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CONTESTED SPACES: THE COMMUNAL COUNCILS AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN CHÁVEZ'S VENEZUELA

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Abstract

Since their launch in 2006, the communal councils (CCs) have been heralded as a significant step towards the establishment of a radical, participatory democracy in Venezuela. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a working-class *barrio* in Valencia, Venezuela's third largest city, this article analyses the impact of the CCs on everyday political practice among local residents. It shows how different actors perceive and make use of the CCs in a variety of ways. Older women in particular have become central players in community life as a result of the reforms, although the burdens they take on arguably reproduce elements of gendered inequality. The article also demonstrates how some residents express suspicions of new community leaders, detailing the disputes that emerge over accusations of corruption and conflicting views of participatory democracy. I argue that the CCs should be understood as "contested spaces", and suggest that the ambiguities and conflicts within them reflect broader tensions within the Bolivarian project as a whole.

Keywords

Venezuela, Communal Councils, Participatory Democracy, Hugo Chávez, Twenty-First Century Socialism

INTRODUCTION

The passing of the Communal Councils Law in 2006 was a significant moment in the Venezuelan government's drive to promote participatory democracy and endogenous development across society. In a move designed to refashion the relationship between state institutions and grassroots organisations, the launch of the neighbourhood-level communal councils (*consejos comunales*, CCs) fell in line with a growing interest in remodelled forms of democracy across Latin America. In recent years efforts to promote participatory models of decision-making have strongly characterised both radical social and indigenous movements and more reformist experiments in urban governance (Baiocchi 2005; Barmeyer 2009; Chavez and Goldfrank 2004; Coronil 2011; Grisaffi 2013; Khasnabish 2010; Lazar 2008; Petras 1999). Initiated partly in response to existing practices of direct democracy among Venezuela's urban social movements (Fernandes 2007, 2010; Motta 2011; Spronk et al 2011), the CCs' guiding philosophy is that local-level citizen participation in the planning, implementation and maintenance of community development projects establishes a platform on which a new "protagonist" democracy can be built (Alvarez 2003). Heralding them as cornerstones of the move towards "twenty-first century socialism", the late Hugo Chávez claimed that the formation of the CCs marked the beginnings of a transference of political, economic and administrative power from the "constituted power" of the state to the "constituent power" of civil society (MINCI 2007; Araujo 2010; Ciccariello-Maher 2013a).

This article analyses the impact of the CCs by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2009 and 2010 in El Camoruco, a working-class *barrio* (shantytown) located in the south of Valencia, Venezuela's third largest city.¹ I assess how political practice evolved in the community after the establishment of four CCs,

and make several central assertions. Firstly, although the Bolivarian government claims that the CCs will lead to an “explosion of revolutionary communal power” (Dorta 2007: 146), participation in the bodies is highly uneven and often a far more prosaic affair for local residents. For some actors, particularly older women, the CCs have offered new opportunities to develop as political subjects and contribute to community life, but these opportunities have been accompanied by new burdens that reproduce existing patterns of gendered inequality.

Secondly, although the community benefitted significantly from the injection of state resources for improvement projects, not all residents were willing or able to commit to working in the CCs. Many of those who did experienced an on-going disparity between the lofty ideals they were encouraged to achieve and a series of daily frustrations with the state bureaucracies that financed their projects. Clashes frequently occurred over allegations of corruption and the misuse of money, with local residents expressing a mistrust of the elected spokesperson who took charge of managing finances, even as they deferred decision-making to those same individuals.

Finally, in El Camoruco many participants themselves were unclear over what “participation” should actually entail. Some actors pursued pragmatic and individualised goals as they sought to benefit both the community and themselves, while others who desired radical models of democracy “from below” (*desde abajo*) sought to advance a more politicised vision of revolutionary self-organisation. In sum, I propose that the CCs are best understood as *contested spaces* in which diverse and often conflicting practices, motivations and understandings jostle for position among different members of the community. They are characterised overall by a multiplicity of tensions and ambiguities that shape how local-level actors make use of and perceive participatory democracy in its vernacularised form. As I will argue, these conclusions

shed new light on contemporary debates concerning the revolutionary potential (or otherwise) of the Bolivarian government's drive to establish a "communal state".

This article begins by assessing recent trends in participatory democracy and viewing the CCs within the broader context of political decentralisation in Venezuela and Latin America. The following sections turn to everyday political practice in El Camoruco, detailing the new social actors that have emerged, the problems they encounter and the conflicts that occur among community leaders, CC participants and local residents. The conclusion links my findings to broader debates about the structural and ideological tensions within the Bolivarian project as a whole.

