

# Targets, Grievances, and Social Movement Trajectories

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## Abstract

Why do targets of social movement activities respond to movements in the ways they do? Many factors play a role in shaping targets' responses to social movement activities. This article focuses on one particular factor: targets' perceptions of social movement claims. The article argues that a target's understanding of a social movement's claims helps shape its response, which, in turn, shapes the evolution of the social movement. Two cases of social mobilization, one in response to water privatization in Bolivia and the other in response to rising corn prices in Mexico, serve as a lens through which to explore these issues. In each case, differences in how public authorities understood the movements' claims help explain why they reacted in starkly different ways to the emerging movements. Where officials appreciated the symbolic value of the good at stake, they acted quickly to curtail resistance. Where officials failed to grasp those meanings, they dismissed the potential for widespread mobilization and inadvertently accelerated movement growth.

## Keywords

Latin American politics, social movements

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Why do the targets of social movement activities respond to social mobilization in the ways they do? Why do state or corporate actors facing social movement pressures choose to ignore those movements in some cases, co-opt them in others, and repress them in still others? Exploring these questions not only uncovers dynamics of a given target's structures and decision-making practices but also sheds light on why and how social movements develop in the ways they do. Social movements do not operate in isolation from their targets; interactions between the two shape both the target and the social movement itself.

Multiple factors are undoubtedly at work in shaping how a target responds to social movement activities. This article focuses on one potential factor: How well the targets of a social movement's claims understand those claims. What do the actors charged with responding to the movement think that the movement is really about? How might those perceptions be different from or similar to the perceptions of the participants in the movement itself? How might those differences shape interactions between the two? This article argues that a target's understanding of a social movement's claims will help determine whether the target perceives the movement to be particularly threatening and what kind of threat it might pose. These perceptions shape a target's response, which, in turn, shapes the evolution of the social movement. Although they are not the only element at work, we cannot understand target responses without them. The article focuses on mobilizations during which the state is the primary target, but the theoretical insights should apply to other categories of targets (e.g., corporations).

Two cases of social mobilization, one in response to water privatization in Bolivia and the other in response to rising corn prices in Mexico, serve as a lens through which to explore these issues. This article shows how differences in how public authorities understood the movements' core claims help explain why state actors in the two countries reacted in starkly different ways to the emerging movements. Where government officials appreciated the symbolic value of the protesters' claims, they acted quickly to curtail resistance. Where officials failed to grasp the meanings with which those claims were imbued for movement participants, they dismissed the potential for widespread mobilization, not only allowing the movement to grow but also intervening in ways that directly encouraged movement acceleration.

## **Targets, Culture, and Social Mobilization**

The argument developed here builds on recent efforts to put contention in context (Goodwin & Jasper, 2012), acknowledges that social movements develop in fields with multiple players and arenas (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015), and

understands social mobilization as part of a dynamic relationship between movements and their targets (e.g., Jasper & King, 2016; McAdam, 1983; McDonnell, King, & Soule, 2015; Skrentny, 2006; Soule & King, 2015). Social movement scholars have made important contributions to our understandings of how targets influence social movement trajectories (e.g., Amenta, Caren, Fetner, & Young, 2002; Bishara, 2015; King, 2011; McAdam, 1983; Rucht, 2004; Soule, 2009). We know that a target's response can dramatically shape how an episode of contention unfolds.

Yet, even as there is a growing literature on the dynamics of corporate response to social mobilization (e.g., King, 2008), scholars pay relatively little attention to why targets in general, and state actors in particular, respond to social mobilization in the ways they do.<sup>1</sup> Discussions of response based on perceived threat, cost, or risk (e.g., Boudreau, 2004; Cunningham, 2004; Goldstone & Tilly, 2001; King, 2008; Kriesi, 1995); the meanings that policy elites attribute to groups (Skrentny, 2006); and why states engage in repression (e.g., Davenport, 2007; Davenport, Mueller, & Johnston, 2005) offer important exceptions. However, even as these works draw attention to the importance of threat perception and offer insights into repressive responses, our general explanations for state response to social mobilizations remain limited. We have few tools with which to systematically understand why states perceive particular movements at particular moments as threatening.

Furthermore, the importance of culture in why state actors choose to respond as they do has gone undertheorized. Culture plays a central role in our understandings of why social movement actors do what they do (e.g., Jasper, 1997). Yet, there is little attention to how culture might shape state responses to those same movements.<sup>2</sup> We know a target's perceptions of threat matter, yet we know little about how culture shapes target understandings of what might be threatening or costly. For example, in Davenport et al.'s (2005) analysis of repression and mobilization, culture is incorporated into analysis of the movement, but how culture shapes state choices is less clear. As a result, we have only a partial understanding of why targets make the choices they do. Some scholarship has focused on how the meaning-making practices of targets shape social movement trajectories. In particular, Skrentny (2006) shows how the meanings that policy makers attach to different groups fundamentally shape responses to movement demands. This article builds on Skrentny's insight that perceptions matter but focuses our analytical lens not on the type of challenger, but rather on the claims those challengers are making. As Jasper and King (2016) argue, "the target remains a hollow creature in the social movement literature—largely lacking in strategy, motivation, and other tools" (p. 2). This article aims to help fill this void and bridge gaps in our current theories by exploring one aspect of the cultural dimensions of target response.<sup>3</sup>

## The Cases

In January 2000, the Bolivian city of Cochabamba erupted in protest. Thousands of Cochabambans took to the streets to protest the privatization of their water supply. The buyer, a consortium called Aguas del Tunari, had gained rights not only to Cochabamba's municipal water system but also to water collected through private and communal wells. In January, when bills came due for water that had, in some cases, doubled in price, the water was began, shutting down the city for days at a time. A cross-class, cross-ethnic, cross urban-rural movement took hold in the region. Protests spread throughout the country and the government was forced to renationalize Cochabamban water by April.

Seven years later and thousands of miles away, in January 2007, Mexicans filled the Zócalo in Mexico City to express opposition to rising corn prices and corn imports. The price of tortillas had risen dramatically across the country: In some regions, prices had quadrupled since the summer. Marching under the banner "*Sin Maíz No Hay País*" ("without corn there is no country"), consumers and producers, middle class and campesinos, united to demand access to affordable, explicitly *Mexican* corn. Recently inaugurated President Felipe Calderón moved quickly to cap prices, and large-scale mobilization subsided.

As they began, the Bolivian water wars and the Mexican *tortillazo* protests looked strikingly similar. In both cases, broad-based resistance movements formed to protest a perceived threat to a subsistence good. In spite of their initial similarities, the movements' trajectories quickly diverged. In Bolivia, protests escalated, shutting down the Cochabamba region and later the country for days at a time. In Mexico, the movement quickly collapsed.

This article begins with the premise that in each case, the state's response to the protests played a critical role in shaping the trajectory of mobilization. In Bolivia, even in the face of early resistance and projected rate hikes, authorities forged ahead with privatization plans. As demonstrations grew, public officials showed little willingness to compromise and chose instead to send troops to thwart the protests. This unwillingness to compromise combined with conflicts between protesters and troops to strengthen the resolve of movement leaders and encourage movement growth. In Mexico, at the first signs of tortilla price increases, public officials worked to placate potential resistance. In just over 2 weeks, high-level government officials successfully implemented a voluntary pact that effectively stabilized tortilla prices. The social movement quickly lost momentum.

