

## Binding Leaders to the Community: The Ethics of Bolivia's Organic Grassroots

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### R E S U M E N

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Las organizaciones más grandes de movimientos sociales en Bolivia—incluyendo sus sindicatos obreros, comunidades rurales, y organizaciones barriales—están unidos por una estructura organizativa jerárquica y una ética compensatoria que subordina a los líderes a las bases de las que emergen. Esta cosmovisión separa un mundo perdurable y legítimo de organización comunitaria (“lo orgánico”) de un mundo corrompido de partidos políticos, dotado de políticos individualistas e independientes que se involucran en prácticas transaccionales y corruptas (“lo político”). La ética orgánica de base, construyéndose a sí misma como heredera tanto del *ayllu* como de la revolución dirigida por los trabajadores, genera una economía moral profundamente sentida que moviliza la participación masiva y guía el liderazgo. Esta ética valoran los principios éticos de complementariedad, solidaridad, anti individualismo y participación obligatoria, mezclando la vida ética y política. Centrándose en las historias de vida individuales, este artículo explora los límites morales y las expectativas sociales que la ética de base orgánica impone a los líderes, quienes deben demostrar el desinterés y la subordinación a la comunidad en sus acciones políticas. [ayllu, Bolivia, liderazgo, Movimiento al Socialismo, política indígena, sindicalismo]

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### A B S T R A C T

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Bolivia's largest social movement organizations—including its labor unions, rural communities, and neighborhood organizations—are bound together by a hierarchical organizational structure and a countervailing ethic that subordinates leaders to the grassroots bases from which they emerge. This worldview separates an enduring, morally legitimate world of community organization (the organic) from a corrupt world of political parties, staffed by self-advancing, individualist politicians who

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engage in transactional, corrupt practices (the political). The organic grassroots ethic, by constructing itself as the heir to both the *ayllu* (Andean rural community) and the worker-led revolution, generates a deeply felt moral economy that both mobilizes mass participation and guides leadership. It valorizes ethical principles of complementarity, solidarity, anti-individualism, and obligatory participation, blending ethical and political life. Focusing on individual life histories, this article explores the moral boundaries and social expectations that organic grassroots ethics impose on leaders, who must perform selflessness and subordination to community in their political actions. [ayllu, Bolivia, indigenous politics, leadership, Movimiento a Socialismo, syndicalism]

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Mobilizing is hard work. Beginning in 1999, a new level of mass participation in Bolivian politics came through a seemingly never-ending series of long-distance marches, hunger strike pickets, battles for city centers, and coordinated road blockades. Each of these tactics requires commitment, endurance, and coordination among hundreds or thousands of fellow participants. When these things are present, they provide unmatched leverage to collective demands, propelling a cycle of disruption, negotiation, and resolution that has changed the face of Bolivian politics.

But let us begin again with the hard work. A highway blockade in La Paz holds because the narrow roadway is littered with thousands of heavy stones—dragged out by hundreds of campesinos—more than the police can plausibly clear. Marchers from the lowland Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia prove their commitment to their demands by day upon day of walking, and nights of quotidian labor, setting up sleeping quarters, and cooking donated food. Striking teachers and medical workers paralyze Cochabamba not just by closing their schools and clinics, but also by taking their turn blocking the bridges and roads that surround the downtown area. Participants and observers compare this labor to the forms of collective work that underlie Andean village life. In 2001, peasant leader Felipe Quispe Huanca (2001:171) said: “I have been impressed by the force and massiveness of the uprising, and it was because the *mita* and the *ayni* functioned, the communitarian form of struggle and organization functioned.” For indigenous intellectual Felix Patzi (2003:208), “The Aymaras . . . rebirthed the communal ethos in various spaces as a strategy of struggle.”

In usage that predates the colonial labor draft that took its name, the Quechua term *mita* designates an obligatory collective labor system. *Ayni* refers to “a symmetrical exchange of delayed reciprocity between equals, usually manifest in labor exchanges,” and is often translated as mutual aid (Allen 1981:165). However, if *ayni* functions in an urban uprising, in a lowland march, or in a departmental

strike, then it is an *ayni* out of place. The ethics of the Andean village is operating far beyond its natural domain. The rural community, peri-urban neighborhood, workplace union, and occupational association are each a base for labor-intensive collective political mobilization.

This article characterizes the ethic of this broader circle of grassroots organizations, which is inspired and derived from village life, but also by syndicalism and other ideals circulating within international left-wing practice. If we understand ethics as ways of defining “how one should live and what kind of person one should be” (Keane 2017:20), then Bolivian social movements offer a rich ethical framework that enables their collective practices.<sup>1</sup> This overall ethic separates an enduring, morally legitimate world of community organization (the organic) from an unreliable and corrupt world of political parties, politicians, and their complicit lackeys (the political).<sup>2</sup> Organic organizations are bound together by a hierarchical organizational structure and a countervailing ethic that subordinates leaders to the grassroots bases from which they ought to emerge.<sup>3</sup> This ethic celebrates virtues, such as class consciousness and selfless service, and proscribes vices. Undoubtedly, this is reminiscent of religious distinctions between the sacred and the profane. However, trusting in the restraints it imposes upon them, it has come to allow leaders to enter the corrupting sphere of politics.