THE COMMUNAL COUNCILS AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Neighbourhood organisations in Venezuela's *barrios* have historically demonstrated a great diversity of political thought and action. At various points since the 1950s, they have practised close clientelist ties to political parties (Peattie 1968; Ray 1969; Karst 1973), adopted antagonistic positions against the establishment (Fernandes 2010) and have occupied a space between the two, expressing a "contingent autonomy, neither fully independent nor fully beholden to the state" (Velasco 2011: 181). Most recently, *barrio* actors played a leading role in pro-Chávez bodies such as the Bolivarian Circles (Círculos Bolivarianos, CBs) and Electoral Battle Units (Unidades de Batalla Electoral, UBEs), as well as in community-focused organisations like the Urban Land Committees (Comités de Tierra Urbana, CTUs) and Technical Water Committees (Mesas Técnicas de Agua, MTAs) (García-Guadilla 2008, 2011; López Maya 2008). Given the multiplicity of autonomous and semi-autonomous positions that neighbourhood bodies have taken in

relation to the state and political parties, the launch of the CCs can be read as an effort by the Bolivarian government to “simplify” a myriad of organisational and ideological tendencies by creating state-managed umbrella bodies that subsume existing groupings (Gill 2012).²

In order to establish a CC, residents must undergo a lengthy registration process that requires a series of public assemblies, elections and bureaucratic procedures before the body can be legally ratified. According to the law, in urban areas CCs must be drawn from communities of between 200 and 400 households. Local residents hold elections for spokespeople (*voceras* or *voceros*), who then take responsibility for specified work committees in areas such as finance, social control (meaning accountability), health, water, food, land and education. When these positions have been chosen, the CC must put forward three projects that will contribute to endogenous development in the community. If they receive state approval, these projects are usually funded by central government bodies such as the Foundation for the Development and Promotion of Communal Power (FUNDACOMUNAL) or the Fund for Intergovernmental Decentralisation (FIDES). In addition to long-term projects, the CCs also administer funds for small-scale micro-finance initiatives called social enterprises (*empresas sociales*), which receive funding from the government’s Microfinance Development Fund (FONDEMI). By 2010, over 20,000 CCs had been formed in Venezuela (Ellner 2010a: 67), with an estimated \$1 billion being transferred directly to them in the first year of their launch (López Maya and Lander 2011: 74).

The structural design of the CCs bears some similarities to initiatives such as the much-vaunted participatory budgeting model in Porto Alegre, Brazil, but there are also key differences. As Baoicchi (2001, 2005) points out, the Porto Alegre system was funded and organised by local municipalities. It owed much to both well-organised

neighbourhood organisations and the political will of local politicians, who strongly advocated a “radical democratic vision of popular control of city government” (2001: 65). By contrast, the CCs in Venezuela receive their funding directly from centralised state agencies, a decision taken after problems emerged at the municipal level with the forerunners to the CCs, the Local Public Planning Councils (CLPPs).³ Partly in response to the problems associated with the CLPPs, the CCs can be understood as an effort to circumvent political conservatism within municipalities by devolving political and economic power directly to “local action units” (Fung & Wright 2001: 21). As several other Latin American cases indicate (Chavez 2004; Rodgers 2010), the specific arrangements of local and national political power in which neighbourhood bodies are situated significantly shape their capacity to access resources and determine their own political agendas.

To date, the CCs have received a mixed response from scholars and political actors within Venezuela. The most enthusiastic have suggested that they offer Venezuelan citizens the opportunity to build parallel structures of governance and gradually wean power away from the central state (Azzellini 2010, 2013). Ciccariello-Maher (2013b) describes the relationship between the Bolivarian government and the *chavista* bases as a complex dialectic, in which elements of the constituted power – chiefly Chávez before his death – respond to pressure from below by using the legislative authority of the state to open new spaces for the development of self-government. Others have acknowledged a number of “rough edges” associated with the bodies, but point to real benefits that can arrive with the injection of state funding to historically excluded communities (Ellner 2009). The most critical warn that financial dependence on the rentier state endangers the autonomy of grassroots organisations, and therefore their ability to either articulate independent political claims (Uzcátegui 2010;

Garcia-Guadilla 2011) or avoid co-option (Smilde 2008). But what have been largely missing from all these debates are detailed case studies of how CCs function in day-to-day terms, thereby inhibiting a more comprehensive examination of how ordinary Venezuelans understand and make use of them. This article aims to fill some of these gaps by providing a detailed ethnographic study of how everyday political practice unfolds in the CCs.

GENDERED AND GENERATIONAL PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION

The formation of the CCs in El Camoruco marked a significant shift for locals, who had been accustomed to working with a single neighbours' association (*asociación de vecinos*, AV) that covered the community's entire population (around 4000 people). Because the 2006 law states that CCs must represent between 200 and 400 households, the original AV was forced to divide into four separate CCs (Sectors 1–4), each with their own communal bank and separate set of spokespeople.⁴ Some local activists were unhappy with this division, suggesting that the sizing rule should be a “guide” rather than a stringent law, and voicing concerns that it would lead to factionalism and conflict. On the other hand, sectorisation did mean that a larger number of people had the opportunity to be elected as community spokespeople.