The article focuses on a puzzle presented by the cases. When faced with similar possibilities for broad-based, widespread social mobilization, state

actors in Bolivia and Mexico made strikingly different choices. No single factor can explain these choices—a number of political and economic constraints shaped the options available and the incentives to employ them. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore all the potentially relevant factors. Instead, the article focuses on a single factor—what state actors perceived to be at stake for protesters—and shows that while this factor was not the only element at work, we cannot understand state responses without it. By exploring the ways in which state officials made sense of protesters' claims, we begin to shed light on a crucial element in the variation in responses to the movements.

## Expanding on the Argument

The argument developed here is built on an approach that focuses the lens of social movement theory on the meaning work done by grievances (Simmons, 2014, 2016, 2016a, 2016b). By paying attention to the ways in which different grievances are imbued with similar or different meanings in various contexts, we can think of grievances as different from the relative gain or loss of a material “thing” or a set of political privileges. Even as grievances maintain material power, their ideational aspects, as well as the reciprocal relationship between the two, play a critical role in developing understandings of what the grievance “is.” By understanding grievances as embedded in cultural contexts, we can productively engage with the ways in which the claims themselves, not simply how those claims are articulated by movement entrepreneurs, shape social movements.

Understandings of water and corn help explain policy makers' responses to social mobilizations in Bolivia and Mexico. In Mexico, government officials charged with responding to the movement understood the symbolic value of corn for social movement participants. As a result, they perceived the movement to be a serious political threat and acted quickly to curtail resistance. In Bolivia, key government officials failed to grasp the meanings with which water was imbued. They dismissed the potential for widespread mobilization, making choices that gave the movement the space to grow and directly encouraged movement acceleration.

The core premise of this article is that we need to look at how culture works not only among social movement participants but also among state actors charged with responding to the movement. I do not suggest that the cultures at work in each of these spaces are bounded, separate, or contained. Cultural structures are both multiple and overlapping.<sup>4</sup> We may understand particular signifiers in different ways depending on the institutional context or geographical location, but the work those signifiers do in different semiotic networks

may also be in tension in ways that participants fail to grasp. Cultural meanings derived from one structure may or may not be transposed to others; conceptual systems are not always or equally shared.

An example from the cases discussed here illuminates the point. Multiple, overlapping cultural structures exist within (but are not necessarily confined by) the Bolivian nation-state. Some symbolic actions across the institutional realms of, for example, agricultural production, mining, or state policy making, or across the geographical spaces of La Paz, Santa Cruz, or Cochabamba, may be mutually comprehensible, while others are not. For example, references to Bolivia's loss of access to the sea at the end of the 19th century may work to produce patriotism across institutional realms or geographic spaces. However, regional identifications are particularly strong in Bolivia, where understandings and practices in the Amazonian region—the *media luna*—are often very different from those in the Altiplano or the mountains. Regional differences in relationships to water play a particularly important role in the events analyzed here. The privatization of water worked symbolically in Cochabamba in ways that do not appear to have been widely intelligible to high-level government policy makers, most of whom were from and resided in different geographic areas of the country. Many officials also expressed logics of development based on individual, market-based conceptions of the good life.<sup>5</sup> Although policy makers largely understood water privatization as a step in the path toward modernization, international integration, and progress, for many Cochabambans water took on community-related meanings that were directly threatened by the privatization process.<sup>6</sup>

### *Target Response*

The specific focus of this article is on the relative urgency of government response. I do not intend to explain the strategies policy makers employed (repression, cooptation, etc.), nor do I explain the relative effectiveness of these strategies. But through attention to the meanings with which grievances were imbued, I can shed light on the seriousness with which state actors took the potential threat generated by the movement, a factor that shaped the responses that policy makers adopted.

Analysis of the cases reveals two levels on which policy makers' understandings of the grievance informed their perceptions of urgency. First, the grievance was sometimes imbued with community-related meanings for the government officials themselves. Relevant decision makers understood corn or water to index, for example, national identity. Second, even if decision makers did not themselves understand the good to be imbued with community-related meanings, they understood that these meanings were produced

and reproduced by *others* in ways that might be conducive to collective action. Although the first-level understandings help explain the reactions of public officials, they do not appear to be necessary. The cases suggest that while government decision makers' own understandings of water or corn informed their decisions, intervention to avoid protest required only that they perceive the potential meaning of the good for others.

Evidence from interviews and newspaper coverage suggests that Bolivian officials saw little potential for mobilization around a threat to water in Cochabamba. Water had little symbolic meaning to the relevant government officials; few were from Cochabamba, hailing instead from the media luna region or La Paz. Furthermore, those same officials failed to understand the meanings with which water was imbued in the Cochabamba Valley. As a result, relevant public officials did not anticipate the scope or scale of the potential resistance movement and did little to try to contain the movement in its early stages. Officials remained tied to the ideological importance of privatization and understood implementation of the Cochabamba concession as a critical step in the path to a modern economy. Their failure to anticipate the potential for a broad-based movement compromised their ability to respond effectively.

When faced with a similar challenge, Mexican officials' actions stand in stark opposition to those of their Bolivian counterparts. In Mexico, high-level government actors quickly appreciated the potential for mass mobilization around a threat to tortillas. Some members of the Calderón administration understood that their constituents perceived corn to have meanings deeply rooted in a sense of self and community. Others not only understood these meanings for constituents but also understood corn to be highly symbolic themselves. Whether corn was symbolic to the officials themselves, the perception that it was to constituents was enough to orchestrate an immediate response to rising tortilla prices; public officials anticipated the potential for widespread mobilization and acted to avert major social unrest.

## Data and Methods

This article is a work of both interpretive historical and comparative ethnographic research.<sup>7</sup> The approach is well suited to the questions at hand for two reasons. First, by enmeshing myself in the world I sought to study, I hoped to better understand what particular actions, words, or other symbols might mean to the people with whom I interacted. I was able to explore the ways in which everyday practices order daily lives and are rendered meaningful. Second, I was able to avoid individualist assumptions about the logics of collective action and policy development and instead treat actors as socially

embedded (Wedeen, 2002). This allowed me to explore questions about the ways in which communities were constituted and how the water concession contract or rising corn prices might be perceived as a threat to them, as well as how state actors interpreted the same events. For a full discussion of data and methods, see Online Appendix A.

### *Data*

I conducted fieldwork in Bolivia during the summer and fall of 2008 and the winter of 2010. I spent most of my time in Cochabamba and La Paz–El Alto but traveled to Santa Cruz for additional interviews and comparative analysis. I conducted fieldwork in Mexico during the winter, spring, and summer of 2009. The analysis is based largely on research conducted in Mexico City. The research in both countries included ethnographic fieldwork, more than 200 open-ended and semi-structured interviews, and close readings of texts produced prior to and during each mobilization. Historical research involved analysis of written materials including regional and national newspapers, primary source documents (including those produced by movement actors and state policy makers), and scholarly works.