Bolivia’s largest social movement organizations—including its labor unions, rural communities, and neighborhood organizations—are characterized by dense membership in particular workplaces or communities. Ideally, membership is contingent on nothing more than residence, occupation, or other status, and everyone who is qualified becomes a member (Lazar 2006). Such organizations frequently manage collective resources and orchestrate the collective labor of their members, whether building community infrastructure or participating in Bolivia’s frequent marches or ubiquitous road blockades. They embrace a heritage of collective struggle for class-based revolution, indigenous autonomy, or both. I term these “organic grassroots” organizations because of the decisive role played by the grassroots membership and their grounding in tradition, culture, landscape, and collective combative consciousness. The term organic suggests the organization and its leaders are an outgrowth of the whole: integral and not separate.

Local leaders are compelled by their base to advance their demands in the larger organization: “They have to be there,” Cochabamba neighborhood organization leader Cristián Mamani told me. “That’s their labor, their responsibility.”<sup>4</sup> They are expected in turn to inform and adequately mobilize their base. Primary school teacher Luvia Vargas Padilla explained how it works while she sat guard over a barricade as part of a citywide teachers’ strike:

[T]he Teacher’s Federation will see that there should be a mobilization like, for example, the one that is happening right now. And all of the people are conscious



Figure 1 José Santos Romero (seated on the left) at the Sucre Municipal Council, 2011 (This photo by Carwil Bjork-James is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License).

of this, all of the teachers and more. So, a kind of movement of everyone is formed. But we need someone to guide us, right, and that's the union chief. So, he goes up, and the Teacher's Federation comes to an agreement, or rather we are *informed*. He comes and communicates to us. And then we go about analyzing, right, we see the problem, we see if it really can be addressed by us getting involved, and how we will go out, whether we go out and march or not.<sup>5</sup>

In Vargas' school, the forty-one teachers and administrative workers chose to support the union's demands and join the nationwide blockade campaign. Workers decided on their participation, but social and ethical pressures can compel unanimity once a wave of mobilization takes hold. "It's like this," Vargas clarified, "when some are fighting for our rights . . . my conscience tells me that I have to get mobilized because this is an issue that also benefits me." Unions maintain the authority to impose fines for non-participation, which is seen as a breach of solidarity, and a failure to be class conscious. Rural teacher María Rita Bautista observes, "We need . . . fines to get ourselves moving. So, that's the problem, we



Figure 2 *Don Ángel Hurtado in his neighborhood of Primero de Mayo, Cochabamba, 2011 (This photo by Carwil Bjork-James is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License).*

don't act conscientiously without a fine . . . We're thinking more of our personal interests and not in the collective."<sup>6</sup> Thus, a grassroots union is neither a system of command nor of individual free will. Officers and workplace assemblies coexist, as do conscience, consensus, and coercion.

The organic structure—I was told in Villa Tunari, in Sucre, in the factory workers' union office in La Paz, and in a community center in the Zona Sur of Cochabamba—comes from the relationships in the community itself. It is the most enduring and central part of organizing. While presently embodied in the form of agrarian unions, neighborhood committees, trade unions, and other grassroots organizations, it precedes and exceeds them. "Organization has always existed" in its organic form, councilman José Santos Romero told me: "even in the Inca era."<sup>7</sup> Its roots are enduring and its future is secure: "The organic structure never dies."<sup>7</sup>

This article explores the moral boundaries and social expectations created by organic grassroots ethics. I draw on interviews conducted during twelve months of fieldwork in 2010 and 2011, observing and interviewing participants in social movement summits, grassroots organizations, and protests in Cochabamba, Sucre, and La Paz, Bolivia. Focusing on individual life histories, it suggests that

leaders must perform selflessness and subordination to community in their political actions. I center my account on two figures: a rural community leader in Sucre, José Santos Romero, who briefly and improbably became the mayor of a city frequently hostile to indigenous and left movements; and a senior community organizer in Cochabamba's Zona Sur, Ángel Hurtado, who began his political life as a Communist militant in the mines of Potosí. I supplement these with the memoir of Filemón Escobar, a mining union radical who co-founded the Movement Toward Socialism–Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (*Movimiento al Socialismo–Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos*; MAS–IPSP), and with comments made by Christian Mamani and María Rita Bautista, two community leaders in Cochabamba's Zona Sur. The training materials published by the Workshop on Strengthening Popular Organization (*Taller de Fortalecimiento de la Organización Popular*; TFOP), offer a particular synthesis of organic grassroots ethics: “Direct democracy,” they advise, “is the system of direction and development of the popular movement in accordance with the will of the grassroots base” (TFOP 2006a:16).<sup>8</sup>

In the contemporary plurinational state of Bolivia, indigenous self-identification—and the embrace of indigenous values in politics—extends far beyond the traditional rural community, influencing grassroots politics in many urban settings. The organic grassroots ethic, by constructing itself as the heir to both the *ayllu* (Andean rural community) and worker-led revolution, generates a deeply felt moral economy that both mobilizes mass participation and guides leadership. By examining the trajectories of a rural leader in urban government and a former union radical involved in neighborhood organizing, the work that follows highlights how multiple ethical traditions have knitted together around a shared set of precepts. Secondly, organic grassroots ethics extend the values often portrayed as intrinsic to the *ayllu* (or even more specifically, to Aymara culture) to a broader domain of ethically guided activist practice, imposing important constraints on leaders. Thirdly, the article shows that although the MAS–IPSP party was first built around organic grassroots ethics, it is not always bound by its strictures. Finally, I illustrate how this ethical language is invoked by both sides in conflicts between the MAS–IPSP and segments of the grassroots left.

