

Populist Transparency: The Documentation of Reality in Rural Paraguay

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This article is an ethnographic account of the politics of transparency in Paraguay that focuses on the circulation of a particular binder full of photocopies from the land registry during Paraguay's embattled "transition to democracy." The concept of transparency posits a representational relationship between documents and reality – i.e. governments are transparent to the extent that they generate faithful and accessible documentary representations of their activities. The article suggests that the difficulty of creating a critical analysis of transparency has less to do with representations than with contention over what counts as reality. The Paraguayan case suggests that we might benefit from rethinking transparency through the logic of populism, in which reality is itself created in the relationship between leaders and their followers.

❖ Key words transparency, democracy, populism, documents, Paraguay

Introduction

In January 2005, during research with campesino (or peasant¹) organizations in eastern Paraguay, I attended a gathering in Presidente Franco, a remote squatter settlement, to see a well-known senator named Julián Camacho make an unusual appearance. Accompanied by the president of the land reform agency, the IBR,² Camacho announced that the community would finally be legalized, and that residents could stop worrying about the threats of eviction that had hung over them for twenty years. Members of a regional

campesino organization known as the Asociación Popular Campesina³ (APC) had gathered hundreds of locals to the site. The event was also made possible by the efforts of a local representative of the ruling Colorado Party (or “Red Party”), who had outfitted the space behind his sawmill with all the trappings of a party event: tables draped in red cloth, red banners, and enthusiastic party members dressed in bright red shirts and scarves to hear a politician deliver a blustery partisan speech.

The most interesting of the red objects produced that day, though, was a binder full of public documents that the senator gave to the leader of the APC as material evidence of his commitment to the project. A gift dressed in the unmistakable colour-coding of party patronage, the binder was just one of a history of populist gestures seen in this area for decades. But unlike most patronage, this gift was not economic, nor did it confer any particular rights or privileges on the receiver or the assembled crowd. In fact, Camacho said, the binder contained documents which could be accessed by anyone; he was simply helping people to see and understand them. It showed, he yelled, during a long partisan rant in colloquial Guaraní loaded with superlatives, that he was being utterly transparent – “che transparenteite!”

In this article, I argue that Camacho’s gift defies current understanding of governmental transparency, and calls for a rethinking of the relationship between citizens, states and the documents which pass between them. The binder was a complex sort of document, a token of a new kind of politics in Paraguay and a small piece in the reconfiguration of how citizenship operates during this country’s embattled “transition to democracy.” Here, I suggest that there are two seemingly incommensurable forms of citizenship afloat in Paraguay since the end of the Cold War: each posits a different sort of relationship between citizens, documents and, the most contentious part, “reality.” The binder performs for both of these citizens at once to suggest new kinds of publics in which these citizens might engage each other. Camacho’s performance, I argue, was a kind of “populist transparency” that challenges both proponents and critics of bureaucratic reforms to think about transparency as a political technique rather than a bureaucratic procedure.

The international obsession with transparency as a technocratic fix to governance problems in developing countries has been in vogue in Paraguay since the beginning of the 1990s. Transparency in the abstract means little more than a production of faithful and factual representations of the activities of political and economic actors. It became a powerful ideological concept in a decade of market liberalization after the Cold War because it linked governmental corruption to economic performance (see Rose-Ackerman 1999; Tulchin and Espach 2000; Haber 2002). But transparency also poses a problem for anthropological critique, since ethnography is an empirical practice which is, at least in part, similarly judged on its fidelity to the real (Levine 2004). This leads some scholars into an obvious problem when they critique transparency for being ideological or duplicitous, for being a fetish

that conceals the true power relations behind it – an argument that boils down to transparency being opaque, but critique of its opacity remaining transparent (see, for instance, Zizek 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Freidberg 2004).

The idea that government can be made transparent relies on a modern understanding of signs focused on the relationship between the signifier and signified, or between representation and reality.⁴ But given the enormous claims made in favour of this governmental virtue, the lack of explicit discussion about what counts as real among pro-transparency reformers as well as their critics is somewhat striking. For though they are often critiqued as ideologies of representation, arguments for transparency by necessity also imply a tacit understanding of what is meant by “reality.” The argument in this article is that while the overt debate in countries like Paraguay over corruption and transparency tends to focus on the representational side of the matter (on who is providing the most reliable information about their activities) the debate is also shot through with a tacit struggle over the real. In short, another layer of this debate arising around transparency reforms is not about how reliable political representations are, or whether they are simply a mask for deeper power structures, but about whose version of reality is being represented. In this, I suggest, populist politicians like Camacho play an interesting role, one which deserves to be examined much more closely. As in much of Latin America (see Lomnitz 2007), Paraguayan populists couch their appeal to the masses through an appeal to experiential reality which is at odds with the technocratic uses of the term in transparency reforms. Following recent theorization about populism (Panizza 2005; Mouffe 2005; Laclau 2005), I suggest that politicians like Camacho render explicit one of the central tensions of transparency politics: the need to present the interests of a particular constituency in terms of uncontested universals.

Democracy and Dual Politics

To explain the multiple functions that Camacho’s red binder played that day, I will first lay out the historical backdrop of the meeting. Paraguay is a tiny and predominantly rural country with a relatively weak state, whose government has been dominated by the Colorado Party since the civil war of 1947. Between 1954 and 1989, the government was led by General Alfredo Stroessner, who built the party up from a small elite base into a massive populist movement and patronage machine (Lewis 1980; Roett and Sacks 1991; Turner 1993; Paredes 2004). Like all dictatorships, Stroessner held power through targeted violence and repression, but he and his party were also enormously popular.⁵ The cornerstone of that popularity was an extensive land reform which gained him the allegiance of a large constituency of Guarani-speaking campesinos. As much as a third of eastern Paraguay’s

arable land, which was still forested in the 1950s, was settled by cotton smallholders during this period. Hundreds of thousands of campesinos came to understand their identities as small farmers to be directly linked to the strength and benevolence of the ruling party. Campesinos epitomized, in Stroessner's language, the people of Paraguay, *el pueblo Paraguayo*, and their betterment was coterminous with the betterment of the nation.