### *Case Selection*

The Bolivian and Mexican cases offer an excellent opportunity for comparison. The dynamics of the social movements were similar, yet the ways in which state actors responded were starkly different. Most importantly, social movement participants perceived the grievances similarly in both cases. In Bolivia and Mexico, the price of a good that was central to conceptions of community rose dramatically. Even though corn is technically substitutable and water is not, the goods took on similar meanings—corn was not understood to be substitutable. In both cases, markets were widely blamed and broad-based resistance movements formed. Similar causal mechanisms were at work as diverse coalitions mobilized to protest perceived threats not only to their pocketbooks but also to their conceptions of community (Simmons, 2016). Furthermore, both mobilizations were part of a broader cycle of anti-globalization and anti-neoliberal contention in Latin America in which communities grappled with the challenges of privatization, free trade, and cuts to subsidies, facing questions of what kinds of goods, if any, should be subject to markets (see Almeida, 2014; Silva, 2009, for excellent discussions of these trends).<sup>8</sup>

However, the comparison is not “controlled.” Cases are not selected so that similarities address alternative explanations for divergent outcomes. The



contexts in which the movements unfolded are different in important ways. Both Bolivia and Mexico experienced extended periods of market-based economic reforms—including severe austerity measures, extensive privatizations, and widespread elimination of subsidies and price supports—yet the countries share few social, economic, or political structures. The movements took place in different arenas that undoubtedly informed the strategic actions of players in different ways (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015). Even as state resources and policy independence were severely constrained by national and international contexts, divergent responses to social mobilization are overdetermined; differences in economic, social, and political structures, as well as those specific to the contested policies shaped why and how state actors responded as they did.<sup>9</sup> Some of these dynamics suggest that alternative mechanisms might have been at work. Others could have been at work alongside or directly facilitated the mechanisms proposed in this article and therefore serve as additional mechanisms, not alternative explanations. These factors interacted with grievance interpretation, and worked to facilitate or limit it, depending on the case. I explore some of these mechanisms briefly here. For a full treatment, see Online Appendix B.

Yet, even if divergence is unsurprising, comparison can still highlight mechanisms at work in social movement processes (see McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Simmons & Smith, 2017); comparison of different “outcomes” allows us to tease out how the processes and mechanisms of policy making in response to social mobilization work. Alternatives can be evaluated through a discussion of the mechanisms and processes at work even if we cannot eliminate them through control. Ultimately, we do not need to control for alternative explanations to show that the mechanisms described here were at work. We do, however, need to consider potential alternatives and address the role that they may have played in processes of policy response.

### *Alternative Explanations and Additional Mechanisms*

One of the most important alternative explanations for why policy makers responded in the ways they did to the mobilizations in Bolivia and Mexico looks to differences in the contested policies themselves. Defining characteristics of the water concession and the tortilla price increases undoubtedly shaped not only the options available to state officials but also the potential costs of inaction. Opposition to a contract signed with a private company presents different policy solutions than opposition to rising corn prices tied to a free trade agreement. Officials in Mexico may have had more options available as they were contending with a price shock without the structural challenges posed by a contract with a private company. Mexican officials could

manipulate import quotas, punish hoarders, and draw on previous experiences with price pacts. Furthermore, tortillas are nonexcludable public goods; most Mexicans were affected by the price increase so officials may have had more of an incentive to address the issue than their Bolivian counterparts who might have imagined that the protests could remain contained to one region.

In spite of these apparent differences in available options and incentives, the situations in which policy makers in Bolivia and Mexico found themselves are more similar than they appear. First, in spite of the constraints of the concession contract, Bolivians had multiple options. In early November, when large-scale mobilizations first occurred, officials could have used a number of strategies to try to diffuse the movement, including offering concessions to select groups in an effort to divide the movement and simply offering assurances that they understood and took seriously protestors' claims (see Bishara, 2015). Willingness to negotiate later on suggests that there was some room for movement short of revoking the contract entirely. Furthermore, that the concession contract was limited to one particular region does little to soften the potential importance of widespread resistance. Cochabamba is Bolivia's third largest city and a central artery that connects the Andes to the Amazon. In addition, resistance to market reforms could quickly be framed as a national issue. It is hard to imagine that large-scale unrest in Cochabamba would not have had national political implications.

Differences in the electoral climate in each country pose a particularly important alternative with which to contend. I argue, however, that they are not an alternative at all, but rather a facilitating factor. A heightened atmosphere of competition at the time of the *tortillazo* suggests that Calderón's team should have been particularly likely to try to respond to voters' concerns (see Garay, 2016).<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Banzer's political opposition appeared weak and disorganized; the Bolivian administration might not have anticipated that mobilization could pose a political threat. Calderón's precarious political position undoubtedly influenced the apparent seriousness with which his team responded to the *tortillazo*. But the ways in which state officials interpreted the grievance cannot be divorced from their calculations. For Mexico's electoral climate to matter, state officials had to understand the mobilizing power of the grievance. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine that any politician, no matter how disorganized the opposition, would opt for the kind of unrest that unfolded in Cochabamba. Major mobilization there would have national political implications both for Banzer's political party and for Banzer himself.

The article cannot offer a full accounting of all of the causal mechanisms at work in shaping state response. Although I hope to have made the case for the comparability of the Bolivian and Mexican cases, I do not argue that the

meanings water and corn took on for government officials are the only relevant factors in explaining either government decisions to respond or the effectiveness of those responses. Addressing all of the political, social, and economic factors at work is beyond the scope of this article. I can, however, make a more modest claim. Through thick description and attention to discourse and symbols, I can demonstrate connections between understandings and explanations without having to rule out alternatives (see Simmons & Smith, forthcoming). The comparison of the Bolivian and Mexican cases shows how state actors' understandings of the meanings with which a social movement's grievances are imbued influence their response to the movement; grievance interpretation is a consequential part of the picture. Furthermore, grievance interpretation is a particularly important mechanism on which to focus as it sheds light on the ways in which multiple structures help to facilitate shared understandings; diverse political contexts, conditions, and constraints can foster similar (mis)understandings of grievance. My claim is not that the mechanism I describe is the only one that matters, but rather that it can explain an important part of the empirical puzzle.<sup>11</sup>

## Bolivia

The water war brought two perceptions of water face to face in confrontation—one economic and the other social and cultural. (Crespo Flores, 2003, p. 244)

Bolivia was arguably the poster child for market economic reforms; water privatization in Cochabamba was not an isolated policy program. Faced with economic crisis, Bolivia's first democratically elected president in almost two decades, Víctor Paz Estenssoro, spearheaded a sweeping marketization program. Implemented in 1985, the New Economic Policy included cuts in social subsidies, liberalization of capital and trade accounts, and privatization of public enterprises. Water privatization in Cochabamba began in the early 1990s as part of a renewed commitment to privatization under then-president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. When the presidency changed hands (and parties) in 1997, the political commitment to markets did not waver. Former dictator Hugo Banzer took the reins, this time as the democratically elected leader of the *Acción Democrática Nacional* (ADN) party and forged ahead with the privatization plans.