### **The Moral Economy of the Ayllu**

A generation ago, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (1990), a renowned Bolivian scholar of indigenous struggle, drew attention to what she called “*ayllu* democracy” in rural communities of the Altiplano. The rural community organized around the *ayllu* is highly esteemed by both anthropologists and indigenous-identified social movements. The post-1952 government treated rural community life as backward, and

sought to supplant local community structures with unions and political parties. Rivera Cusicanqui, on the other hand, valorized the ayllu, an Andean structure for community self-management of the lands inherited from ancestral spirits. She reframed the ayllu's formalized set of offices (or *cargos*, a Spanish term used in various parts of the Americas) as "its own electoral mechanisms" (101) and insisted that its "apparent rigidity and inequality mask a richly democratic communal life" (102).

Rivera Cusicanqui's intellectual work was part of a widespread valorization of indigenous lifeways in Bolivian political life. The Katarista movement, which took leadership of the principal peasant organization the CSUTCB, in 1978,<sup>9</sup> placed rural organizers in a tradition of anticolonial resistance that reached back before the colonial era to an Inca social order. Kataristas proposed syndicalist and communal self-organization of rural indigenous peoples, independent of the existing political parties and based on their own political traditions (Albó 1987; Rivera Cusicanqui 1986). In the 1980s, Rivera Cusicanqui's Andean Oral History Workshop worked with community members to catalyze a revival of the ayllu form in rural communities (Stephenson 2000), leading to the Confederation of Ayllus and Markas of Qollasuyu. An indigenous cultural revival was also embraced by both a lowland indigenous movement better connected to hemisphere-wide indigenous organizing, and coca growers' movements whose members valorized the indigenous heritage embodied in the coca leaf through the 1990s and 2000s.

James Scott (1977) drew attention to the ways in which subaltern peasants maintain an ethical world that separates them from the dominant society, its institutions, and its values. Religion, ethnicity, social ties, and community structures can all contribute to this separation, keeping peasants skeptical of hegemonic values while providing a "social grid for mutual action" (270). Among the strengths of this moral universe, he writes, is its "very embeddedness . . . in pre-existing social ties" and the near inseparability of leaders from their larger community. These themes are central to the ethnography of Andean village life (Allen 2002; Bolin 1998; de la Cadena 2015), which describes an ethical world constructed in historical contrast to creole- and mestizo-run urban and state culture. In this ethnographic work and in the popular political imagination, the ayllu has become the metonym for this moral economy of indigenous Andeans.

This article's description of organic grassroots ethics builds on other recent work documenting social movement organization in Bolivia and beyond (see Table 1). Pablo Mamani Ramírez (2005) describes ayllu structures transposed to neighborhood organizations. Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2008) emphasizes differences between rural ayllus in the Aymara Altiplano and the assembly-based mass movement that arose in Cochabamba in 1999. Her work explores how the organizational structures of each are linked to parallel, but not identical, visions of self-rule. Nicole Fabricant's (2012) ethnography of the Bolivian landless movement examines how the "imagined ayllu" orients both democratic micropolitical

Table 1: Ethics and practice in recent works on Latin American social movements

Marisol de la Cadena	<i>Earth Beings</i>	Rural Cuzco 1940s–2010s	<i>Ayllu</i> as ontological	<b>Cultural explanations</b> <i>obligations, traditions, timeless</i>
Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui	“Liberal Democracy versus <i>Ayllu</i> Democracy”	North Potosí 1980s	<i>Ayllu</i> as traditions	
Pablo Mamani	<i>Microgobiernos Barriales</i>	La Paz/El Alto 2000s	<i>Ayllu</i> transposed to neighborhood	
Sian Lazar	<i>El Alto, Rebel City</i>	El Alto 2000s	Communal neighborhood, union	
Bruno Baronnet	<i>Zapatismo y Educación Autónoma</i>	Chiapas 1990s–2000s	Assembly– <i>cargo</i> hybrid	
Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar	<i>Los Ritmos del Pachakuti</i>	Aymara Altiplano 2000s	<i>Ayllu</i>	
Nicole Fabricant	<i>Mobilizing Bolivia’s Displaced</i>	Cochabamba 2000s	Union, assembly-based mass movement	
Raúl Zibechi	<i>Territorios de Resistencia</i>	Santa Cruz 2000s	<i>Ayllu</i> reimagined in land occupations	
Marina Sitrin	<i>Horizontalism</i>	Periurban South America Argentina 2000s	Self-constructed communities	<b>Process explanations</b> <i>structures, ideologies, experimental</i>
			Factory occupations, neighborhoods, picketers	

Source: Elaborated by Author.

practices and collective management of recovered lands. Sian Lazar describes a central role for both union and communal systems of organization, which merge in “a kind of political syncretism” in Katarismo, El Alto urban movements, and the MAS–IPSP (2008:174; see also 2006). She ethnographically explores the relationships among community members, their leaders, and the state as Alteños build an indigenous and popular collective identity.