After years of economic stagnation and the loss of key Cold War allies,⁶ Stroessner was deposed in 1989 by dissidents within his own party. This new generation of Colorados heralded a new era of democratic reforms. They held a constituent assembly, and in 1992 began to hold regular, internationally recognized elections (Lambert and Nickson 1997). But much to the dismay of its middle-class opponents, the Colorado apparatus continued in power, now winning elections by running plausible Stroessner heirs for the massive rural base. National politics continued to be dominated by men in red scarves yelling sentimental diatribes about the injustices of the elite to masses of barefooted followers. This would continue for 19 years, until the Colorado party finally lost an election.⁷ While they remained in power, many decried Paraguay's "transition to democracy" as a sham, an interminable process in which power was merely decentralized from the executive into the hands of corrupt party bosses. Camacho was just such a person, an old-guard Stronista adored in the countryside for his advocacy of the land reform and his ability to turn a quick phrase in impeccable Guarani, and despised by middle class Spanish Asunceños for the same reasons.

The outward aesthetic of Paraguayan politics was slow to change during the transition. But as I've argued elsewhere (Hetherington 2008), the transition did significantly change the relations of power between rural Paraguay and Asunción, and shifted the terms of address of Paraguayan politics. Schematically, if Cold War populism was a politics addressed to "the people," (*el pueblo*) then the new democracy introduced a politics addressed to "the public" (*el público*). *El pueblo* was a constituency called into being by Stroessner through opposition to threatening elites and outsiders. It was the humble masses for which the young campesino family stood as an iconic figure of Paraguayan nationhood, and Stroessner promised it participation in the body politic against the manipulation and abuse of landholding elites.⁸ *El público*, created by a newly freed press and a more open field of political debate, is also a way of describing the nation, but it is quite different. If *el pueblo* is the heart of the nation, the primitive wellspring of Paraguayan goodness, then *el público* is its head, the holder of opinions to which government must subordinate itself during elections. *El pueblo* is spoken for, identified with, and can be led by charismatic persuasion and paternalism. *El público*, by contrast, is fickle and judgmental, and constantly demands accountability of its leaders.⁹

The people who actually identified themselves as participants in this new public sphere were small in number, primarily a group of Spanish-speaking

urban professionals whom I call “new democrats,” awaiting the decay of the Party and their inevitable ascendancy as modern liberal technocrats. Their dominance of the newly free press and the international NGO sector made them prominent protagonists of government reform, and of Paraguay’s self-representation as an emerging democracy escaping the stranglehold of corrupt authoritarians. New democrats saw Stroessner’s departure as an opportunity to assert the sovereignty of the public sphere over the state apparatus. In their political language, the gift economy sustaining the party came to be called “corruption,” and the lack of institutionalized information about government was tacit evidence of criminal wrongdoing.¹⁰ In this realignment, the apparently unshakable alliance between the party and the majority of campesinos was seen as the product first of manipulation by caudillos (strongmen), and then, as it stubbornly remained strong, of the irrationality of the countryside.¹¹

El público did not completely displace el pueblo. Instead, these terms signalled different modes of address and different constituencies whose support politicians needed to court during the transition. New democratic parties created in this period were quite good at addressing el público, but failed in elections because of their inability to successfully address el pueblo.¹² But the Colorado Party proved much more malleable, adjusting to the new political landscape as it attempted to maintain its hegemony. Their careful adjustment to democracy eventually gave rise to what many observers called Paraguay’s “dual politics,” known elsewhere in the region as “neopopulism” – a politics that recapitulates classical populism in style, but trades in import substitution for neoliberal structural adjustments (see Weyland 1996; 2003; O’Donnell 1996). This strategy was especially evident in the incarnation of the Colorado Party that won the 2003 election. The president elect, Nicanor Duarte Frutos, bore all the trappings of a Stronista caudillo: he claimed to be a campesino himself, yelling his speeches in fluent Guaraní draped in the party’s traditional red scarf, and he was adept at turning political slush funds into patronage machines.¹³ But his real ingenuity lay in his ability to curry simultaneous favour with new democrats and international economists known for their disdain of Paraguayan party politics (Nickson 2007). In that vein, he hired a respected economist as his finance minister, and signed a long-stalled stand-by agreement with the IMF.

The notion that this was a “dual” politics expressed the sense that Nicanor’s team was speaking to two publics at once, el pueblo and el público, two constituencies that both imagined themselves to be the centre of the body politic but whose conceptions of popular sovereignty were incommensurable with each other (see *The Economist* 2004; Lambert 2005). The dual politics argument is an interesting one, because while it builds on a plausible depiction of the Paraguayan political landscape, it also helps to maintain the idea that modern democracy is somehow completely separate from the populist style of

the Colorados. Transparent, technocratic liberalism, it seems to suggest, is the province of one constituency, and its purity appears largely untouched by populism. Populism, and the campesinos who fall for it, is relegated to democracy's past, a static holdover in the present that must ultimately be expurgated from the public sphere.

According to this depiction of new-democrats and their international allies, transparency is the primary quality that distinguishes Paraguay's new political actors from Colorados. Beginning in the early 1990s, transparency became the ethical standard for democratic reform. While they failed, at least until 2008, to run a serious electoral opposition to the Colorados, new democrats were successful in creating a national image of Paraguay as among the most corrupt countries in the world, with the party at the centre of a nation-wide network of patronage, criminality and inefficiency.¹⁴ Transparency was, above all, supposed to cure the nation of its red-scarved politicians whose appeals to the masses were made on the fuzzy, audit-proof terrain of feelings and untraceable gifts. This made it hard for new democrats and others to appreciate that campesino organizations also clamoured for transparency and demanded it of the Colorado party, with which they struggled much more closely. Transparency claims like Camacho's were unrecognizable to new democrats because they used the term in a slightly different way. The possibility of a kind of "populist transparency" remains completely unexamined in the literature. But as I will show in the rest of this article, this oversight only contributes to the tendency of both Paraguayan new democrats and social scientists to ignore a very creative political dialogue happening within post-Cold War populism. For Camacho's was a dual politics that not only spoke to two publics at once, but also spoke across them, using the binder as a bridge, and tried to manufacture representational fidelity to multiple realities.