From the first moments of the Bolivian initiative to privatize water in Cochabamba, the actions of government officials suggest that they both misunderstood and did not care to understand what the reaction in Cochabamba would be. Cochabambans were not consulted during the initial bidding process in 1997 or the revision of the bidding requirements in

1999 (Crespo Flores, 2003), both of which were managed in La Paz, Bolivia's functional capital. Local government officials and the public were ignored as potential stakeholders or potentially productive contributors to the process. Civic organizations were similarly sidelined as officials from the municipal water company, SEMAPA, and the national government negotiated the concession (Maldonado Rojas, 2004). Engineer and local politician Gonzalo Maldonado remarked, "the government consulted with political parties and forgot to consult with the people" (quoted in Crespo Flores, 2003, p. 237). Herbert Müller, who was treasury minister at the time, recalls that the government failed to "socialize the process." "We believed," he recalled, "that economic rationality would be enough to convince the people."<sup>12</sup> Müller's comment reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of Cochabambans' relationships with water. In sidelining local voices, the officials in charge of policy development (and later the response to the social mobilization that emerged) left no space to understand those relationships and to develop an appreciation for the meanings with which water was imbued in the Cochabamban context.

### *Water in Cochabamba*<sup>13</sup>

When goods such as water become part of daily life and practice, they become part of our cultural narratives, shaping their possibilities for valuation (see Fourcade, 2011). Many Cochabambans shared an understanding of water as a symbol of something more than its biophysical characteristics. Cochabamba's history of, and contemporary experiences with, scarcity combined with irrigation practices and understandings of an agricultural past to imbue water with meanings tied to local and regional identities. To many Cochabambans, water was not only a critical component in their continued livelihood but also a good that took on national, regional, and ethnic significance. The Aguas del Tunari contract not only threatened relationships with a critical material good but also imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) of nation, region, and ethnicity.

For example, relationships with water were often intertwined with conceptions of pan-Andean identifications, helping to produce imagined communities of Cochabambans or Andeans. The region's historical and contemporary relationships with irrigation made conceptions of "*usos y costumbres* [traditions and customs]" central to rural, peri-urban, and urban identifications. Even for those Cochabambans who do not practice irrigation, *usos y costumbres* have become an idealized element of regional identity—a central piece of what it means to be Cochabamban. In urban areas, they can

be a way of preserving a connection to Andean ancestry. Thus, water worked to produce powerful ethnic and regional identifications.

At the same time, relationships with water also produced quotidian communities—communities constituted by face-to-face interactions whereby members knew each other directly (Simmons, 2016). Scarcity—as a result of both drought and municipal service provision failures—cultivated relationships with water that were “artisanal” (Bakker, 2003)—people interacted directly with its cultivation and distribution—and often with each other in the process. Cochabambans formed water cooperatives to dig their own wells and pipelines and worked collectively to advocate for their water needs, forming communities with water at the center.

These community-related understandings emerged as incommensurable with conceptions of water as a good that could be exchanged for profit. Yet, during the crucial moments when Cochabambans could have made clear the ways in which the concession and the new law threatened their perceptions of community, few Cochabamban voices were involved in the process.<sup>14</sup>

Instead, the understandings of development and progress generally, and water specifically, that dominated the policy-making process drew on different cultural logics.<sup>15</sup> For policy makers, water was understood as an “abstract” industrial product (Bakker, 2003) to which the logics of markets could easily be applied.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, privatization would bring much needed resources and introduce efficiencies to Cochabamba’s water system. Privatization might not expand networks to Cochabamba’s unconnected neighborhoods, but the municipal-run water system also failed to meet this need. The state was perceived as having managed the resource poorly and it was time for the private sector to step in. Müller recalls his perspective at the time: The contract would “solve the water problem in Cochabamba, so why would Cochabambans be opposed?”<sup>17</sup> In claiming to have thought this, Müller shows that he had little understanding of what many Cochabambans thought the problem was.

### *Early Opposition*

Apparently certain that opposition would be minimal, officials claim to have been confident that they could ignore early attempts at organized resistance.<sup>18</sup> When asked about potential civil unrest in September, the president of Bolivia, Hugo Banzer, stated, “I’m used to that kind of background music” (*Los Tiempos*, September 3, 1999). Banzer dismissed the possibility of large-scale mobilizing, suggesting that it would remain in the background, unlikely to affect contract implementation. It is possible that previous experience with small-scale protests since his election in 1997—or even since the

initial adoption of sweeping market reforms in 1985—influenced Banzer’s perceptions. Organization around water in Cochabamba could have been simply one more short-lived episode of contention with few long-term political consequences. However, by not taking seriously the meanings that water took on in the Cochabamban context—either because members of his administration did not know what they were or because they simply did not care to know—Banzer was ill-equipped to anticipate the potential for (and respond in ways that might have mitigated) large-scale mobilization.

Even as irrigators and urban organizations mobilized in large numbers on the eve of the passage of critical reforms that would allow the privatization process to move forward, most government officials appear to have remained unconvinced of the potential for large-scale resistance. Civil society leaders organized a roadblock of the Cochabamba-Oruru highway—a major national artery—on October 27, but reaction from government authorities was minimal. Carlos Saavedra, the trade minister, and Luis Uzín, superintendent of basic sanitation, remarked that they understood these early protests to simply be a manifestation of divisions in the municipal electoral process (*Opinión*, December 10, 1999; *Los Tiempos*, December 12, 1999).<sup>19</sup> The government representatives who arrived from La Paz to negotiate an end to the blockade made few concessions. Nevertheless, protesters stood down.

Seeing potential opposition as minimal, government officials did little to dampen local fears or express empathy for the challenges that the Aguas del Tunari contract might pose to local relationships with water. Officials consistently stated, “*o pagan las tarifas o no hay agua* [either they pay the bills or there isn’t water]” (García, García, & Quintón, 2003, p. 47). The dismissive and condescending response of Bolivian officials may have unwittingly triggered emotional responses that encouraged further mobilization (Bishara, 2015). Cochabamban scholar and activist Carlos Crespo Flores (2003) argues, “neither the government nor the superintendency [*sic*] understood the collective perception of water as a social and cultural good and the implications for any attempt to introduce market disciplines” (p. 244). Vice minister of governing José Orías (who was also a Cochabamban) observed that state officials “treated it like buying or selling a house, not like they should have treated water.”<sup>20</sup> Orías’s comparison implies that government officials treated water as a purely material good—something like a house that could be individually owned and managed with few caring how the house might be transformed by new occupants.<sup>21</sup> For the government officials involved, selling Cochabamba’s concession was a transaction—a complicated one, but a transaction nonetheless—between the government and a private firm. They failed

to see how this particular transaction was not simply an exchange of property but rather a violation of community.

### *Growing Unrest*

By the beginning of January, it was increasingly apparent that the state response would continue to come from La Paz and be shaped by Paceños' and Cruceños' understandings of water. In an attempt to avert the work stoppages and mobilizations called for January 11, representatives of the central government—all from La Paz or Santa Cruz save for Orías—tried a second round of negotiations. There was apparently little willingness on the government's side to reach a compromise. On January 10, Saavedra arrived in Cochabamba to convince leaders of the mobilization to call off the strike. One of them recalled, "The government was deaf to the people's complaints [*reclamos*]. At the beginning, if they had changed just four or five clauses, most of the movement would have compromised and the rest wouldn't have had enough of a following to continue."<sup>22</sup> His comments were not unique.<sup>23</sup> Mauricio Barrientos, president of the Cochabamba Civic Committee (an organization designed to express local interests to state officials), concurred that, at this stage, compromise had been possible. But he thought, "the government didn't want to solve the problem because they thought it would go away."<sup>24</sup>

The protests took place as scheduled, and the water movement brought Cochabamba to a halt on January 11. Demonstrators remained in the streets for 3 days when government actors agreed to negotiate. After 3 weeks of meetings, the government's final proposal reflected a failure to understand Cochabamban concerns. Saavedra offered a reduction of the rate hike from 35% to 20%. The reduction was neither sufficient nor credible; with many Cochabambans experiencing hikes of more than 100%, the government's promise to reduce rates from the 35% that Aguas del Tunari maintained was the extent of the hike to 20% lacked credibility.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the proposal did not address concerns with changes to the water law, the elements of the Aguas del Tunari contract that Cochabambans feared would affect communal or private wells, or halt the further investments in long-term access to a sustainable water supply. The proposal reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of what many Cochabambans understood to be at stake; the protests were not simply about the material impact of a price increase.