Broadly, these descriptions of decision making may be placed alongside others from across Latin America on a continuum from cultural explanations (the *ayllu* as a cultural or ontological mandate) to voluntaristic, process-focused explanations (see Table 1).<sup>10</sup> In her ethnography of rural community activism, Marisol de la Cadena (2015) describes how the *ayllu* exerts an ontological pull on protagonist Mariano Turpo, requiring him to speak on behalf of his community or risk severing ties from the context that gives his life meaning. On the other

hand, *new* political organizations cannot be described as so timeless, nor can their ethics be seen as culture itself. The Zapatista movement in southeastern Mexico is a political innovation richly layered with the traditional cargo system, assembly-based democracy, and Catholic service to the poor (Baronnet 2009; James 2007). Raúl Zibechi (2008), who takes El Alto as an emblematic case, sees a general phenomenon of self-constructed and self-governed communities emerging on the urban periphery across South America. Finally, Marina Sitrin (2006, 2012) characterizes the factory occupations, neighborhood assemblies, and picketing movements of the unemployed in contemporary Argentina as instances of horizontalism—a belief in self-government without hierarchy.

### **Organic Ethics and José Santos Romero**

I met José Santos Romero on two occasions in his office in Sucre’s City Hall. As an affiliate of Evo Morales’ Movement Toward Socialism party, he would serve one five-year term as a member of the municipal council and seventeen very dramatic days as Sucre’s Mayor. During my first visit, he was still deeply enmeshed in a struggle for the Mayor’s office with fellow MASista Verónica Berrios, and was thereby in a complex relationship with the national leadership of the party. While he chose to speak off the record regarding the leadership battle, his extended comments and life history provide an insightful introduction to the way that the organic grassroots tradition looks at the world and seeks to delegate participation in electoral politics, the legalities of governance, the dirtiness of political deal making, and the complexities of public service to the community.

When I turned on my microphone to record Santos Romero’s autobiographical narrative, he first named his community of birth, the rural campesino union it belonged to, and his current union affiliation. Then he narrated a five-minute sequence of roles he had taken and training he had received on behalf of the community, starting with *promotor agrícola*, a technical training role he took on during the 1983 drought. “We see ourselves as obligated by the needs of our communities, or of our neighborhoods,” he said. In this narrative, the community charges him with responsibility and he self-effacingly accedes. You can see his occupational trajectory—as rural laborer, a waged and later self-employed artisan, and dairyman—through the sequence of union offices he has occupied.

This path, “preparing oneself organically and advancing through the steps,” is reminiscent of the system of cargos, or series of rotating offices in Andean communities. Within the cargo system, positions of *leadership of* and *service to* the community blend. One can rise in the ranks only by diligently performing a sequence of lower-status tasks. Rivera Cusicanqui (1990:101) observed that the cargo system involves a steady climb toward increasing responsibility through the

life course, so that “in the long run all the families of the ayllu end up holding the principal positions of authority, in ascending order.”

Higher positions also come with new work obligations. Santos Romero observed that “when they are serving as the leader, [one] works 50 percent, or 30 percent of the time for their family, and works the rest of the time for the community.” Those in leadership positions are also expected to take part in onerous forms of protest, such as hunger strikes and cross-country marches. For Santos Romero, these required experiences directly contribute to leaders’ abilities: “The biggest events that we have organized are . . . the school where one acquires class consciousness.”

Class consciousness and “organic consciousness”—loyalty and service to the community—are synonymous in his exposition. This system of collective social obligation within the “organic structure” of the community binds and orients present and future leaders. As Lazar (2008:262) argues, because of “the high degree of suspicion and rumor around [their] supposed misdeeds,” “[c]urrent leaders may keep themselves in check.” By rejecting individualism and so-called personal appetites, this ethical system “reinforces the common idea of what the collectivity actually is and what its interests are.” Bolivia’s radical unions similarly embraced this ethic. Filemón Escóbar (2008:258) writes that “the unionist is an authentic revolutionary, because he lives for *sindicalismo*—because he lives for the others. In the mining center it is prohibited, by tradition, to live off” union leadership and politics.

### Santos Romero and “the Political”

Of course, Santos Romero was not just a community leader, but a participant in electoral politics through the Movement Toward Socialism–Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples. The MAS–IPSP defines itself as a bridge between the opposed spheres of the organic and the political. Santos Romero recalls, “At first, we said that union organizations should not involve ourselves in political life . . . and it was our grandparents, our ancestors, who said this [as well.]”

Skepticism toward the state and political parties has a long history in Bolivian grassroots movements. While unions and peasant rebels collaborated with the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement after the 1952 Revolution, they emerged disappointed from the experience of worker “co-government” and the Peasant–Military Pact. In response, the powerful miner’s union advanced an independent political position under which “unions ought not to make themselves the agents of any party, even if that party is in power and calls itself revolutionary” (Tesis de Colquiri, quoted in Zavaleta Mercado 2011:763–64). This *clasista* (“classist,” or class conscious) approach paralleled Katarista rejection of government and

political party interference in grassroots organizations. This skepticism toward the state was reinforced by the collaboration of nominally “left” parties in the neoliberal shock therapy programs after 1985. As Escóbar (2008:232) recalls in his memoir, they “had ceased being parties, only to convert themselves into pillagers of power, in distributors of posts.”