My local CC in Sector 4 was formed in August 2007. After successfully holding its elections, the sector agreed to apply for money to establish a day centre for elderly residents (La Casa de Los Abuelos), materials to repair some of the most rundown houses in the community, and a project to fill in the dirty and polluted canal that marked the border between El Camoruco and its neighbouring *barrio*. Ten social

enterprises were also established with microfinance loans from FONDEMI. Of these, seven were still functional in 2009, including a carpentry workshop, a confectioner, a small ceramic block producer and a piñata workshop.

One of the most notable features of Sector 4's CC was that it was largely run by a small group of elderly women named Esme, Juliana, Carla and Natalia.⁵ At the time of its launch, the community had elected 28 spokespeople. But since then the number of public meetings had decreased significantly as the projects themselves became the CC's main focus. In place of public assemblies, this group of dedicated women – known locally as *las señoras* – had assumed responsibility for the bulk of the unpaid labour required to run the CC.⁶ When they began their new roles, *las señoras* received official identity cards from FUNDACOMUNAL and attended a series of training workshops at institutions such as INCES, the government's National Institute for Socialist Capacitation and Education. The workshops detailed how to facilitate meetings, draft funding proposals, manage budgets and organise community events. There were also optional courses in personal development, self-esteem and leadership. Juliana, who had never been involved in community work before the CCs were launched, had been inspired by the workshops and was now studying social management in Mission Sucre, a university-level initiative also funded by the Chávez government.

I've learnt so much so quickly, but it's a lot of work. My family are always complaining because I'm always here in the house working on things for the *consejo comunal!* I've attended all the workshops, which are tiring because they often start at eight in the morning and end at three in the afternoon. I'm so busy with work for the CC and my course at the Mission, there's no time for anything else.

Together with the training schemes, regular contact with a myriad of state institutions was evident in the reams of political propaganda and official documentation that cluttered the houses of *las señoras*. These included copies of the 1999 constitution,

booklets of recently passed laws and manuals on everything from microfinance to socialist family values.

Engaging with bureaucracy was also a key component of the spokespeople's everyday practice, and was particularly critical to the maintenance of the CC's three long-term projects. Frequent contact with the state funding providers and work contractors required constant letter-writing, form-filling, photocopying and telephone calls. Budgets, account statements and work contracts also needed constant monitoring, and everything had to be counter-signed by Esme, the social control spokesperson. Yet bureaucratic efficiency on the part of the spokespeople was no guarantee of a project going ahead smoothly. In the case of the canal project, for example, 7,000 Bs.F (\$1,628) had been transferred to the CC and used to clean the canal in preparation for its concrete filling, but a second sum of money promised by FUNDACOMUNAL never arrived. Juliana wrote several letters to the organisation but was yet to receive a satisfactory response. She then tried directly contacting the engineer contracted to carry out the work, but was told that he was waiting for the second payment from FUNDACOMUNAL. The cancelled meetings and unanswered letters that accompanied Juliana's efforts to complete the project clearly tested her patience. "I don't know whether it's a problem with FUNDACOMUNAL – whether they're not doing their job – or if they've got so many projects [they lack the funding for ours]," she commented.

As committed as Juliana was, it was obvious that she found it difficult to balance her role as a spokesperson with her family commitments. Both of her daughters worked during the days, and I would often find her simultaneously preparing the family's food, fielding phone calls and separating her bickering grandchildren. This merging of community work and domestic reproduction was in keeping with the observations of Friedman (2000: 266-269), Fernandes (2007: 98-107) and Motta

(2013), who point out that though women have traditionally been excluded from formal political spheres in Venezuela – including those of the political left – there is a long history of their involvement in neighbourhood organising. As Moser (2009: 68) notes, poor Latin American women often act as social “shock absorbers” by combining domestic reproduction with wage labour and community work – a “triple burden” that has also been observed by ethnographers such as González de la Rocha (2001) and Roy (2002).

Sara Motta argues that, in Venezuela, gendered norms that depict women “through a desexualized and dependent articulation of mother, daughter, and wife” (2013: 41) persist in spite of the fact that they have historically been at the centre of collective struggles around health, water and community improvements. Drawing on the insights of the Venezuelan feminist Alba Carosio (2007), Motta suggests that such struggles both confronted and reinforced exclusionary gendered norms. On the one hand, the caring maternal role was transgressed as it was politicised through community mobilisations (2013: 44). But on the other, “the politicization of their role as ensurers of the reproduction of the family and community, which came at great personal cost, also reproduced more traditional representations of the women as self-sacrificing caregivers” (2013: 44; see also Briceño and Lopez 2010; Carosio 2007; Rantala 2009; Vargas Arenas 2007).

The case of the *señoras* in El Camoruco indicates that these tensions were not only gendered, but also generational. Well aware that they were taking on a heavy burden, the women nonetheless reasoned that those of a younger age were unable to do so because of their employment commitments. They also described how the introduction of a regular and secure state pension under the Chávez government had given them the financial security to dedicate themselves to such work.⁷ Esme explained,

for example, that her efforts were part of her gratitude to Chávez and the revolution, which had prioritised elderly people through its welfare programmes.