When movement members rallied to stage large-scale protests in early February, minister of governing Walter Guiteras arrived from La Paz to order protesters to suspend the march or "bear in mind the consequences," mobilizing the army and the La Paz police force to make good on the threat (García et al., 2003). Guiteras revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of

the dynamics in Cochabamba when he stated, “Strong economic interests are distorting the true interests of the people of Cochabamba to have water in the short and middle term” (quoted in Crespo Flores, 2003, p. 241). By focusing on the material, policy makers failed to understand the ideas with which water was imbued.

### *Reinforcing the State-Movement Divide*

The reactions of the public officials charged with thwarting the protests suggest they thought the movement could be contained through a display of physical force. The march quickly turned into a violent confrontation as the La Paz police force (known as the “*dálmatas* [dalmations]” for their spotted uniforms) tried to keep protesters from occupying the Plaza 14 de Septiembre, Cochabamba’s symbolic center. The damage, however, was more than physical. The presence of the *dálmatas* conjured images of a repressive regime and heightened local solidarity. On February 5, the headline for *Los Tiempos*, a Cochabamba daily, read “*Como en la dictadura* [like in the dictatorship].” The headline referenced not only the repressive government response but also alluded to Banzer’s previous tenure as president, known as the most repressive in recent memory.

With the willingness to use violence, the central government further divorced itself from Cochabambans, becoming an “other” that could be an enemy to both region and nation. Cochabamban regional and Bolivian national identifications became increasingly powerful, as did the sense that water was *ours*. It did not belong to a central governmental authority that could sell the water and undermine its communal role.<sup>26</sup> Yet, the government continued to fail to appreciate the dynamics at work. Vice President Quiroga offered his own interpretation, arguing, “the Cochabamban movement is against Cochabamba and against satisfying Cochabamba’s need for drinking water” (quoted in Crespo Flores, 2003, p. 242).

The perspective of José Antonio Gil, the director of the Cochabamban division of the national military, offers insight into the divide between the central government, the region, and the nation, as well as the ratcheting up of a feeling of “Cochabambanness.” Like Orías, Gil was both a Cochabamban and an employee of the central government—he could potentially share the same understandings of water as his fellow Cochabambans and offer insight into why and how the government was responding in the ways it did. Gil recalls,

The government thought that by showing a lot of force, they would stop the taking of the plaza. But they just didn’t understand the local dynamics, what



role water played for all of us . . . and once the people were repressed in the way they were, it created solidarity in the region.<sup>27</sup>

Gil called the perspective of the officials who came in from La Paz to both direct the army and negotiate with the movement “the CNN perspective, not the perspective from knowing Cochabamba.” By comparing them with a foreign news network, the government negotiators, most of whom were from the media luna—Bolivia’s Amazonian region—became not only decidedly un-Cochabamban but also un-Bolivian. They were foreigners, descending briefly to analyze a situation without any understanding of local history or practices.

Bolivian officials continually demonstrated an inability to understand the potential for widespread mobilization in response to the Aguas del Tunari contract. Ultimately, large-scale mobilizations in April pushed the government to concede; the Aguas del Tunari contract was revoked and SEMAPA regained total control over the water system. State officials consistently miscalculated the kinds of concessions that would keep Cochabambans from continuing to mobilize. Attention to the meanings that water held for Cochabambans and the failure of the government officials to understand those meanings shed light on why officials consistently misunderstood both the potential for mobilization and what it would take to contain the protests.

## Mexico

These kinds of things can bring down governments. (Official from the Mexican Department of the Economy)

From the first moments of the *tortillazo*, government officials in Mexico City were intent on devising a solution that would quell and contain any social unrest. Any explanation of Mexican policy choices during this period must pay attention to officials’ understandings of the meaning of tortillas, and corn more broadly, to many Mexicans. Even as the political context in which Mexican officials found themselves in December 2006 played a critical role in the choices these actors made, their perception of corn as a potentially powerful “mobilizing grievance” (Snow & Soule, 2010) shaped their actions. Despite its different meanings to people in various parts of Mexico, corn is imbued with special meaning. For many Mexicans, corn has come to mean “Mexico”; it is deeply imbricated in understandings of Mexican family life and serves as a foundation for perceptions of communal belonging, indexing both imagined identifications at the national-level and quotidian communities within neighborhoods or families. Mexican officials understood that tortillas symbolized far more than their simple material value.

This appreciation allowed them to anticipate the potential for widespread mobilization and develop policy responses that effectively contained the mobilization.

In December 2006, Felipe Calderón of the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) took office as the new president of Mexico. Tortilla prices rose precipitously only a month later, and social actors began to organize their constituencies in protest. The political context of the presidential elections the previous summer shaped the Calderón administration's perceptions of its options. A highly contested presidential race had pitted Calderón against *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The Federal Elections Institute certified Calderón as the winner, but his victory came with notable controversy. Despite voting irregularities and a small margin of victory, the Electoral Tribunal certified Calderón's victory. López Obrador's followers set up camps and paralyzed downtown Mexico City. In early September, López Obrador declared himself the president elect. In December, he set up a shadow government, declaring it the legitimate government of Mexico.

Every member of Calderón's team interviewed for this research described a perceived "legitimacy crisis" for the administration in January 2007. López Obrador's followers had left the streets but had continued to talk about the "*fraude* [fraud]" that had put Calderón in office. The political context shaped Calderón's response—his administration needed to be perceived as understanding the interests of its constituents and as willing to respond to them. Calderón's advisors decided on a swift response to the *tortillazo* as a mechanism through which to secure legitimacy. But why? This would work only if the issue was broadly perceived as meaningful—people needed to think that Calderón was responding to something that mattered to them. The *tortillazo* was a political issue, but only because of the important role it played in the daily life and livelihood of many Mexicans.<sup>28</sup>

The initial actions of Calderón's team suggest that they saw rising tortilla prices as a critical issue to which a swift response was necessary. Almost immediately, Calderón's advisors met in Los Pinos (the Mexican president's home and offices) to determine a course of action. High-level officials from Hacienda (the Ministry of Finance), Economía (the Ministry of the Economy), Sedesol (the Ministry of Social Development), and Los Pinos attended. An official from the Ministry of the Economy recalls, "We all felt like we had to act immediately." Unrest, he claimed, was inevitable.<sup>29</sup> Another attendee of early sessions at Los Pinos argued that there would have been a "*desmadre*" (loosely translated as a "disaster") without quick, early action.<sup>30</sup>

But solutions were difficult to devise. For a government committed to free market principles, a fixed price was an unattractive solution. The concept of a

“price pact”—a commitment from major corn flour and tortilla producers to maintain prices at or below mutually agreed-upon levels—gained quick approval of the inner circle at Los Pinos. Even most of the “technocrats”—policy makers heavily identified with free market policies and ideologies—in attendance were on board. Undersecretary of Social Development at the time, Félix Vélez, recalled that he was the only one voicing opposition to the plan: “The Los Pinos meeting worked how I would imagine the central planning office for a communist regime would work—and this was the PAN!”<sup>31</sup> Although other attendees paint a picture of a slightly more contentious meeting, most recall that even those for whom the pact was a betrayal of their fundamental principles of “good” policy were on board. That so many professed hardline free market politicians were in agreement is one indicator of how large they perceived the potential crisis to be.