From the organic point of view, politics is by nature a realm of unaccountable political parties, led by self-advancing, individualist politicians who corrupt local leaders to act like them. The 2009 Bolivian Constitution opens with a set of “ethico-moral principles,” including *Ama qhilla, ama llulla, ama suwa* (Quechua: “Don’t be lazy; don’t lie; don’t steal”). The mandate to work hard, so that burdens do not fall on others, and to serve the community rather than oneself, are the obverse of these prohibitions. Kataristas added a fourth maxim to the Quechua tercet—*Ama llunk’u*: “Don’t be a suck-up” (Ticona Alejo 2000:136). “Leaders who are servile toward the class interests of the powerful,” as the Workshop on Strengthening Popular Organization (TFOP 2006b:10) describes them, must be watched out for.<sup>11</sup> The assembled grassroots base should “exercise the most jealous control over the elected leadership” (TFOP 2006a:16). The Kataristas cut their teeth challenging “the corruption of the leaders, who were servants of the bosses, of the landlords, and who took their bribes,” as national leader Jenaro Flores described them (Ticona Alejo 2000:54).

For the grassroots organizations, imagining and constructing the “Political Instrument” was a carefully defined strategic choice, gestated from 1987 to 1995. Formative interorganization talks among the indigenous, peasant, and worker confederations were held in November 1992. The Political Instrument, founded in Santa Cruz in 1995 as the Assembly for the Sovereignty of the Peoples, was a joint venture of popular movements intended to intervene in the political world without giving up control to outside political parties (Burgoa Moya 2016:16–35). Beginning in 1995, Escóbar (2008:293) writes, “an old tradition of the left, that the union was one thing and the party another, was broken.” The workers’ unions, however, did not join their rural counterparts in this move, opting to retain their clasista independence.<sup>12</sup>

In creating the Political Instrument, some adherents to the organic worldview accommodated themselves to the usefulness, even necessity, of entering the political world. In exchange, the MAS–IPSP allowed them to extend the power of the assembly over political representatives. This relationship is a key component of the way the party presents itself: “We are not of the MAS, the MAS is ours.”<sup>13</sup> Again, Santos Romero’s autobiographical narrative illustrates how this happens in practice:

Now on a second level . . . on some occasions, the people or the grassroots bases themselves, can see that we can also carry out a political and administrative function.

In this way, I was chosen by the Chaunaca Subcentral [campesino union] as a potential candidate for the Sucre City Council.

After this nomination, he attended a series of other assemblies at which he “had the opportunity to win the confidence of the bases themselves.” The novelty of the MAS–IPSP, writes its co-founder Escóbar (2008:260), is “that all of the affiliates of the communal or union assembly, whether present or not, would then vote for the candidate that it elected.”<sup>14</sup>

Since its breakthrough 2005 electoral victory, the MAS–IPSP has worked to solidify its electoral dominance by rapidly expanding into every Bolivian municipality. The party recruited local politicians, activists, and celebrities in its effort to secure a parliamentary majority and a local presence nationwide. Meanwhile, a substantial number of long-time, high-profile leaders and intellectuals were pushed out of, or broke with, the party and became critics of the government. As a result, the party’s ideal of subordination to social movements competes with its local political machines, individual ambition, and loyalty to the national leadership.<sup>15</sup> As I discuss next, the organic system was never implemented in urban Cochabamba. In 2015, the candidate for Chuquisaca governor designated by the departmental peasant confederation, Damián Condori, was rejected by the MAS–IPSP and found another party to back him.

Still, in some settings, MAS–IPSP political figures have the same obligations as leaders within grassroots organizations: listening to the grassroots base, facing them, and carrying out their wishes. It means accounting for one’s accomplishments and failures, and avoiding the worst sin of all—putting one’s own interests before group interests. This ethic is perceptible in nearly every paragraph of Santos Romero’s narration of his political life—a genre of discursive performance he has no doubt had to offer in numerous assemblies over the years.<sup>16</sup> It conditions the actions of leaders, forms the primary basis for criticizing them, and allows for their repudiation from below.

There is a long anthropological tradition of describing cultural constraints on authorities’ power and independence. Interpretations of the Pacific coastal potlatch have emphasized the leveling and redistribution functions that attach to chiefs’ demonstration of their own high status. Pierre Clastres (1998) describes a social organization that offers leaders prestige while burdening them with obligations, elevates them in times of agreement with the general sentiment, and restricts their independence. These elements conspire to ensure that “[t]he chief is there to serve society; it is society as such—the real locus of power—that exercises its authority over the chief” (Clastres 1998:207). However, where many of these accounts emphasize how these constraints are woven into the culture, I believe the organic grassroots ethic makes these obligations into ethical maxims. Thus expressed, they can be transposed to less traditional, or less ethnicized, contexts.