Documenting citizenship

The new democratic premise that transparency is an antidote to populist corruption relies on a simple opposition between two ways of organizing the relationship between the state, the citizenry and documents. Both transparency and populism are forms of inclusion. Populism produces citizens through semi-private networks of gift-giving, including the gifts of documents that solidify the linkage between state and citizen. Because the state is not a mere manager of pre-existing rights or laws, but rather a personalist body, abstract concepts like citizenship, rights and the services that come with them are never separated from the personality of the executive.¹⁵ By contrast, transparency produces citizens by extending the public sphere of deliberation about government through the circulation of information about government, a condition which is supposed to mitigate against the abuses of strongmen. Public rational citizens outfitted with transparent information prevent the

arbitrary use of resources on which the populist thrives. A closer look at the populist use of documents during the Cold War, however, suggests the relationship is more complicated.

Cold War populists built their appeal to the masses against the tyranny of the elite by sympathizing with their social exclusion and promising to bring them into the nation. It created citizen subjects through hierarchical networks of personalist gift-giving. Citizenship was a gift that Stroessner extended to people as a form of largesse. It was not an abstract principle or bundle of rights so much as a relationship between people and the state materialized by documents like military service records and party membership cards, carried primarily by men to facilitate their encounters with bureaucrats and police.¹⁶ Of all these documents, land titles produced by the land reform agency were the most sought after. Titles were the vehicle through which Stroessner turned peasants into political actors by giving them personhood. Here the language of Colorado populism had a decidedly Lockean ring to it (see Radin 1993). The property relationship that titles created between “man and land”¹⁷ turned campesinos into rational beings possessed of dignity and a sense of the future. “It is no contradiction to say that ‘owning land’ is equivalent to owning oneself,” wrote Mario Halley (1985: 12) of the Paraguayan land reform. Owning land, he went on, is “to value one’s own labour, to confide in one’s own foundation, and on that foundation, to build (edificar) that which dignifies human life: house, family, plantation, harvest, bread, peace, love, unity and dominion.”

Land titling promised to create citizens, and through them a sovereign and democratic nation that included el pueblo Paraguayo as free participants. But the democracy that it promised was always deferred to the future, suspended temporarily by martial law. Arguably, it did not give citizenship at all, but conditional and subordinate membership in the private club that controlled the state. This was the temporal trick of mid-century populism: strong-handed economic development first, institutional development and political liberalization second.¹⁸ The deferred promise of national progress allowed populists to build a politics around the recognition of campesino structural marginality while reinforcing present hierarchies of their own. The great future society promised by the title would start with recognition of men by the state, and in this case, by President Stroessner personally. Man would become a political subject through ownership not only because he recognized himself in his property, but because he was recognized by Stroessner through title. Handing out titles in this way solidified the personal relationship between Stroessner and the recipients of titles, a relationship in which the former consolidated his authority as benefactor according to a particular way of gifting citizenship. The rights it conferred could not be separated from the personality of the giver, nor from the materiality of the document itself, which

was useful only if it could be presented to police or bureaucrats during encounters at the periphery of the state.¹⁹

Transparency, Regularity and Information

This way of reckoning citizenship through the documentary gifts is one of the legacies of Stronista populism that remained strong in the countryside throughout the transition. During my research in 2004 and 2005, I asked many campesino families to show me their land titles. In presenting them to me they showed little interest in the representational qualities of titles – those maps and inscriptions which purported to depict their property. Instead, they pointed to signatures and stamps that traced networks of relations on the page. The signature of the president of the IBR was always the most important part of the document, because it linked the chain of recognition straight back to the state, and in older documents, directly to Stroessner. What I found most interesting, though, was that this way of reading titles also applied to other documents. I worked with campesino organizations who were involved in extremely complex legal disputes over land, and who had taught themselves to interpret and use public documents to challenge bureaucrats and the powerful landowners around them, often taking their better-educated opponents by surprise with their legal literacy. And yet that literacy always seemed at cross-purposes to mine. When we sat down to discuss these documents, I invariably tried to read them for accounts of events and participants and legal precedents, asking questions about whether particular claims about the dispute were true. In short, I searched these documents for “information,” and tried to assess its veracity or transparency. My campesino interlocutors, in contrast, read for stamps and signatures, for indexical traces of those who had been involved in constructing particular accounts, and discussed how these people might be enlisted or repudiated in future struggle, that is to say, they were interested in the networks which the documents made possible. Reading was never merely a mining of facts from the page for campesinos, but a practice of interpretation which, combined with other sorts of knowledge exterior to the documents, allowed them to trace the contours of political alliances and oppositions. The end result of these reading sessions was always the creation of more documents, new pages to be added to the files which interpreted the existing files.

Inheriting a central tenet of modern language ideology (see Silverstein 1979; Crapanzano 1981), I read the documents with a focus on the representational aspects of the inscriptions they contained. Campesinos were more interested in the productive capacity of those inscriptions – that is to say, not the information that was revealed to them by the documents, but the interpretations they facilitated. This is not that surprising – these are two sides of any engagement with legal documents.²⁰ But the different emphases are key to understanding the bureaucratic dimension of Paraguay’s transition to

democracy. According to the campesino approach to documents, the very idea of transparency doesn't make much sense at all, since their interpretation is never closed. Documents do not "store" information. Instead, information is a potential quality of documents as material objects which may or may not become salient in the play of social interactions around them.