On January 18, the “Agreement to Stabilize the Price of the Tortilla” took effect. Signed by cabinet officials, representatives of the maíz-tortilla manufacturing industry, maíz and tortilla distributors, and the president of the *Confederación Nacional Campesina* (CNC), the “voluntary” agreement committed the signatories to sell tortillas at prices no higher than 8.5 pesos/kilo, corn flour at no more than 5 pesos/kilo, and maíz blanco for no more than 3 pesos/kilo. Felipe Calderón spoke at the signing in Los Pinos. The agreement carried all of the weight of the presidency.

Of the more than 45,000 *tortillerías* in Mexico, only 5,000 were bound by the agreement.<sup>32</sup> Yet, Mexicans were now “guaranteed” an option for a stable price; even if their local *tortillería* was not participating, many Mexicans would be able to take direct advantage of the agreement by shopping at, for example, a rural Diconsa store or Walmart. The president claimed that at more than 320,000 locations, Mexicans would find tortillas sold at the pact’s “just” price (Calderón, 2007). He went on, “We will not tolerate speculators nor hoarders; we will apply the law firmly and punish those who seek to take advantage of the needs of the people” (quoted in Javier Jiménez, 2007). Even many who did not have access to a participating supermarket or store claimed that the pact assuaged fears of continued rapid growth in tortilla prices.<sup>33</sup> With the large-scale producers and distributors on board, many smaller *tortillerías* would have to step in line as well—if not at 8.5, then at something close to it—if they wanted to compete.

Tortilla prices continued to rise. But many Mexicans appear to have believed that Calderón had dealt with the issue. This suggests that concerns are not with prices per se, but with how those prices are perceived. In particular, the idea that corn and tortilla prices should not be subject to the vicissitudes of markets appears to have been a critical component in explaining the timing of the protests and the lack of protest around price increases in

subsequent months. Calderón staged a performance in Mexico—the price pact was part of a political dance to which many Mexican citizens responded. The intervention on January 18 was a public show of commitment to Mexico’s “poorest.” Regardless of how much material relief the price pact brought, it demonstrated that the government was committed to protecting tortillas from market fluctuations.

Almost 2 weeks to the day after tortilla prices started to make headlines, the Calderón administration had armed what appeared to be an effective response. Why had it acted so quickly and with the full force of the highest levels of the Mexican government? Government official after government official offered the same response: “*teníamos que . . .*” [“We had to . . .”]. Although each official finished the sentence differently, the sentiment was usually the same: “We had to act.” “We had to resolve the crisis.” “We had to deal with it.” “We had to find a solution.” The urgency of the language betrayed a sense that there was no choice; if prices were going to continue to rise, the only option was to intervene in the markets in some way. What was a political contingency seemed like a moral imperative or inevitability. Because an increase in corn prices meant a threat not just to Mexican pocket-books but also to the very notion of what it meant to be Mexican, officials “had to” act.

The speed with which the Pact was orchestrated, the high-level positions of both the designers and the signatories, and the decision that the president himself would speak at the signing ceremony offer ample evidence of how critical the Calderón administration understood the challenge to be. The agreement was not issued through the Department of Agriculture or Economy, but rather the discussions for it and the signing itself took place at Los Pinos. Advisors reported that the president had taken a direct interest in making sure his administration developed a plan that would serve to calm the growing unrest.

Officials offered a variety of explanations for why something “had” to be done. A few cited the importance of the first 100 days of Calderón’s presidency, arguing that continued price increases would undermine public support and derail the president’s agenda. Others discussed the perceived legitimacy crisis created by the controversy over Calderón’s election and continued discussions of electoral fraud, claiming the need to demonstrate a commitment to the whole population. As conversations continued, every interviewee expressed a fear of a large-scale, widespread protest movement; even those who would not feel the financial pinch themselves might take to the streets to defend access to tortillas as a fundamental component of what it means to be Mexican.

Most officials did not hesitate to identify potential protest as a motivating factor. Two attendees of early Los Pinos meetings recalled a long discussion

of the French Revolution. "That was not going to be us," one said. "Are you kidding? These kinds of things can bring down governments. No way we were going to let that happen. We could not have another French Revolution on our hands," he concluded. For these government officials, the French Revolution conjured images of people in the streets, of the toppling of a government, of the politicization of previously unorganized groups. And they drew a clear connection between tortillas and bread. "For Mexicans, corn is our bread. They worry about bread in Europe, we worry about corn here," one official remarked.<sup>34</sup> Another offered a stronger statement: "You think bread was important in France? You haven't seen anything like what could happen with tortillas here."<sup>35</sup> Although it may not be popular in scholarly circles to explain the French Revolution with reference to rising bread prices, that connection is exactly what Mexican officials had in mind. Just as bread had brought down the *ancien régime*, so, too, could tortillas upend the current Mexican government.<sup>36</sup>

Mexico's leaders understood the potential for widespread unrest because of the importance of tortillas in the Mexican imaginary. Some insisted that the importance was purely economic, but the language used betrayed understandings of the deeper role the good played for many Mexicans, and sometimes themselves. One of Calderón's advisors stated, "it was not about the symbolic power of corn." But he immediately followed up with "It was about defending the rights of the people." Why and how are tortillas or corn a "right?" If "rights" are based on the pure economic need of feeding a family, then it is difficult to understand how tortillas are part of the equation. In almost every Mexican town, tortillas can be easily substituted for cheaper bread or other grain products. If it is a Mexican's "right" to have access not just to affordable food but to affordable tortillas, then the symbolic power of the good was at work in the administration's decision-making process, in spite of the protests of this particular official.<sup>37</sup>

Other officials had equally skeptical reactions when questioned directly about the symbolic power of corn as a potential motivator for social protest. But their answers to other questions suggested that there was something more than simple economic calculus at work. Graciela Aguilar, director of Aserca (Sagarpa's arm for agricultural trade) both at the time of the *tortillazo* and at the time of her interview, questioned the mobilizing power of corn's meanings in Mexico. But when I asked why the administration had chosen not only to act quickly but also to do so in a way that intervened directly in the market, Aguilar looked at me as though I were in kindergarten. "Where are you from?" she asked, her tone implying that my own question bordered on idiotic. "Of course the government acted quickly. You must not understand what corn means in Mexico," she continued, adding "it is part of our ancestry . . .

it is the culture. We did not have time to think, we had to act.”<sup>38</sup> According to her, there was something that I, as a foreigner, would clearly never understand about corn and its intersection with everyday life and identity in Mexico. Had I understood, I never would have asked the question. For Aguilar, corn indexed Mexico in the same ways it did for the thousands who took to the streets demanding access to cheaper tortillas. As a result, government response seemed inevitable for Aguilar.