## Urban Movements and Organic Values

As the major cities swelled with new residents from the 1980s through the 2000s, an increasing number of urban residents maintained ties to rural indigenous communities. The mobilization against water privatization in Cochabamba marked a political debut for community organizations of that city's urban periphery; they blockaded the regions' highways in collaboration with rural residents who live outside the metropolis. The Water War also drew on labor movement methods, including mass assemblies, blockading tactics, and the general strike form (Bjork-James 2013:100–158). In the twin cities of El Alto and La Paz, tens of thousands of rural demonstrators collaborated on the streets with local residents during a series of mobilizations, culminating in the 2003 Gas War, which brought down a Bolivian president. All major analyses of this event emphasize the role of El Alto's self-organized urban communities in mounting a sustained pressure campaign that physically blocked off the capital of La Paz from the outside world. For Luis Gómez (2004) and Raúl Zibechi, the city became an extension of the Aymara Altiplano and its traditional forms of self-organization. "Local councils," Pablo Mamani Ramírez argues, "have similar characteristics as the rural ayllus in their structure, logic, territorial dimension, and system of organization" (quoted in Zibechi 2010:25). Zibechi, whose perspective reflects engagement with Bolivian scholars Mamani, Gómez, and Felix Patzi (2003), is keen to discover the "social machinery that prevents the concentration of power or, similarly, prevents the emergence of a separate power from that of the community gathered in assembly" (Zibechi 2010:16). He offers a dramatic resiting of Clastres' antistate powers in urban peripheral neighborhoods.

### Ángel Hurtado and the "Organic" Peri-Urban Neighborhood

To illustrate these multiple ethical referents, I now turn to the story of Ángel Hurtado—a community leader in the May 1 Neighborhood (*Barrio Primero de Mayo*) within the southern District 9. Hurtado was a "relocalized" miner: that is, he was laid off from the state mining company Comibol under neoliberal "shock therapy" policies in 1985. Bolivia's highly politicized mine workers in the Union Federation of Mining Workers of Bolivia (*Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia*; FSTMB) were the bastion of its mid-century labor movement. Within mining communities, leftist factions competed for adherents while cooperating in strikes and labor organizing. Workers endured government massacres from the 1920s to the 1970s, and formed armed militias that aided in the 1952 Revolution. In the mines, Hurtado had affiliated with a Maoist-line communist party and aspired to join an armed revolution, but the neoliberal Supreme Decree 21060

in 1985 interrupted all that. Looking back, he recalls, “Beginning with 21060, we the miners disappeared as an organization in Bolivia. All of us went away in all directions, to La Paz, to Santa Cruz, to Cochabamba, to everywhere in the end.”<sup>17</sup>

He names his own neighborhood and nearby Villa Sebastián Pagador as places where “we the miners . . . were able to reorient [the people] in a revolutionary process.”<sup>18</sup> In 1989, eighty families of Barrio Primero de Mayo formed a Water Committee that built a well to supply water to affiliated families. Peri-urban neighborhood associations organized using the language of union life: everyone who has a faucet and a meter had “*voz y voto*”—the right to speak and to vote, and the right to take on leadership positions.

In 1999, the municipal water company Semapa was privatized and sold to a consortium led by foreign investors. Unexpectedly, the neighborhoods of the Zona Sur (many of them beyond the water grid) became a core force in the citywide struggle. Large-scale assemblies at the district level backed the campaign against water privatization. Hurtado speaks of Primero de Mayo’s mobilization for the Water War like a father might speak of a long-awaited child:

We [in our neighborhood] have such a quantity of vehicles, of minibuses, around forty. And from here the neighbors went down [to the city center to fight in the Water War] in one line. They were setting off dynamite; it was fearsome. And the people watched—because those from this sector, those born here, the Cochabambans, had never seen this class of mobilization. And since we the miners are of a revolutionary character, and have always been fighters. That is what we have fostered here in Cochabamba. And it gave us . . . the first day to see *so many* vehicles go down in line while [throwing] dynamite [in the air and] setting it off.

Water Committees reoriented themselves behind all-out pressure campaigns, blockading outlying roads, and traveling daily into the city center to join street battles. Blockades, street fighting, food, and first aid were all organized collectively.

### **The Merger of Indigenous and Syndicalist Values**

Ángel Hurtado and Filemón Escobar, his comrade from the miner’s struggle, share a similar outlook on the unity of workers’ and indigenous struggles. For Escobar (2008:260, 199), “the ayllu assembly has extended itself to the union struggle of the miners, of the factory workers, of the oil workers, and of the neighborhood councils,” although “only a few see it that way.” Hurtado sees the defining structures of Quechua-Aymara communal life at work in his neighborhood. Once a devout Marxist-Leninist, he now speaks of restoring indigenous values to politics: “recovering,” “recuperating,” and “returning to practice” the values that constitute a way of life. Remembering his father’s stories of nineteenth century indigenous

resistance, he said, “I came to recall that, that solidarity, for example, is called *ayni* here, right?” The collective work that built his communities’ roads, water system, and political organizations embodied for him a cultural logic, more powerful than his previous political orientation, because “every day we practice it in our lives, we Quechuas and Aymaras.”<sup>19</sup>

Hurtado recited four principles of Andean life: “reciprocity, complementarity, equilibrium, and reverence”—words that are now familiar parts of Bolivian political discourse (as well as the ethnographic literature). Each can be explained with stories of Andean cultural traditions, and each functions as a critique of life in the capitalist West. Indigenous cultural recovery and leftist syndicalism coexist within the organic grassroots ethic. On one hand, Hurtado is critical of his leftist past: “In the mines, we never valued our own culture. Rather, we had accepted, let us say, ideologies from abroad . . . Even the Marxist ideology, those of the left, were from the West.” On the other, as for José Santos Romero, terms like “class consciousness” and “revolutionary orientation” flow freely from his lips. He seems to be engaged in a continuous process of translation, of showing that the anticapitalist, antihierarchical values he has long embraced are native to the place he lives.