To say that information is a quality is not dissimilar to saying that redness is a quality of apples (or binders or scarves), and this, as Webb Keane (2001; 2005) reminds us, means that redness is always "bundled" materially to other qualities so as to resist our interpretive attempts to reduce them. The information in documents comes bundled with fragility and flammability, with loseability and age, with over-written words, poor handwriting or typewriter ribbons, or the blurriness of several passes through rural photocopiers. It comes marked with stamps and signatures that connect it to parallel biographies of bureaucrats past and present, themselves amended between readings, disconnected and reconnected to new networks and political entanglements. The document bundles together many qualities which can never be exhaustively, or transparently accounted for, qualities that become actualized as information in the multiple readings, negotiations and tussles into which they are introduced. In other words, the information contained within the binder is not unrelated to its redness – they are all qualities of the object which contribute to its potential significance.

In the age of bureaucratic reform and public efficiency, this sort of open-ended politics of documents is considered costly, unruly, inefficient and corruption-provoking. During the transition to democracy, new democrats adopted good governance projects offered by USAID, the IDB and the World Bank to promote transparency, which meant creating rituals of document-making that would increase public access to information about governance practices (see World Bank 2000).²¹ Fundamentally, it meant reducing the interpretive openness of public information and making the reading of documents impersonal and apolitical. Given the immense importance that the rural population placed on land titles, it is not surprising that new democratic attempts to reform the rural land market were particularly controversial. Called "the de Soto solution" in Asunción, after Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto (2000), these reforms had two key prongs: handing out land titles to those who owned their land informally, and streamlining a public registry of real estate assets which would make information about landholdings transparent and therefore available for market transactions, especially mortgage (see also Deininger 2003).²² What Camacho was offering residents of Presidente Franco was one variant of these projects, which went by the name of "regularization," the process of resolving legal or representational problems in specific large properties.²³ The practice was introduced as a legal tool in 2002 with a new office in the land reform agency called the "Office of regularization of state land." By 2005, the office was

dealing with dozens of “irregular” landholdings, land so hopelessly mired in legal disputes as to have become non-transferable. The largest and most intractable of these properties was part of a huge estate called Finca 8, part of which was now covered by the community of Presidente Franco.

The red binder was primarily filled with work product from the Office of Regularization’s attempt to solve the legal muddle of Finca 8. When Camacho arrived that day in Presidente Franco claiming he would solve the land problem there, and do so transparently, the binder he brought as a gift therefore served multiple dissonant frames. Here was a document created in the style of a populist gift, given with all the pomp, speech-making and redness that creates a relationship between giver and the receiving crowd. And yet the gift participated in two new democratic projects which were supposed to make such gift-giving redundant. It was the gift of regularization – that bureaucratic procedure which is good because it is impersonal and renders bureaucracy indifferent to personalist politics. And it was the gift of transparency, that quality which disconnects information from the conditions of its production, including the gift-giving. The dissonance here points to one of the core distinctions between populist and new democratic politics: citizenship as gift versus citizenship as a product of procedural transparency. The novelty of a figure like Camacho is that he seems to be performing for both sorts of citizen at once.

What the Binder Said (and some of what it didn’t say)

Campesinos attended the meeting in Presidente Franco hoping the speaker would solve a problem that was almost twenty years old. The community had been founded by pioneers in the mid-eighties, when young families moved north into forests that for a long time had been “idle.”²⁴ Presidente Franco had never been formalized as a colony by the IBR, which would have entailed expropriation and redistribution of the land it sat on, and as a consequence its residents had not been able to receive occupancy permits, let alone titles. The town now housed several thousand residents, and the main road sported two gas stations, a police post, several schools and a bull-fighting ring. Nonetheless, the residents were legally land invaders, and since they had started building here, a military unit, a financier, a bank and a powerful Colorado organizer had all claimed to own the land. With each new claim came the threat of dispossession. None of these claims had ever stuck, and Presidente Franco’s residents said the main reason for this was that they had fought off each of the claimants, often violently.

The primary problem this caused residents was not strictly a “market” problem in the sense imagined by the proponents of the de Soto solution. Hernando de Soto claims that the solution to rural poverty lies in creating a streamlined public registry and providing other informal landowners with regular titles. According to de Soto, titles are necessary to reviving the “dead

capital” of the poor by making it possible to use land as collateral against loans. But none of the people with whom I spoke in the colony expressed any desire to mortgage their land. They were already able to get small amounts of credit using cattle, motorcycles and future agricultural product as collateral, and few campesinos were in any hurry to deepen their debt load and risk losing their land. Instead, they said, the lack of *kuati’a* – documents – meant that they lived in constant fear of eviction from powerful people better connected to the state apparatus than they were. What campesinos wanted was not an efficient land market, but a document to say that the state was behind their claim. They went to the meeting because they had been convinced that Camacho and the IBR could provide these guarantees by trumping the claims of bigger more powerful land speculators.

The local representative of the campesino organization had done most of the leg-work prior to the meeting, going house-to-house to convince his neighbours to attend. It was no small feat. Although there was a core of Colorado supporters willing to come simply to see their party leadership, most residents were suspicious of the land agency and the party. There had been several periods in the early and late 1990s in which settlers had begun to pay the IBR for land titles, but had stopped payments when they became convinced (correctly) that no title would be forthcoming. Since then, most campesinos had stayed away from the IBR. But with tensions increasing between campesinos and indigenous people on the western edge of Presidente Franco and with Brazilian land speculators on the eastern edge, the APC representative was able to make the case to several hundred residents that they should try this meeting.

What most people expected of Camacho was a speech about expropriation – the familiar idiom of redistribution that all campesinos understand from the legacy of the land reform. Instead, though, he spoke in the entirely foreign language of “regularization.” Camacho’s primary task was therefore to explain regularization and convince people that it was an appropriate political response to their problems. This was an act of translation to make the project intelligible to campesino interests, or even, as I will show, campesino reality. And in order to understand regularization, they had to first accept the commensurability of Presidente Franco with the bureaucratic abstraction called *Finca 8*. As Wendy Espeland (2002, see also Espeland and Stevens 1998) would put it, the meeting was about “commensuration,” the sort of operation required to make disparate things commensurable and therefore amenable to rational deliberation.