Other officials discussed the mobilizing potential of the tortilla’s place in the national imaginary more directly. Many remarked that tortillas were fundamental to “being Mexican” so of course a threat to them would bring people to the streets. They appear to have understood a sense of self—both collective and communal—and nation to be at stake. Tortillas were, by their accounts, part of what it was to be Mexican. Officials claimed that even for those who could afford to pay the high prices, the idea that others could not violated a sense of country and could motivate widespread unrest. Corn is “like the flag” remarked one official.<sup>39</sup> The simile suggests that corn indexes national identity in a way that symbolizes country and implies that its desecration would be understood as an affront to nation. Even Félix Vélez, the advisor who took a clear stand on the side of markets remarked, “Alongside the Virgin de Guadalupe and soccer, corn is part of national identity. [There is an understanding that] if the government is committed to the people, it will guarantee this basic staple.”<sup>40</sup> Although he disagreed with the policy choice, Vélez claims to have understood what was behind it.

Calderón’s advisors also talked about the sense that the “myth of Mexico” was at stake. Corn evokes an image of a Mexican countryside, of legends of the Popul Vuh, of a far-away past, and an imagined present. Tortillas reflect what many *want* Mexico to be—a vision steeped in history and community, and a distinct culinary tradition that sets the nation apart. The “myth of Mexico,” as one put it, was also wrapped up in the accessibility of the tortilla and corn. With the price increases, he argued, “the myth was at stake.”<sup>41</sup> The possibility that high prices would diminish the centrality of the tortilla in the Mexican diet threatened an understanding of what makes Mexico and Mexicans distinct. By evoking this myth, government officials revealed one more layer of their own understandings of the meanings with which corn is imbued.

Some of Calderón’s advisors made explicit reference not only to the mobilizing power of the threat to tortillas but also to the broad-based coalition that such a threat could create. They did not simply picture unorganized riots. Instead, many described the potential for a well-organized opposition coalition. “This kind of thing could bring the unions . . . together with the more radicalized sectors like the miners. And López Obrador’s followers along

with the [previously] demobilized middle classes,” one official hypothesized.<sup>42</sup> “But they did not have the time to organize this kind of resistance,” he went on. “We moved in to address everything too quickly.” Officials expressed an understanding of the potential for a threat to tortillas to bring together disparate organized groups and the unorganized. An Economía official stated, “of course there would have been a revolt . . . tortillas are an emblematic product that can bring everyone together. Milk, bread, all of the prices could rise, but it was the tortilla that the government feared . . . tortillas and corn are unique; there is nothing like corn.”<sup>43</sup> Officials appear to have understood exactly why a threat to tortillas could cross salient divides—between city and country, across ethnic backgrounds, between squabbling unions and social organizations. It was a threat that would appeal to something “more profound,” as one official put it, than the divisions that kept them from working together.<sup>44</sup>

Officials also capitalized on the connection between tortillas and “being Mexican” to bring the crucial players for a successful price pact on board. As the agreement was voluntary, with no compensation for the companies that participated at the outset, Calderón’s advisors needed to convince major participants in the maíz-tortilla chain that it was in their interest to participate. These players came on board quickly for a number of reasons. Interest in seeing the Calderón government remain stable and the potential to gain a larger market share of the tortilla business likely played a role, as did a desire to increase foot traffic in stores. But Gerardo Ruíz Mateos, minister of the economy 2 years later, echoed the sentiments of others who had put the pact together when he recalled that the pact also “appealed to their [the business participants’] consciousness as Mexicans.”<sup>45</sup> Even if the companies did not agree to the pact out of their own commitment to nation, they appear to have understood that they could be painted as traitors for continuing to raise tortilla prices.

With the price pact in place, the movement seemed to lose momentum. The major social groups that had been organizing the January 31 march continued to plan, and the march took place. In spite of the participation of various groups in the events, interviews and newspaper coverage suggest that the demands no longer had the same mobilizing power that had driven early participation. The issues at stake had become more abstract—the neoliberal economic model, neglect of the countryside, and a lack of transparency. The administration had effectively communicated that tortillas and corn were special and would receive the protection they were due. In doing so, the administration severed the connection between movement leaders and the general population. Many who had been willing to participate in earlier mobilizations were now confident that tortillas and corn would be protected.

The Calderón administration continued to work to contain what remained of the mobilization. Many public officials contended that they no longer feared widespread unrest but were quick to respond “publicly and sympathetically to the simultaneous marches.”<sup>46</sup> *La Jornada* reported that Calderón “‘shared’ the concerns of the diverse organizational participants that marched” on the 31st (Roman, 2007). Government officials were also quick to reach out to movement organizers, establishing “tables of dialogue” that began to meet in early February. Although much had changed since the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) lost power in 2000, some of the institutional vestiges of 73 years of corporatist rule remained.<sup>47</sup> At the very least, institutional memory about how to effectively channel popular mobilization was largely intact. All the major organizations that had called the march were invited to participate in “regular” sessions with officials from Los Pinos, Sagarpa, Sedesol, and Economía.<sup>48</sup> Gradually, participants dropped out, but the conversations continued and the meetings functioned as a link, albeit tenuous, between the administration and organized civil society. By bringing the opposition to the table quickly, policy makers effectively undermined any momentum that might have been produced by the January 31 march. They also effectively capitalized on divisions within the plural group, offering enough favors to demobilize some, and highlighting differences among those that remained.

## Conclusion

The comparison of the Bolivian and Mexican cases reveals the critical role that government officials’ perceptions of what is at stake during a social mobilization can play in state response. But it also raises new questions: Why and how are such different perceptions possible? Why would government officials in one case understand the symbolic nature of the claims, while in the other officials appeared to have understood little beyond the good’s material role? Why and how did the “cultural structures” (Sewell, 2005) in Bolivia develop so that Paceños, Cruceños, or Cochabambans might understand water differently? Or in Mexico in ways that made understandings of corn broadly shared at the national level?

Any answer to these questions requires a close treatment of how relevant semiotic networks are produced and reproduced in Bolivia and Mexico. The evidence presented offers some clues as to where we might begin to develop an answer: Attention to geography and long-term governance structures offers potentially fruitful avenues for future inquiry. Regional splits and governance structures that isolated policy makers from their constituents may



have combined to produce an environment in which relevant Bolivian officials had little understanding of the meanings that water took on in the Cochabamban context. Conversely, the national implications of a threat to corn, combined with institutionalized structures of communication that persisted in spite of the transition away from official corporatist rule under the PRI may have helped Mexican policy makers anticipate and work to quickly diffuse potential unrest. These two factors might have helped create the conditions of possibility for different “cultural structures” to be produced and reproduced.