I have a lot of love for *el pueblo*, for this work. I feel really appreciative towards the Chávez government... Right now you won't be able to find elderly people in their houses because they're out at the missions or La Casa de Los Abuelos.⁸ The quality of life has changed a lot for us.

Part of this gratitude lay in the fact that the CC also provided a number of personal opportunities for the women. Although becoming a spokesperson was undoubtedly a commitment that meant hours of unpaid labour, it was also a chance to develop new skills, cultivate self-esteem and, in many ways, become semi-professionalised community activists, even quasi-state functionaries. As Esme's statement above highlights, becoming a CC spokesperson was an articulation of citizenship closely tied to established ideals of solidarity, self-sacrifice and altruism. But on top of these subjective benefits, the role also offered the opportunity for modest financial gains. Esme had established a piñata workshop with a microfinance loan from FONDEMI, and could often be found at work with paint and papier-mâché in the front room of her house. As a known person at the centre of community life, her small business was the first point of call for anyone in need of a piñata. The CC thus facilitated the expansion of social networks and material opportunities, meaning that community leadership and social enterprise became mutually beneficial endeavours.

Such were the demands that came with the spokesperson role, however, that few people seemed willing or able to take it on. Since there was now a clear set of institutional channels and ascribed funding providers, the need to "catch the attention" of the state through collective mobilisations appeared less pronounced than in the pre-Chávez era (see Fernandes 2010; Velasco 2011). Instead, spokespeople had to learn how to successfully plan, implement and maintain projects, confirming Nancy Postero's

observation that project-focused initiatives privilege particular actors who demonstrate the strongest capacity to “*montar proyectos*” [launch projects] (2007: 77). As far as Sector 4 of El Camoruco was concerned, this capacity was both gendered and generational, an outcome of existing traditions of neighbourhood organising, recent improvements to social welfare and the particular dynamic that existed between *las señoras*.

PARTICIPATORY OR REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?

Although the well-documented failings of the pre-Chávez era resulted in the wholesale rejection of the political system known as *puntofijismo* (Ellner and Hellinger 2003; McCoy and Myers 2004), Venezuelan citizens continue to value democracy as both a principle and a set of practices. Indeed, Hellinger (2011: 28-29) argues that one of the enduring legacies of the Fourth Republic (1958-1998) is that many Venezuelans retain a belief in the importance of pluralist or representative democracy. For Chávez’s supporters, meanwhile, it is clear that a strong connection with the former president galvanised those who may have otherwise turned away from electoral politics. This was apparent in the support Chávez received during the coup of 2002 (Motta 2013: 45), as well as in the large voting turnouts in numerous local and national elections since 1998.

An enthusiasm for democracy was also evident in the elections for El Camoruco’s CCs, which directly replicated national elections in their form and process. Mirroring electoral procedures for professional politicians, residents would find lists of prospective spokespeople on the walls of the local school when they arrived to cast their vote. These would be conducted via secret ballot in boxes identical to those used for

political parties, and there were even officials from the National Electoral Council (CNE) present to oversee proceedings. While this attention to the formalities of democratic practice worked to symbolically incorporate the CCs within the broader political system, it also contributed to the view that spokespeople were, like professional politicians, in some way institutionally removed from rest of the community. This was at odds with the rhetoric surrounding the role, which emphasised that spokespeople should merely act as delegates who carry out the community's will. In practice, however, a slippage in this definition was often observable. Faced with the minutiae of practical challenges associated with the projects, on occasions spokespeople would take decisions independently. As a result, there were many local residents who viewed the CCs in the same vein as my neighbour, Graciela: "Ach, *those* people with *their* projects."

In Sector 4, such views were a by-product of the patterns of participation described above. Although a wave of enthusiasm had accompanied the formation of the bodies in 2007, these numbers had fallen dramatically by 2009. My own estimate regarding the number of regular participants, gleaned principally from attending meetings and talking to local residents, was that El Camoruco's four CCs usually had between five and ten core active spokespeople, with another 20 to 40 people, depending on the sector, who would attend meetings and contribute to decision-making. Occasionally, when the CCs organised events for public celebrations such as Children's Day, a large proportion of the community would turn out and participate. But the reality was that for many people who worked, maintained families or simply preferred to spend their free time doing other things, the demands of running a CC were too great to justify the kind of commitment made by *las señoras*. Santiago, a young man who had been involved in a number of *chavista* organisations, described how the succession of

different community bodies in the Chávez era had left him and others cynical about the arrival of the CCs:

The first thing we had here were the Bolivarian Circles. When they arrived everyone was like, 'Whooh, great, let's get involved!' But in truth they didn't really do anything. Then it was the cooperatives, but nothing seems to be happening with them now. Now we have the *consejos comunales*, but there are a lot of problems with them too, people aren't doing what they should be.