This is where the binder came in as a key prop. Most of its pages were copied from a senate bill, a technical document authored by Camacho generically entitled “Which increases the national budget for the fiscal year 2005.” The bill outlined how the government could regularize the land by buying it from the National Development Bank (BNF), the current owner of

Finca 8, and transferring it to the IBR which would take care of redistribution. All the government needed to do was provide the cash for the transfer. It was followed by a short summary of the convoluted documentary history of the land, and a map of the fraction in question. The bill itself covered one page, the explanation fit on two pages, and the supporting documents, most concerning the bureaucratic history of Finca 8, approximately 170 pages photocopied from an old land title in the public registry.

Just as the maps were supposed to be spatial representations of Finca 8, so much of the text was supposed to be its history. But what was written on the documents was a strange history to imagine from the shade behind the sawmill, a history happening far away in the core of Asunción, in transactions between people who had no interest whatsoever in the campesino colony of Presidente Franco. To give a sense of the disconnection, here is the text of the fourth page translated from the binder.

NUMBER SIX HUNDRED AND NINETEEN: In the city of Asunción, Capital of the Republic of Paraguay, on the twelfth day of August of the year nineteen eighty-one, I, J.J.B.R., Public Notary, owner of registry number __, with two witnesses, received the following people: On the one hand is doctor P.C.B.A., Paraguayan, married, judge of the first circuit civil court of commerce and labour in Coronel Oviedo, living at 11 Manduvira street (Asunción); and on the other hand is Doctor Julio M. Rejis Sanguina, Paraguayan, married, living for the purposes of this transaction on the corner of Independencia Nacional and Presidente Francia [also Asunción]; both are of legal age and have complied with all the relevant laws of the country ... to which I will testify. Dr. Julio M. Rejis Sanguina is here in representation of the Banco Nacional de Fomento in his character as the president of that institution, a position to which he was named in Presidential Decree no. 20 331 on the 26th of January 1976, which states: “.....Article 1. That Dr. Julio. M. Rejis Sanguina be named President of the Banco Nacional de Fomento, for the period 1976/1981. – Art 2. That thanks be given to Mr. Alberto Gonzalez for services rendered as Interim President of said Institution.... Signed: ALFREDDO STROESSNER. I testify that this is an exact copy.”

Most of the text of the 170 pages was like this, protocolized scene-setting of encounters between important men vouching for each other's legal status. It was built on the discursive foundation of what Angel Rama (1996) called the “Lettered City,” that space of literary and legal circulation, of rarefied notarial protocols traded back and forth on increasingly dog-eared documents between bureaucrats, notaries and lawyers, that dominated Latin American political life until the mid-20th century (see also Franco 2002). It was not, as campesinos would often say of such documents, *orrealida*, “our reality.”

According to the binder, Finca 8 was all part of an old estate that once covered over 200 thousand hectares. The land had belonged to the BNF, which had repossessed it from its previous owner in 1981. During the 1970s, Finca 8 had accumulated thirty-seven embargoes resulting from lawsuits from individuals, lawyers, other financiers and two banks, an airline, the national electric company, and four separate claims by the state social insurance company. The previous owner, a financier with no interest in the land whatsoever, had used the title in a great deal of (illicit) transactions which later resulted in the legal challenges. But once the Bank owned the land, nothing more was done with it – so many competing claims made it impossible for the Bank to sell it.

Ironically, Finca 8's legal problems and ensuing non-transferability resulted from the creation of a perfect land title – a representation of rights to land that the different parties involved assumed to be so secure that they had no need to check its accuracy or even its readability. Residents of the Lettered City had transacted on this title since 1889 without demonstrating much interest in what was going on in the forest. So abstract were these financial transactions that no mention was made of physical investments on the land, resources or infrastructure, much less of the existence of at least a dozen indigenous communities, several squatter communities, and a military base established near the northern edge. The only recorded attempts at establishing a relationship between the title and physical land were several measurements which reduced it to a topographical abstraction – an empty polygon on a white sheet of paper surrounded by numbers, which stood on its own as a self-evident visual representation of the land which was up for sale or seizure. The polygon was the only indication that anything was being traded other than bits of paper. From a campesino perspective there was nothing real about this real estate. Certainly it was not a fixed asset, but a fungible one, more like money than a house. Its owners were financiers, and the land was only used as collateral against other investments, and increasingly just as ways of extracting funds from other financial institutions.

Until the land reform started in 1963, this was the rule rather than the exception in eastern Paraguay (see Kleinpenning 1987, 1992; Pastore 1972). By the early 1980s, though, land all over this area was being expropriated by the IBR. Campesino struggles for land during this period were usually against large landowners and companies. The struggles were often long and violent, but the goal for campesinos was always clear: state expropriation, which the IBR sometimes granted, depending on the relationship between the landowner and the party. But the fact that this land already belonged to the national bank made it more complicated to redistribute; the expropriation had already happened in the form of a repossession, which made it state property but put the title in the wrong state agency. The BNF's ownership effectively shielded the title from expropriation by the IBR, suspending the title in its

abstraction. Transactions on the document had stopped because it had become impossible to commensurate the interests of the BNF with those of any potential buyer.²⁵ The BNF acted in a way which suggested that they were stonewalling the transaction for as long as possible. They did not grant me an interview, just as they avoided meetings with anyone interested in the Finca 8 property. Lawyers representing campesinos and the IBR all told me the same story when I asked them what was going on with the Presidente Franco case: they simply didn't know, because they couldn't get anyone at the BNF to talk to them. At the IBR, the manager in charge of the Office of Regularization was most frank when I asked him. "That's a really complicated case," he said. "Everyone wants this to happen but the Banco.... Every time I go over there they tell me they will do it next week. But they won't show me the documents. It's very frustrating. In truth [en realidad] I don't know what their problem is."