People experience social and political order in heterogeneous ways. Yet, something helps facilitate moments of shared intelligibility. How that shared intelligibility is produced and reproduced as well as why some things may be more intelligible than others to some groups are questions that emerge from the evidence presented here; shared political and geographical structures may shed light on how some semiotic networks are produced and reproduced. Attention to these structures might also help us better understand the ways in which processes and practices of valuation shape perceptions of commodification (see Fourcade, 2011; Zelizer, 2011). For many Cochabambans, intimate, daily connections with water produce understandings of the resource as something that should not be sold for profit. For the officials from La Paz and Santa Cruz charged with responding to the mobilization, the logic of the market was the only way to both preserve and develop Cochabamba’s water resources. Different logics of valuation and understandings of development produced different relationships with the good. This, in turn, produced different understandings of what was at stake in Cochabamba in the fall of 1999 and winter of 2000.

Of course, there is much that is contingent during periods of political contention; these structures are not the beginning of a unilinear causal chain that makes the (mis)understandings highlighted here somehow inevitable. But the Bolivian and Mexican cases suggest that patterns of meaning-making surrounding the perceived grievances at the core of social mobilizations can help shape what state actors perceive as threatening, how they evaluate potential responses, and how social mobilization develops as a result.

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### **Notes**

1. This article draws on insights from the literature on corporate response but agrees with the implications of King (2011) that many of the dynamics shaping state responses are likely to be different. I hypothesize that one place of overlap is in precisely the dynamic outlined in this article: Corporate actors' understandings of grievances likely play a role in shaping response.
2. The literature on corporations appears to pay more attention to questions of cultural processes as they shape target responses. See de Bakker et al. (2013) for an interesting discussion. They call for understanding "strategic interactions as cultural practices that are situated in pluralistic institutional fields" (p. 580).
3. Implicit in this approach is an understanding of states as made up of multiple arenas; responses to social movements are developed within particular branches of the government and by particular people.
4. I see cultural structures as "corresponding to spheres or arenas of social practice of varying scope that intertwine, overlap, and interpenetrate in space and time" (Sewell, 2005, p. 206). Semiotic networks may not be easily pried apart, but we can still recognize that "structures need to be seen as multiple in the . . . sense that different institutional realms, operating at varying social and geographical scales, [may] operate according to different symbolic or cultural logics" (Sewell, 2005, p. 208).
5. See Fourcade (2011) for a discussion of economic valuation of symbolically important goods.
6. This is not to say that there was an internal, logical consistency to the meanings that water took on in the Cochabamban context—these meanings were multiple

and often contradictory. Nor is it to say that a similar logical consistency existed for the meanings that water took on for the relevant policy makers. What this article brings to the fore is how the tensions produced by the variety of meanings that water took on informed the responses not only of the Cochabambans who mobilized but also of the policy makers charged with responding to the mobilization.

7. For descriptions of interpretive social science, see Rabinow and Sullivan (1987), Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2013), and Wedeen (2009). For a good discussion of the difference between interpretive and noninterpretive ethnography, see Wedeen (2009). For discussions of ethnography and comparison see Simmons and Smith (2017) and Simmons and Smith (Forthcoming).
8. Although these patterns are critical to understanding how and why social mobilization unfolded in Bolivia and Mexico, this article focuses on making the case that shared intelligibility mattered, not why or how it emerged. I discuss a few possibilities for the conditions under which shared intelligibility might or might not develop in the conclusion; a more in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this article.
9. There is also increasing recognition of the importance of contingency in explaining the trajectories of contentious episodes (see McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001).
10. Results in the presidential election the previous summer were heavily contested and considered fraudulent by many.
11. See Fearon and Laitin (1996) for a similar methodological approach. They use comparative case analysis to uncover relevant causal mechanisms without claiming an exhaustive account of all of the causal processes at work.
12. Interview with the author, 2010, La Paz.
13. See Simmons (2016) for an extended discussion of water in Cochabamba.
14. Cochabamba's mayor and the governor of the Prefect (state) of Cochabamba worked alongside the general director of SEMAPA during the final negotiations. Other negotiators included the vice minister of investment and privatization, Miguel López Bakovic; the superintendent of basic sanitation, Luis Guillermo Uzín; and the superintendent of electricity, Alejandro Nowotay (García, García, & Quintón, 2003).
15. Interviews with the author, 2008 and 2010, La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz. These observations draw on multiple interviews with policy makers at the time of the concession and mobilization. Many were conducted in confidence; the names of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. Opinions, editorials, and statements published in local newspapers confirm the accounts provided during interviews.
16. Bakker (2003) contrasts "artisanal" relationships to those that develop in much of the global north where water is an "abstract" industrial product and "large amounts of [it] . . . are taken for granted as a necessary requirement for daily life in modern, industrialized societies" (pp. 46, 42); consumers need only open a tap and water appears.
17. Interview with the author, 2010, La Paz.
18. Interviews with the author, 2008 and 2010, La Paz and Santa Cruz.
19. Municipal elections were scheduled for December.
20. Author interview with José Orías, 2010, Cochabamba.
21. Acknowledging that houses often have symbolic value for owners, sometimes do for communities, and that the act of homeownership is itself symbolic in many places.

22. Author interview with Coordinadora member, January 2010, Cochabamba. Some of the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.
23. Author interviews with Coordinadora leaders, August-September 2008 and January-February 2010, Cochabamba and La Paz.
24. Author interview, January 2010, Cochabamba. Author interviews with Marcelo Delgadillo, Óscar Olivera, and Víctor Gutiérrez, September 2008 and January 2010, Cochabamba. Six separate interviews, including three with government officials who preferred to remain anonymous, confirmed this impression of these early negotiations. It is possible that Saavedra is being painted as a scapegoat, particularly since the government officials present at these talks requested that I should not attribute any comments about Saavedra to them. Saavedra would not agree to an interview for this research; for his account of these events, I rely solely on the statements published in newspaper coverage.
25. Author interviews, 2010, Cochabamba.
26. It was not until March that the foreign connections of the Aguas del Tunari conglomerate were revealed; the selling of the water to a foreign company was not yet a rallying cry of the movement.
27. Author interview with José Antonio Gil, 2010, Cochabamba.
28. See Online Appendix B for a more detailed discussion.
29. Most members of the Mexican Government at the time of the *tortillazo* would not allow me to attach their names to any quotes. Interviewees are only named when the speaker gave explicit permission before, during, or after the interview. In all other cases, they are anonymous.
30. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
31. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
32. Participating *tortillerías* were those with representation at the price pact negotiations. The relatively low percentage of *tortillerías* affected does not mean that the agreement affected a similarly low percentage of the quantity of tortillas sold. Participants tended to be larger *tortillerías* with wider distribution.
33. Interviews with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
34. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
35. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
36. Most officials conceded that they did not think “real” revolution was likely. Yet, destabilizing resistance was imaginable. This is particularly surprising in a state where political stability had been a hallmark of governance for more than 75 years.
37. I anticipate that this statement is possible because the symbolic and the material are so intimately intertwined where corn is concerned in Mexico. It is easy to see how an individual might think only corn’s “material” role in Mexico is being evaluated when, in fact, conceptions of what the material “is” are rooted in semiotic practices.
38. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
39. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
40. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
41. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
42. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
43. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.

44. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
45. Interview with the author, 2009, Mexico City.
46. Interviews with the author, January-June 2009, Mexico City.
47. Through repeated interactions involving inducements and constraints, the farmer, worker, and popular sectors had been simultaneously mobilized and incorporated into the state (see Collier & Collier, 1991).
48. Interviewee did not report the same frequency for the meetings.

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