for decades by the usual suspects (*los mismos de siempre*). They don't represent us'.[10] But the people's legitimacy, their very existence as a collective with a shared identity and will, is a construction that populists constantly need to work at.[11]

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10 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqImkEQJWYE
11 In spite of the different context and theoretical framework, there are similarities here with Krase and Krase's point on the 'cynical production of community' (2019: 171).

De la Torre (2013) has noted how president Correa's government involved a peculiar combination of populism and technocratic elitism. In Cuenca, a similar combination can be observed in the figure of mayor Palacios. The outsider candidate, Palacios, who in the above quote identifies with the people against the elites ('the usual suspects […] don't represent us'), is also an upper-class entrepreneur who claims to run the municipality with expert know-how, as opposed to abiding by political interests. But in Cuenca, populism also becomes elitist in the way the formerly upper-class heritage includes 'the popular' (Mancero Acosta 2012). Elitist aspirations still pervade this popularised heritage and, consequently, ideas of 'the people' in Cuenca. Hence, the praise of 'the people' as cultivated and noble can easily turn into pressure, or outright exclusion, if real people do not meet this image. Populism takes an elitist turn as the idealisation of the people becomes normative exigence. At stake is the legitimacy of real people's claims to belonging and social and political participation.

During my fieldwork, I observed the struggles for legitimacy of various social groups, but the clearest illustration of the above would come from the city's street vendors. In the literature on Andean cities, street vendors are represented as an ever-marginal social group that has, at the same time, been a pillar of city life since colonial times (Seligmann 2012). The heritagisation processes of city centres often imply 'cleansing' efforts that translated into expelling street vendors from heritage spaces. This has happened also in Cuenca, especially since it was declared UNESCO world heritage in 1999 (Mancero Acosta 2012). Following this declaration, a municipal ordinance was introduced which severely restricted legal street vending, and a municipal police body was founded to enforce this ordinance. Various compromises have since been made by subsequent municipal administrations to give street vendors some room for manoeuvre, arguably with the main intention of gaining the votes of this large group. However, here as elsewhere (Pardo 2019), street vendors still mostly work in precarious conditions and in a legal limbo. Their — by now historic — struggle for recognition includes arguments about the right to work, the right to the city and the right to dignity. These claims are made in a way which highlights the key sources of legitimacy discussed above. At a demonstration event organised by street vendor associations, a spokesperson argued that they are themselves part of the city's heritage, despite municipal attempts to exclude them from it. Another of their leaders with whom I spoke had developed concrete ideas about how to integrate street vendors into the city through permanent stalls and markets. As he worked close to the tram route, I asked him what he thought of the tram. He answered that it was a good project which would modernise the city, adding that street vendors, too, wanted to be part of the modern city, that they could be part of the solution, not the problem. Tram stations could have vending booths operated by street vendors to give a better service to people, he observed.

The legitimation discourses of street vendors thus navigate the values of heritage and modernisation; vendors attempt to inscribe themselves into the tradition of the city, while at the same time showing their potential contribution to its modernisation. Although both heritage and modernisation processes show exclusionary tendencies (Hayes 2020), their hegemonic, or iconic, status makes it hard to challenge them. Instead, street vendors show how strategies of

legitimation involve the negotiation of one's own position within these processes, one's pledge of allegiance to these values. Their claims to legitimacy are directed not only to the authorities but also to city dwellers more generally, as street vendors' relations with inhabitants fluctuate between exchange and conflict (Hurtado-Tarazona 2019). Notably, street vendors do not constitute a homogenous group. Sometimes, the legitimation of some of them delegitimises others, as when longstanding vendors criticise the newcomers from other parts of the country or, 'worse', from Venezuela.[12] Venezuelan street vendors and beggars – mostly people who have fled their country in recent years – have come to constitute the new outsiders against whom claims to belonging are articulated. Conflicts such as these show how 'the people' in Cuenca, the *cuencanos*, constitute a category of legitimacy – as the legitimate inhabitants of the city, owners of the city's heritage and participants in governance — which real people struggle to enter. This generates symbolic fights to be part both of the city's tradition and of its set-up as a modern, cosmopolitan society. These fights are also very physical, as people struggle to *inhabit* the spaces in which they claim to belong (Krase and Krase 2019, Graezer Bideau 2018).

Conclusion

Approaching urban governance and belonging in Cuenca through a focus on urban things reveals the entangled nature of (de)legitimisation processes. I have described how the rulers, the ruled and things variably legitimise and delegitimise each other. Politicians propose public works in order to be elected, sourcing legitimacy from 'the people' in a populist fashion, as well as from the city's iconic things and values. City dwellers actively participate in the personalisation of politics and the focus on *obras*, not as blind followers but as close observers of the leaders and of the implementation of their agendas. However, people's position as legitimate judges of the leaders, and even as legitimate inhabitants of the city, is made to be dependent on their own alignment with the city's iconic things and values — an alignment which is sometimes highly contested. Thus, urban things become active elements in the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, providing a terrain for their encounter, and the issues and tools for political engagement. After winning their own legitimacy battles, some urban things crystallise as icons of the city, becoming vectors of shared values and sources of legitimacy. Mancero Acosta's (2012) hegemonic heritage in Cuenca is an apt illustration. However, as strong as icons may be, their legitimacy is never absolute, for their forms and definitions remain open to change. The contradictory acts of alignment with icons by authorities and city dwellers show how their forms and meanings are negotiated. The construction of the tram has unsettled Cuenca's iconic heritage in significant ways. It has been a threat to the traditional aesthetic of the city and to the livelihoods of people who consider themselves to be the legitimate inhabitants of that space. And yet, while the complications of the tram project continue to this day, its spectacular modernity lends it iconic potential.

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12 See also Pardo (2019) on conflicts involving immigrant vendors.

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