Regularization, as noted, was a new democratic project. The primary effect of such a project would have been to make the Finca 8 title commensurable with other titles, and therefore reintroduce it to the land market. But in this case it was not to go ahead without political intervention. Camacho's gamble was that he could rescue the project by bringing the senate into the game, diverting state money to buy the land from the Bank, and thereby commensurating a number of interests at once. If it worked, the project would win him and the IBR new democratic credibility in Asunción. By making the project speak to campesinos, he could also reassert his relevance to a huge local constituency, and mend relations with the APC. But this is something quite different from what campesinos wanted. As noted above, campesinos primarily wanted the project to ensure them tenure security. The local APC representative made this difference clear when he spoke, imploring the IBR president to issue them non-transferable titles, the kind of paper which would give land security but effectively erase the land market altogether. But campesinos were willing to support the regularization without the guarantee of non-transferable titles; they saw in the project a short-term advantage, which made them willing to leave the question of transferability for a later period.

Camacho's performance allowed all of these interests to temporarily converge. The red binder that made Finca 8 commensurable with Presidente Franco, or more generally, made the abstraction of the polygon commensurable with what campesinos recognize as *orerealidad* – "our reality," the universe of experiences that they considered properly campesino. To do this, he spoke for over half an hour about the hardship of campesino life, about the hard work of men and women in their fields, the difficulty of accessing education and health care, the terrible road into Presidente Franco, the lack of running water, the indignities heaped on them by Asunción elites, and the constant threat of dispossession by powerful absentees which compounded all of those other problems. As he finished, he opened the

binder, showing the polygon to all those present, explaining that the potential for tenure security lay just beyond Finca 8's transfer to the IBR. Then he presented the local APC leader with the document. In so doing, Camacho connected the binder to campesino reality, and with campesino interests in a way not envisioned by proponents of transparency reforms. He demonstrated his ability at speaking to reality, a skill that is essential to the populist political mode discussed in the next section.

(At Least) Two Documentary Realities

Both campesinos and new democrats in Paraguay spend a lot of time explicitly invoking reality in framing their political arguments, and, as it turns out, both of these views of reality are centrally concerned with documents. But while campesinos see documents as constitutively foreign to their conception of reality, new democrats invoke reality to describe things which exist only on documents. As well as being the baseline for transparency, then, the notion of reality also signals non-negotiables, the grounds for incommensurability between divergent political projects, and one of the fault-lines between new democrats and populists in Paraguay. Below I develop these points further and then explain how Camacho's red binder addressed both of these sorts of reality.

Campesinos invoke the real as a way of identifying with the experience of rural hardship, and by extension elite misunderstanding of conditions in the campo. As a rule, documents are thought to signal this misunderstanding: most documents exist by and for the elite, and they are either out of touch with campesino reality, or a sign of intentional duplicity. I've described exceptions to this rule – primarily for land titles and for government case files which can be read like titles. But these are exceptions to an overall disdain for documents that one encounters everywhere in rural Paraguay. Campesinos use the Spanish word “letrado,” lettered, to mean duplicitous, they mock the use of documents by politicians they dislike, and they will often complain, after listening to someone explain something with documents, that the documents “are not our reality.” They often claim that “you can't win anything on paper,” (ndojeganaí mba'eve kuati'a 'ari), by which they mark their exclusion from the Lettered City. In fact, I would argue, it is the representational qualities of documents that they disdain, not documents themselves. As I said, land titles are different because they are seen not as representing property but as facilitating relationships. Campesinos are very precise in this – “you can't win land on paper,” they say, but they are constantly seeking documents with which they can win land.

By contrast to this suspicion of written documents, campesinos have great praise for politicians who are able to “speak our reality” (he'i la orerealida). Speaking reality is an ability to orally invoke the affective

landscape of the campesino narrative, to invoke the unremitting bleakness of the material present. Campesinos often told me that they only considered me capable of understanding their reality because I had eaten mandioca (cassava) at campesino tables, picked cotton, dug tu (small subcutaneous parasites) out of my toes, faced the police with them and done my best to speak a stigmatized register of Guaraní. It is by showing signs of this corporeal connection to rural hardship, and weaving them into Guaraní speech, that politicians can be commended for speaking reality. A leader like Camacho who can speak this reality is usually very judicious in his or her use of documents covered in Spanish words.

New democrats have a quite different view of reality, which gets to the heart of their notion of transparency. For new democrats, reality usually refers to a kind of materialism which privileges the economic as the foundation of social and political life.²⁶ Pablo Herken, a well-known economist and public intellectual in Paraguay, provides a useful example. In his weekly appearances on Channel 9 news, Herken assessed Paraguay's politicians according to whether or not they are "paying attention to the macro-economic reality." During the early years of his presidency, Nicanor's apparent desire to pay attention to macro-economic indicators, his choice of finance ministers and his ability to sign agreements with the IMF, all gave Herken some reason for hope that this government would finally bring Paraguay out of the tradition of arbitrary populism. Good government, Herken always reminded his audience, is based on transparent fiscal policy responding to this economic reality, which is itself inscribed on other documents put out by bodies like the IMF and Herken's own NGO. Macroeconomic reality, as evoked by Herken and others, is an idiom designed for *el público* (not the specialized discourse of economists). It is the reality of a new democratic public that believes that the government's first priority ought to be national growth, a figure which is produced by economists in NGOs, the government, and international bodies like the IMF. Macroeconomic reality not only can be transparently represented in Spanish documents, it is real by virtue of its representation in such documents. The explosion of documents emanating from the new audit bureaucracies of the World Bank, Transparency International and the IDB in Asunción are the grounds of this new democratic reality, but they belong to a community of privilege set apart by the walls of a new Lettered City.

Not surprisingly, Herken neither speaks Guaraní nor ever engages in discourse about *campo* life and no campesino would ever mistake him for speaking their reality. What campesinos call reality is, to the new democrats, the lens of ignorance, the sentimental bog in which populism thrives and brews its potential violence. Herken's use of reality here is an idiom of identification, indexing privileged distance from poverty and rurality just as Camacho's vulgar Guaraní indexes a corporeal proximity to it.²⁷ In other words, reality's framing differs for different publics, contexts and projects. *Orerealida* is an experiential reality that links the state in a direct relationship

with *el pueblo* in the hopes of mitigating campesino hardship, while “macro-economic reality” is a technical abstraction which synthesizes many of the hopes of the urban middle-class. During the transition, each of these realities was constituted as the other’s opposite, a different situation from which knowledge and politics can be constructed.