As comments like this suggest, the continual exhortation to participate seemed to leave some fatigued, and as a result they deferred decision-making to those who were willing to take on the burden. With their ID cards, official documents and daily involvement in the state's workings, spokespeople certainly accumulated trappings of the "mystique of sovereignty" (Taussig 1997: 18). But with these trappings came the more problematic perception that they were quasi-professional politicians who operated in a representative capacity, rather than delegates of a body that was supposed to be participatory.

Many active spokespeople viewed cynicism towards the CCs as a symptom of selfishness and disloyalty. Because of their close interaction with state bodies, spokespeople were exposed to current debates about the health of the revolution that circulated in the *chavista* party-state milieu. A common opinion among PSUV and state officials was that the persistence of "capitalist" or "individualistic" attitudes in the general population was inhibiting the government's push for twenty-first century socialism.⁹ During a workshop I attended with spokespeople from across the urban parish at the local Alcaldía (municipality), this was the main topic of discussion. Our trainer, a government official, described how cooperatives had struggled in Venezuela because of the lack of a "socialist mentality". "People still believe they can stop working when they go home at 3pm in the afternoon," he told us, mentioning Cuba as an example to be followed. "But you have to sacrifice yourself." Many of the

spokespeople nodded their agreement, and the bus journey home was spent discussing why participation seemed to be dwindling in the community.

A few days later at a CC meeting in one of El Camoruco's neighbouring communities, a spokesperson named Marielvis, who had been at the workshop, began berating a number of locals who, in her eyes, were not pulling their weight.

There are really only four or five of us working in this *consejo comunal*. We've all been at meetings with the Alcaldía for the last few days, but you know what they always ask us? 'What projects have you got? What are you doing?' They won't start sending us funds until we've got projects ready. I've heard some people saying, 'Oh I don't want to work, oh I'm busy with my work and my kids,' but I'll tell you this: you all have responsibilities.

This outburst revealed how an ideal of participatory democracy *desde abajo* could be turned on its head. Rather than institutions of governance being opened up to the population at large, demands from above could be placed on local communities by using participation as a disciplining idiom. Marielvis's words effectively transferred accountability from the state to local communities, using a discourse of revolutionary sacrifice to rebuke those who were perceived to be indolent or individualistic. The adoption of critical party-state discourses by CC spokespeople thus enabled them to cultivate what Bourdieu terms the "delegated authority" (1991: 111) of institutions of power. As they became specialists in Bolivarian bureaucracy and discourse, spokespeople could subjectively remake themselves as local-level guardians of the revolution. But in adopting this position, they also contributed to a blurring of the boundaries between community organising and government diktat.

DISCOURSES OF CORRUPTION

Local people, however, sought to hold their spokespeople to account in equal measure. While complaints about low levels of participation came from one direction, rumours about corruption within the CCs began to emerge from the other. Some residents suggested that funding for the micro-finance initiatives was being misused, and speculated that spokespeople were spending communal bank money without the community's consent. A typical conversation of this nature took place at a barbeque I attended one Sunday afternoon.

Raúl: In Sector 2 they gave a family all this money to start a *hierrería* [smithy]. I don't know what happened to the *hierrería*, but that family's got a lovely new front to their house, and a new car.

Yuleidi: I know, and there's that *muchacha* [young woman] who got money to open a *cachapería* – I don't know what she's doing but she's not making *cachapas* there, she was selling some other type of food.¹⁰

Raúl: I don't get involved in all these *consejos comunales*, I don't think they're a good idea. To me it just seems like another way for people to steal money. They're not *consejos 'comunales'*, they're *consejos 'robonales'*.¹¹

A subtext running through such conversations was the belief that corruption was an inevitable companion to the handling of money, with many people arguing that the CCs were merely a new setting in which a presumed national proclivity for thievery would inevitably occur (see Coronil 1997: 321-366). Because politics and politicians, Chávez excepted, were generally regarded as inherently contaminated, the CCs and their spokespeople were increasingly associated with what locals termed “*la misma vaina*”: the same old problem of corruption.

Sector 4's spokespeople responded to these rumours by arguing that people should participate if they wanted to stamp out corruption. By mid-2010, Juliana was eager to call elections so that she could relinquish her role. She was tired of the constant criticisms and argued that people were merely making excuses for their own lack of involvement.

I've left my studies, my husband and my family for this job. And for what? To be accused of corruption when I've spent every day of the last two years working for this community. This is the problem here, there's only a small group of us who actually commit to working, but then everyone else says that we're not doing things properly or that we're just working for ourselves. You can't win.

These disagreements were further compounded by the fact that accusations also circulated between El Camoruco's different CCs when projects were organised by the whole community. Because funding could only be paid into one CC's bank, arguments would break out over who was controlling it. In one case, during the organisation of a trip for the neighbourhood's elderly residents, Sector 3 refused to release their pot of money because they suspected that money had "disappeared" from the other three sectors. The issue was only resolved after a series of ferocious arguments.