Like José Santos Romero, Ángel Hurtado affiliated with the MAS–IPSP. He describes how the party came to grassroots organizations and said, “‘You choose the best person, a person who has a good record,’ and the organizations carried that out in their open assemblies and their congresses.” Both report the presence of newer members of the party who are outside the circle of organic grassroots organizing, and the problem of dirtier ways of doing politics. Hurtado also levels an accusation about the limited reach of the organic method for choosing council members in Cochabamba: the grassroots nomination process worked “90 percent” of the time among the rural organizations, but “here in the city, they keep on with the old custom: a little bit of bribery.”<sup>20</sup> Christian Mamani, another community leader in Cochabamba’s Zona Sur, sees the same pattern:

At the beginning . . . the vote or decision of the social movements was respected. But later, it [the MAS–IPSP party] grew more and more . . . Nowadays, they are practicing politics the way other parties did. They close ranks among themselves, and just themselves, and the social organizations . . . are just an instrument to be manipulated.<sup>21</sup>

### **Organic Grassroots Principles as a Language of Conflict**

The language of organic grassroots ethics has become widespread in Bolivian political culture, making it a key part of the language of national political conflict. Despite the MAS–IPSP’s consolidation of power, 2011 saw more protest events than any year in the previous decade: dozens of regional campaigns advanced

diverse, sometimes contradictory, claims. Many of the protesting organizations were part of the MAS–IPSP’s broad left constituency and were based on the organic grassroots model. The government responded to these mobilizations by attempting to disqualify the leaders, demobilize their backers, and counter-mobilize other sectors.

When labor movements led a national strike wave for higher wages in early 2011, government officials—from the president on down—blamed the strike leaders for carrying out a “political” mobilization. The government alleged that strike leaders were paid off by right-wing opponents from the east of the country, or intent on a coup to overthrow the government, or committed to Trotskyism over the interests of their members. These charges always attempted to isolate responsibility for “politics” with the leaders, who were alleged to pursue “personal interests” that ran counter to those of their base and the nation as a whole. Embracing the union, but rejecting its strike, the government urged grassroots members to abandon their leaders and come to an agreement.

In another instance, the same rhetoric backfired. In July 2010, a sputtering campaign by the Civic Committee of Potosí demanded employment through industrialization and infrastructure investment. Seeking to undermine the protest, the national government labeled it a political maneuver by Mayor and leftist rival René Joaquino. Incensed with having their demands labeled “political,” Potosinos mobilized in much greater numbers, paralyzing the region for nearly nineteen days. Once critical mass had been reached, the crowds repositioned elected representatives as people obliged to carry out the demands of the base. Attending the August 3 “General Assembly of the Potosí people,” Governor Félix Gonzales apologized for his previous absence and put himself “at the disposal” of the public. When the crowd called for a hunger strike, high-level MAS elected officials put their organic obligations ahead of their political party ties and joined the strike.

At the Fourth National Forum of Social Organizations in November 2010, numerous grassroots activists shared their criticisms of the MAS–IPSP and the direction its “process of change” was taking. The room was crowded with experienced organizers. It smelled of sweat and bags of coca leaves, which many participants chewed as they listened to one another. In the workshop on participatory democracy, these activists spoke from the same organic grassroots worldview. “We, the social movements, are the central actors,” said one participant, generating murmurs of agreement. “We believe that change is what the organizations, persons, and the public in general do. It is not accomplished by a minister or a vice president,” insisted Celestino Condori, the leader of the Potosí strike. A member of the neighborhood federation in Plan Tres Mil (in urban Santa Cruz) said, “The government needs to come down and consult with the grassroots,” before defining an uncritical allegiance to the state as a new form of colonialism: “We need to de-colonize ourselves and demand this from them.”

## Conclusion

Organic grassroots ethics invoke morality, deeply felt obligation to the community, and a history of loss and sacrifice in ways that are reminiscent of traditional definitions of religion. They valorize ethical principles of complementarity, solidarity, anti-individualism, and obligatory participation, blending ethical and political life. Organic grassroots ethics define both virtues (selflessness, service to community, equilibrium with nature) and corresponding vices (corruption, and placing personal interests ahead of the collective interest). Ethnographers and other scholars attempting to understand social movements would do well to place greater attention on movements' ethos, alongside their demands and forms of organization. The organic grassroots ethic simultaneously requires participation in politics (as in the Political Instrument), articulates a profound skepticism of political dealings, and regulates illegitimate political behavior. It also respects public interventions in the political sphere precisely because they are "not political."

While I have used autobiographical narratives to illustrate these positions, I do not intend to represent the two men described here as paragons of virtue. In acts of self-presentation, they are evidence of the rules of virtuousness, rather than necessarily of its performance (Albro 2010; Lazar 2008:76). In any case, leaders' aspiration to virtuousness is far from the only way that organic grassroots ethics serve to bind leaders to the community they represent. The ethics provide a basis for justifying attempts to question, constrain, or push aside leaders who fail to serve their communities. As María Rita Bautista, who became a community leader in K'ara K'ara following a major episode of local corruption, observed, "There are little oligarchies in the organizations as well." In the Zona Sur, local organizations have seen multiple cycles of ethical failure: leaders who absconded with money from collective accounts, who did not listen to the base, and who were disinterested in collective mobilization. In Primero de Mayo, residents confronted small-scale corruption by reorganizing their water system three times. In these moments, the assembly of neighbors served as the counterbalance to unethical leaders, by denouncing them, replacing them (as in Bautista's neighborhood), or re-forming the organization.<sup>22</sup> It is in conflict rather than stability that organic grassroots values are most important.