Given this division, Camacho’s performance was quite creative. He began with a regularization project aimed at incorporating Finca 8, that frozen artefact of the Lettered City, into the new democratic reality of the market. But he also tried to make it speak to campesino reality by turning it into a documentary gift. In the act of giving, Camacho performed a new kind of politics, something like a “populist transparency.” In other words, the red binder was an amalgam: it was again the gift of citizenship to campesinos, but the gift of a new kind of citizenship, which addressed *el pueblo Paraguayo*, and invited them to become different kinds of citizens, similar to the denizens of *el público*. Camacho’s populist realism employed in this way suggested a politics in which government is made transparent to a public historically excluded from the very representational terms through which transparency operates. This may be a dual politics that plays on segregated worlds. But it is also a politics that establishes artefactual bridges between those worlds. And it is not transparency as a universal and unchanging ethic, but transparency as an engaged political activity that responds to circumstances: it doesn’t speak to an assumed universal citizen but to a multiplicity of actual people who form the citizenry.

Concluding: performing populist transparency

Camacho’s regularization bill eventually fell apart, and the legislation was not approved. The Bank was asking fifty million dollars, a sum that the ministry of finance refused to hand over to the IBR for the purchase. In effect, Camacho was never quite able to make the project speak properly to the new democrats who now controlled the government purse strings. Nor did the idea of Finca 8 ever really take hold in Presidente Franco, although the IBR spent almost two years trying to draw lines through forests and people’s gardens to try to make the polygon fit the landscape. But that is somewhat beside the point. What Camacho showed that day was that transparency reforms are both more partial than most purport to be and more politically interesting than many critics claim.

I have called this a performance of “populist transparency,” a phrase meant to evoke the derision that new democrats feel for populist politicians but also to suggest that transparency reforms participate in some of the political logic outlined by recent theorists of populism (e.g. Panizza 2005; Mouffe 2005). Ernesto Laclau (2005) argues that populism is, at its core, a form of politics that promises or threatens (depending on your vantage point)

to elevate the particular to the level of the totality. In a place like Paraguay this is especially obvious. Those politicians I have been calling populists speak to a constituency that both considers itself “campesino” – an identifiable segment of the population – and *el pueblo Paraguayo*, an ideal national body. I have suggested that the new democrats’ público has a more elaborate claim to universality, but nonetheless follows the same basic form: it is a claim to universal ethics which corresponds to an exclusionary group, and which must be understood in its situated enunciation, as always already political.²⁸ When either group makes claims to transparency they evoke, often explicitly, a reality which embodies simultaneously the particularity of a given constituency and that constituency’s aspirations to universality.

Seeing transparency as populist, I argue, is critical to an anthropology of post-Cold War development in Latin America. On the one hand, it provides us with an analytic that resists developmentalist temporalities by refusing to see transparency as an antidote to, and natural successor for populism. It also allows us get past some of the more facile critiques of transparency projects which ultimately claim that they are opaque. Camacho’s populist transparency – obviously partisan, blustery and flawed – neither conforms to the demands of new democratic reformers, nor simply subverts them. Instead, it complexifies them by assuming the situatedness of realities. If transparency is a relationship that is formed and reformed between documents and reality, then it is an open relationship always under political negotiation, not only because documents are inherently slippery and their creators prone to occlusion, duplicity and error, but because the real is itself always open.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to many people in Paraguay who helped me during this research, especially Antonio and Irene and their kids. My thanks also to those who commented on earlier versions of this article, including Marisol de la Cadena, Bettina Ng’Weno, Anna Tsing, Timothy Choy, Bruce Grant, Matt Hull, Saul Cohen, Abigail Sone, Maggie Cummings, Jessica Cattaneo, John Thiels, Sandra Widmer, Mark Goodale, Leticia Barrera, and Alex Smith, as well as Narmala Halstead at JLA and some excellent anonymous reviewers. The research was made possible by grants from the Wenner Gren Foundation, the SSRC and SSHRC Canada, and support from the Centro de Estudios Rurales Interdisciplinarios in Asunción.

Biographical Note

I hold a doctorate from the University of California, Davis, and am currently a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Toronto. My current work looks at the relationship between democratic reforms, peasant theories of law and the rapid expansion of genetically modified soybeans in Paraguay.

Notes

¹ Following Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 11), I use the word *campesino* to describe more than simply a constituency or sociological box, but also an ideological location from which a particular politics is enunciated and as a marker of subalternity which is consistently anachronistic to the political world of self-styled moderns. I also prefer the word “campesino” over “peasant” because it underlines the historical specificity – as opposed to the sociological abstractness – of the category (see Boyer 2003).

² Instituto de Bienestar Rural, or “Rural Welfare Institute,” an offshoot of the ministry of agriculture.

³ APC is a pseudonym, as are the names of all people and communities in this article except for a handful of historical figures.

⁴ I draw heavily here on Timothy Mitchell’s (2000, 2002) argument that this approach to representation as the management of the correspondence between the abstract and the real underpins modern forms of governance (see also Foucault 1970). There are important objections to be made both to the sweeping nature of this generalization and to the tacit temporality it reproduces (see Keane 2007). The argument here does not mean to replicate the temporalities, but to acknowledge them as part of certain prevailing political ideologies, and to explore how certain uses of “transparency” depend on them.

⁵ Alfredo Stroessner’s repression and violence are well-documented (Miranda 1980; Lewis 1980; Pittman and Brown 1988; CDE 1993; Expa 1980), but it is an artifice of transition historiography to believe that Stroessner’s success was not built primarily on massive rural support and loyalty, much of which continues well into the current decade.

⁶ Principally the United States, the biggest supporter of the regime, which began to withdraw that support throughout the 1980s over concerns about human rights violations.

⁷ In April 2008, the Colorado presidential candidate was soundly beaten by Fernando Lugo, a leftist ex-Bishop heading a coalition of smaller parties. Despite losing the executive for the first time in 61 years, the Colorados still retain overwhelming control of the Senate and Congress, not to mention most of the bureaucracy.