Although the emergence of these accusations just three years after the CCs were launched might suggest that a culture of mistrust pervaded the bodies, such exchanges can also be understood as an attempt to establish a culture of accountability for new political institutions. As Gupta (1995) points out, discourses of corruption can be central to the way that citizens imaginatively construct relationships between themselves and the state. By leveling accusations at politicians or state officials, citizens hold more powerful actors to account by judging them against an ideal of how they should conduct themselves. Though this ideal may be a long way from the real life encounters the poor have with the state, it nonetheless works to articulate the kinds of rights and responsibilities that *should* exist between state actors and citizens. As he writes, "The discourse of corruption, by marking those actions that constitute an infringement of such rights, thus acts to represent those rights to citizens themselves" (1995: 389). Similarly, Lazar (2004b) argues that in local democratic arenas, rumour and accusation work to form pre-emptive accountability, so that both existing and future leaders know what is expected of them. Even though suspicions and tensions may

appear potentially destructive, “contestation is much of what actually makes the community” (2004b: 90).

Seen in this light, the discourse of corruption that pervaded everyday discussions of El Camoruco’s CCs can be understood as an attempt to hold spokespeople to account and promote a set of values to which they should adhere. This was, in a sense, a direct response to the criticisms of non-participants by spokespeople: if such leaders became “state-like” or “politician-like” by admonishing local people or taking decisions on their behalf, they would be subjected to the same accusations that might be leveled at state officials or professional politicians. Ironically for a policy that lauds grassroots protagonism, an unintended consequence of the CCs’ emergence in El Camoruco was thus that voluntary actors risked becoming tarnished by their association with politics and money. As the lines between state functionaries and community organisers became increasingly blurred, one might speculate that the CCs decentralised not only power and resources, but also “the corroding force of accumulated toxins, waste, and excrement” (Coronil 1997: 353) that is seen to accompany governance and politics in Venezuela.

SELF-GOVERNMENT AND REVOLUTION

It is widely acknowledged that the Bolivarian movement is made up of a number of competing ideological and organisational tendencies (Ellner 2013). The radical Venezuelan intellectual Roland Denis (2011), for example, has argued that contemporary *chavismo* is divided between two broad currents: the “bureaucratic-corporatist republic” and the “self-governing socialist body” (cited in Spronk et al 2011:

247-248). Denis contends that while the Bolivarian government seeks to lead the popular movements that give it legitimacy, the second current possesses “an entirely different logic, based in self-government of land, social spaces, and spaces of production” (*ibid*: 248). In El Camoruco, although not all actors in the CCs displayed coherent ideological positions, tensions between these two broad currents were evident in disputes between newly-elected spokespeople and older community leaders whose activism pre-dated the establishment of the CCs. In these exchanges, accusations of self-interest and bureaucratism reflected conflicting views of how political power and decision-making should be organised in the CCs.

Among the most vocal critics of new spokespeople was a group of *chavista* leaders who had been central members of the AV before the launch of the CCs. Two of the group – the AV’s former President, Rafael, and his close friend, Rosa – had viewed the development of the CCs with growing concern for some time. With a wealth of experience as community activists, they considered themselves more ideologically “prepared” than many of the newer spokespeople, and regarded the bickering over money as a threat to the revolutionary process. As they saw it, the clamor to receive funding and the disputes it generated served to misdirect the energies of activists and residents away from a more important long-term goal: the establishment of self-governing institutions that could form the building blocks of a socialist society. As Rafael commented,

It sounds like a contradiction, but all the money that the government sends to the *consejos comunales* can work against the revolution. You know, when we ran the *asociación de vecinos* in 1999, we achieved really high levels of participation because of the way we allowed people to incorporate themselves. Now, the vision is distinct, in the sense that what [the CCs] have achieved is only possible due to the funds. A lot of people [in the CCs] are really dedicated to organising whatever scheme in order to get the funds, but they’re not worrying about the general participation of the people.

Fearing that a culture of community mobilisation was being lost, the ex-AV activists

began to challenge local spokespeople by making two demands in public meetings. First, they proposed that anyone should be able to organise projects, rather than this being the sole preserve of spokespeople. Second, they argued that spokespeople should prioritise community mobilisation over the search for funding. The overarching aim of these proposals was to re-politicise the CCs and move towards a greater degree of self-government within the *barrio*.

Rafael and Rosa's major public challenge to the spokespeople came when the Alcaldía announced that it was cancelling the contracts of the zone's private waste collectors, who were consistently accused of corruption and criminality. The two of them had been looking for a way to launch a project that could provide employment for local people and spotted an opportunity when they heard the announcement. Their plan was to establish a community-run waste collection cooperative through the local CCs. Local workers would be sourced from El Camoruco and its surrounding *barrios*, and would be offered jobs as waste collectors. The Alcaldía would pay initially, but funding applications would be made for trucks and equipment so they could eventually become a self-sufficient cooperative whose profits would be administered by the CCs. After positive discussions with IMA, the Alcaldía's Municipal Environmental Institute, Rosa convened a meeting in El Camoruco and invited interested workers and spokespeople from the local CCs to attend.