Conversely, however, when an organization is relatively demobilized, or when much of its strength comes from connection to powerful outside actors, including the state, its leaders are relatively unbound to the base. The organic grassroots perspective offers a way to critique such leaders as corrupt or co-opted, but not to contain them. It may thus be useful to think of these organizations on a continuum between an organic grassroots position, where leaders are bound to the base, and a clientelistic position, where leaders are bound to outside patrons. The MAS-IPSP now proposes itself as a new kind of political patron, committed to the collective

interest of the oppressed, but dissidents and independent mobilizations see instead separation from the grassroots.

On any given day, national political conversations in Bolivia may refer to the principle of rotating leadership, to the inappropriately political nature of a strike, or to the virtues of class consciousness, humble service, and cultural recovery. While far from hegemonic, organic grassroots ethics has become part of the language of contention. Multiple grassroots traditions contribute to its orienting force, pulling power downwards in ways that perpetually place it in tension with political projects oriented toward party consolidation and management of the state.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>While I frame the values described here in terms of ethics, they are parallel to the “knowledge-practices” described by Casas-Cortés et al. (2008).

<sup>2</sup>Sian Lazar (2008:200) similarly describes how El Alto leaders contrasted *la política* with “working organically.”

<sup>3</sup>While this sort of organization is commonplace, particularly among poorer Bolivians, it is not the only politically relevant structure. Elsewhere (Bjork-James 2012), I describe the contrasting workings of “participatory networking” organizations, which have voluntary and sparser membership, and work by informing and connecting the public (and organic grassroots allies) rather than mobilizing their base. Horizontally organized collectives of environmentalists, anarchists, feminists, and labor organizers played catalyzing roles in the 2000 Cochabamba Water War, the 2011 TIPNIS campaign, and the recent movement against gender violence.

<sup>4</sup>Interview, April 4, 2010. This and all following translations by author. Unless otherwise indicated, all extracts from a given individual are from the first cited interview.

<sup>5</sup>Interview, April 14, 2011.

<sup>6</sup>Interview, May 31, 2013. Bautista is also a Zona Sur community leader. Like many rural teachers, her primary residence is in the city.

<sup>7</sup>Interview, April 20, 2011.

<sup>8</sup>The Workshop on Strengthening Popular Organization, a Cochabamba-based popular education effort organized in 2007, drew on union, neighborhood, and rural community traditions to teach about grassroots organization, with a focus on the organic/political distinction and the role of leaders. I refer here to two modules of the workshop: “Vida orgánica y acción política” (Taller de Fortalecimiento de la Organización Popular 2006a) and “Función dirigencial” (Taller de Fortalecimiento de la Organización Popular 2006b).

<sup>9</sup>The Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia, which supplanted the Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia.

<sup>10</sup>For an argument that the “cultural traits” and “political experiments” substantially overlap, see David Graeber’s (2004:56) description of how “over time, what were once projects become identities, even ones continuous with nature. They ossify and harden into self-evident truths or collective properties.”

<sup>11</sup>Robert Albro’s (2007, 2010) work on politicians in Quillacollo (just west of the city of Cochabamba) offers a different take on transactional politics. He focuses on men whose lives are conditioned by accusations of being supplicating llunk’us. Yet many of their transactions are intended

to get services and public works to their communities. This is also the analysis of political clientelism advanced by Javier Auyero (2002) on poor urban communities in Argentina.

<sup>12</sup>At least until a 2014 endorsement of the MAS–IPSP. The new alliance between unions and state was under severe strain by 2016.

<sup>13</sup>Damián Condori supplies this quotation—the title of a recently published oral history of MAS–IPSP-affiliated campesinos (García Yapur et al. 2015:119).

<sup>14</sup>This practice has been criticized as antidemocratic by the political right. To be clear, there was no formal mechanism to require or monitor unison votes, although members did rehearse the voting process (as shown in the 2007 documentary *Cocalero*) and local leaders spoke with pride about high vote margins for the MAS after elections.

<sup>15</sup>Arguably, high-level politics within unions are also dominated by these tendencies, including the cocaleros (Escóbar 2008: 301) and the CSUTCB (Ticona Alejo 2000: 103–14).

<sup>16</sup>For a compilation of similar performances, see García Yapur et al. (2015).

<sup>17</sup>Interview, March 28, 2011.

<sup>18</sup>For a parallel interpretation of the role of miners in El Alto’s protests, also based on oral histories, see Arbona (2008).

<sup>19</sup>Interview with author and Carmen Medeiros, March 28, 2011.

<sup>20</sup>This claim is in part personal, and I have not verified his remembrance that he was twice designated a candidate by the District Nine assembly only to have his name not appear on the list. But in a broader sense, the accusation of prior corrupt methods persisting in local government can be corroborated.

<sup>21</sup>Interview, April 18, 2010.

<sup>22</sup>However, Fabricant (2012:91) observes that such investigations of corruption can themselves “be driven by power-hungry regional and departmental leaders.”

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