⁸ Analysts tend to avoid the word “populism” to describe Paraguayan history, preferring the more precise terms “caudillismo,” “personalism,” and “clientilism.” Some national examples are Vera (1990), Britéz and Morínigo (1993), Romero Sanabria (1998), and Bareiro (1999). International commentators who use this language include Roett and Sacks (1991) and Hamill (1992). I prefer “populism” because, while it covers similar ground, it shifts the emphasis from the leader to the constituency.

⁹ I have expanded on this considerably elsewhere, where I analyze the journalism and literature of dissent against Stroessner and his legacy (Hetherington 2008). The language of *el público* arises with democracy among this group as a way of shifting the modes of address of Colorado propaganda.

¹⁰ This is not to deny that the Colorado government was corrupt according to any definition, but primarily to flag “corruption” as a discourse of purity with political uses far beyond its descriptive ones (see Gupta 1995; Hansen 2002). One of the most successful

politicians to accuse his foes of corruption was Lino Oviedo, a general who used much of the military to run his private smuggling operations.

¹¹ See, for an example of this stereotype, *El país en una plaza*, a short novel by Andrés Colmán Gutiérrez (2004).

¹² Two parties in particular suffered this fate: Encuentro Nacional, the first party to really challenge the Colorados after the coup, and Patria Querida, a technocratic party that emerged in the late 1990s and was all but destroyed in 2008.

¹³ His elected predecessors had used these funds as drawers from which to pilfer, and both faced charges of theft during Nicanor's presidency. This is what Nicanor did with the royalties from the sale of Itaipú hydro-electricity, for instance. Instead of rolling the money into state revenue, Nicanor set up a separate agency which distributed Itaipu royalties in the campo in the form of small agricultural start-ups (goats, chickens, rabbits and bee-hives).

¹⁴ For national sources, see Mendonca (2002); Miranda (2000 & 2001); Paredes (2002). At the international level, the story was best promoted by Transparency International (2005), whose "Corruption Perception Index" ranked Paraguay among the five most corrupt countries in the world from the mid-1990s onward.

¹⁵ This understanding of populist gift-giving is derived from Auyero's (2001) study of Peronism in Buenos Aires. Following Bourdieu's (1977) reading of Mauss, Auyero (2001) says that the experience of such populist gifts should not be understood as a simple exchange for political favours, but as something that retains its aura of selflessness through strategic deferral.

¹⁶ After the coup, these were replaced by a national ID card and number with which all Paraguayans were to identify themselves publicly. Again, this was part of a general regional shift after the Cold War toward new sorts of constitutional and stronger legal systems. Most countries in the region held constituent assemblies in the early 1990s (Van Cott 2000), and in many places social movements moved from a radical politics to a legal-based politics of rights (e.g. Postero 2007; Holston 2008; Hetherington 2008).

¹⁷ The gender of this populist citizen was explicitly male not only in the rhetoric, but also in land reform policy until 2002 when the new *Estatuto Agrario* modified the terms of land grants to make women equally eligible for land.

¹⁸ This historicist line also served as the analytic for sociologists of populism, starting with Gino Germani (1968), and is now replicated in the ideology which sees democracy as a politics which replaces populism.

¹⁹ See Poole (2004) on this point for a similar example in Peru.

²⁰ According to Peircian linguistics, they are two elements of all forms of signification. This view has become central to recent anthropological analysis of documents (including Riles 2000; 2006; Reed 2006; Brenneis 2006; Yngvesson and Coutin 2006). The thrust of this literature has been to shift analysis from the denotational content of documents to their formal aesthetic properties and their materiality to explore the unexpected forms of signification in which they become entangled. My argument here is not that campesinos only pay attention to the formal and the material at the expense of content, but rather that they are attuned to it in a way that much social science (and especially the literature on bureaucratic reform), makes it difficult to appreciate.

²¹ This was part of what Peck and Tickell (2002) call "roll-out-neoliberalism", that version of government reform which creates governmental institutions in the hopes of framing more rational economic and political behaviour (see also Gordon 1990; Rose 1999). Chief among these bureaucratic rituals was audit, which, as a number of anthropologists have pointed out, not only makes governance "visible" but also reformats government according to a new ethic that sees visibility as the highest standard to which it must aspire (Power 1997; Strathern 2000; Miller 2003).

²² Several projects funded by the IDB (2002) and World Bank (1995), aimed to translate into a simpler form documents in the land reform agency and the public registry, to reduce the amount of negotiation (and costs) required to trade them. Since the end of the Cold War, the reform of land markets has been seen as a cornerstone of rural development worldwide. Its consequences are perhaps most dramatic in post-socialist countries where it took the form of decollectivization (see Verdery 2003; Hann 2003). There are analogous cases in Latin America, particularly in Mexico and Peru (see Chase 2002). In most of Latin America, and certainly in Paraguay, the shift is in a lot of ways more subtle, not aiming at a wholesale reengineering of the agrarian landscape but rather a solidification of already semi-private ownership arrangements to fully integrate them into unrestricted land markets.

²³ Small properties were of course just as irregular, but did not warrant their own department or designation. Regularizing these properties fell under the purview of cadastral reform projects.

²⁴ In land reform language, “idle” meant that they were not being used for agriculture. There were indigenous groups using the forest for hunting and gathering and some swidden horticulture, but these were not considered “economic” activity by campesino pioneers, nor were indigenous people considered even to have claims on the land by land reform legislation, in which they remained completely invisible until 2002.

²⁵ There were no private land buyers in Paraguay willing to take on the kind of risk that this investment would have entailed.

²⁶ This has both Marxist and neoliberal variants; they are not distinguished by their political ideology so much as their formal commitments to “the economy” as a separate, privileged sphere (see Callon 1998; Mitchell 2002).

²⁷ Claudio Lomnitz (2007) talks about populist talk of “reality” as an “idiom of identification” which evokes class war. My use of these same words is meant to point out the similarity of new democratic uses of the same idiom.

²⁸ Butler (2000) and Tsing (2005) elaborate this point about the political locations of universals.

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