As people began to arrive on the day of the meeting, she noted down the names of the *barrios* and sectors that were present. "We have Barrio Macuto here, José Felix here, El Camoruco Sector 1? Yes. Sector 2 and Sector 4 too? Yes, good. And Sector 3? Well I'm from Sector 3, so that's all four sectors from El Camoruco covered..." At that moment, Angel, a spokesperson from Sector 3's CC who had been observing the meeting from across the street, shouted at her: "You're not *consejo comunal*!"

“How can I not be *consejo comunal*? I live in Sector 3, I’m part of this community,” she replied.

“But you’re not a *member* of the council, you weren’t *elected*,” Angel spat back angrily. The argument was put on hold to conclude the meeting, but later on Rosa recounted how the two of them had continued when it finished. Angel had refused to concede that, as a non-spokesperson, Rosa had any right to organise meetings or speak for Sector 3. In turn, she regarded him as typical of many new spokespeople who had become intoxicated by what she called their “*pedacitos*” (little pieces) of power. Rosa argued that spokespeople were supposed to be community delegates rather than elected decision-makers, and stressed that anyone from the community should be able to put forward proposals and participate in their CC’s running. “People think that only spokespeople, only people from the committees, are the *consejos comunales*. But the *consejo comunal* is the community, it’s the assembly of citizens. That’s the most important part,” she asserted.

Disappointingly for Rafael and Rosa, the project had to be abandoned when the spokespeople refused to allow their communal banks to be used to deposit money, in what they regarded as an act of sabotage. Furious, Rosa repeated her claim that such attitudes were reproducing the rotten practices of the pre-Chávez era. “These people are still thinking like, ‘This is my *consejo comunal*, I am the *consejo comunal*.’ They don’t understand how a *consejo comunal* is supposed to work.”

The episode demonstrated how one understanding of participation – the ideal that anyone could and should take an active role in running a CC – clashed with the assertion that only elected “members” could arrange meetings or launch projects. While personality clashes certainly played their part in the dispute, it also centred on a struggle to determine how participatory democracy and decision-making should work in a CC.

The main issue was not that Rafael and Rosa had attempted to organise the project without the CCs, but rather that they had done so without going through the spokespeople – a sign, as Angel seemed to view it, of usurpation and disrespect. Rosa's response was that people like Angel remained beholden to self-serving bureaucratism and therefore needed challenging.

Overall, the exchange showed that the *raison d'être* of the CCs remained contested and unresolved in El Camoruco. For some residents, participation in the CCs was a means of accessing state resources and taking advantage of new openings in order to benefit both themselves and the wider community. Spokespeople like Angel appeared to enjoy the small trappings of power that came with their roles, and went to substantial efforts to protect the status that came with it. For others like Rafael and Rosa, participation was interpreted through social imaginaries in which community bodies sat at the centre of a political struggle. An actor's motivations and loyalties were not only important in terms of how resources were controlled and distributed locally, but also in terms of defending the revolution and building self-governing communities. As such, the CCs were understood as part of a broader struggle between socialist and capitalist moralities, in which perceived individualism was seen as a threat to the moral legitimacy and functional efficacy of emergent collectivities.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have analysed the development of political practice among El Camoruco's residents since the Communal Councils Law was passed in 2006, and have made four key points concerning the Bolivarian government's attempt to stimulate participatory democracy through the CCs. Firstly, I have argued that the emphasis on

small-scale, community-managed projects produced both new opportunities and new burdens for local residents. Those who took on responsibilities as spokespeople, many of them older women, acquired new skills and developed as political subjects. Yet they also encountered existing patterns of gendered inequality, which were arguably reproduced as much as they were challenged by the CCs. Secondly, despite the repeated valorisation of participatory democracy at the level of discourse, there was a notable gap between the state's drive for participation and the real-world ability and willingness of locals to dedicate their time to the CCs. One problematic outcome of an emerging institutional distance between spokespeople and non- (or infrequent) participants was that *barrio* residents could be admonished, often by their own neighbours, for failing to live up to *chavista* aspirations of participation. Thirdly, such trends were to some extent countered by accusations of corruption and self-interest, which reflected attempts to create a culture of accountability around the CCs. Finally, many of these tendencies were at odds with more radical visions of self-government and revolution, which remain significant currents in the Bolivarian movement. Those activists who envisioned more overtly political, self-governing neighbourhood bodies were constrained in their ability to forge alternatives by the political-legal framework of the bodies and their own loyalty to Chávez and his legacy. The prospect of forming alternatives to the CCs, or of transforming them into more combative entities, was politically and logistically problematic. As things stood, divergent currents co-existed uneasily.

These conclusions show that a set of unresolved tensions shape political practice in the CCs. I argue that they are best understood as contested spaces in which a complex interplay between individual self-interests, state agendas and broader ideological imaginings intersect on a daily basis. Such findings suggest that current debates about participatory democracy in Venezuela, particularly those around the relationship

between constituted and constituent power (see Azzellini 2010, 2013; Ciccariello-Maher 2013a), may require some refining. While such discussions often describe the Bolivarian *proceso* as one fraught with tensions, they often seem to assume that these lie largely in the contingent alliances made between grassroots organisations and the state. This article has highlighted how significant tensions also exist among grassroots actors themselves. Although the most radical may indeed conceptualise the CCs as a site in which to “subject constituted power to constant constituent pressure, binding the two in a dialectical chain toward ever more radical and direct representation” (Ciccariello-Maher 2013a: 129), it is evident that not all individuals share this view. The danger of catch-all characterisations of the *chavista* bases is that they may overlook the highly diverse ways in which grassroots actors perceive and make use of participatory initiatives.

By the same token, those who paint the CCs as a “subordinated social movement” (Uzcátegui 2010: 205) may equally neglect the level of contestation that exists within the bodies.¹² While the government’s discursive promotion of self-government *desde abajo* does seem to be at odds with the CCs’ reliance on national funding agencies, this fact does not go unchallenged by grassroots actors. The struggle to define precisely what the CCs should be is clearly a central problem at the local level, but it is also one that *barrio* residents are attempting to tackle.¹³ The evident tensions between bureaucratism and self-government, liberalism and socialism, undoubtedly reflect contradictory tendencies that run throughout the Bolivarian project (Hellinger 2011: 36), while the ways in which these dynamics play out in practice may vary greatly according to the political histories and cultures of different places.

As far as El Camoruco can be taken as indicative, this article has shown how the CCs are suffused with an array of different instrumentalist and ideological uses, as well

as by myriad confusions and conflicts among grassroots actors. There are unquestionably significant individual and collective benefits that arrive with the CCs' projects, and it would be wholly unfair to underplay the value of the material improvements they can achieve. Yet it is also clear that both the structural framework of the CCs and their everyday interpretations significantly complicate the drive to establish embryos of a revolutionary democracy.

NOTES

¹ Research for this article was carried out through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in El Camoruco over a 15 month period between 2009 and 2010. A shorter subsequent visit was undertaken in the summer of 2012, during which I presented preliminary research findings to members of the community. My research was conducted principally through participant observation in the daily workings of the CCs, which included attending public meetings, accompanying key actors in tasks associated with the CC and tracing interactions between CC spokespeople and state agencies. Extensive semi-structured interviews were undertaken with spokespeople, participants in the CCs and with local residents, including those who did not participate in the bodies. By living in the community with a host family, the ethnographic method also allowed me to analyse everyday discourse surrounding the CCs, democracy and the political situation in Venezuela more generally. This approach produced a more comprehensive view of how the CCs were understood by my respondents, situating them within wider political and moral discourses that circulated in the community. The quotations

and examples that appear in this article have been selected as archetypical examples of the attitudes and discussions I encountered.

² The CTUs and MTAs, for example, are now supposed to be committees located within the CCs.

³ According to Wilpert (2007: 56-60) and García-Guadilla (2008: 6), the CLPPs struggled due to a poor formulation of the law, political resistance at the municipal level and a period of political upheaval and crisis nationally between 2002 and 2003.

⁴ In order to protect the identities of my respondents, I have changed the names of both the community and the individuals mentioned in this article. The only unchanged names are those of high-profile political figures.

⁵ The 2009 Organic Law of the Communal Councils, which changed a number of structural components contained in the original 2006 law, saw communal banks replaced with finance committees. Although the implementation of the new law was being discussed during my research period, El Camoruco's CCs were still operating with communal banks until 2010.

⁶ *Señora* is a term of respect, akin to "madam" in English.

⁷ As Ellner (2010b: 92) notes, one of the first decisions taken by the Chávez administration was to halt the proposed privatisation of social security provision and increase and secure state pensions for all Venezuelans of retirement age. By 2007, the number of pension recipients had reached 2.2 million, a three-fold increase since 1998.

⁸ The missions referred to here are the education missions launched by the Chávez government, which provide free education at all levels. The Casa de Los Abuelos mentioned was located in the neighbouring *barrio*, José Felix Ribas. It was this project that had inspired Sector 4's CC to attempt to establish one of their own. They were still looking for a suitable building for their proposal when I last visited the community in 2012.

⁹ PSUV refers to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista de Venezuela).

¹⁰ *Cachapas* are sweet pancake-like wraps made from cornflour that are usually filled with pork and cheese.

¹¹ *Robo* is the Spanish word for stealing.

¹² My translation.

¹³ As Andrea Cornwall points out, "Boundaries between "invited" and "popular" spaces are mutable, rather than fixed; "popular spaces" can become institutionalised, with statutory backing, and "invited spaces" may become sites for the articulation of dissent, as well as for collaboration and compromise (2004: 2).

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