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‘The Community’ as a Multivocal Concept: Everyday Urban Life and Grassroots Politics in Caracas’ Informal Neighbourhoods

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ABSTRACT
This article analyses the multivocal meanings of the concept ‘the community’ as embedded and employed in everyday- and political discourses in working class and shantytown neighbourhoods (*barrios*) in the capital city of Caracas, Venezuela. Set in the context of the late Hugo Chávez’ presidency (1999–2013), I explore how ‘community’ variously referred to socio-territorial space or to emerging and contested notions of political community, and how the different meanings were imbricated. I focus on how experiments with bottom-up democracy foregrounded popular sector communities as essential to the construction of ‘Bolivarian’ Venezuela, and trace contemporary notions of ‘community’ back to the Venezuelan state’s earlier nation building projects, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. Through engaging with anthropological debates about the challenges attached to the term ‘community’, I argue that valuable ethnographic insights can be gained through unpacking how ‘community’ is invoked in different contexts and by different actors.

KEYWORDS Community; Venezuela; grassroots activism; urban informal neighbourhoods; Hugo Chávez

Introduction

Grassroots activism was a central feature of the late Hugo Chávez’ presidency (1998–2013) in Venezuela. Scores of people were engaged in community development projects and political mobilisation, fostering a re-articulation of the relationship between popular sector communities and the Venezuelan state. This article is an exploration of the multivocal meanings of the concept ‘the community’ (*la comunidad*) as employed in everyday – and political discourse in urban working class and shantytown neighbourhoods (*barrios*) in Caracas. Through an ethnographically based analysis of how ‘the community’ was invoked in different contexts by local inhabitants,

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political activists, and the state, and in dialogue with recurrent debates within anthropology about the concept's contentiousness, I demonstrate that 'community' offers a preeminent optic through which we can capture how spatial history is produced and embodied, and social and political relations are conceptualised and negotiated.

My interest in the topic originates from a series of fieldworks in Caracas, the capital city of Venezuela, for altogether almost two years in the period between 2005 and 2015. Here, I explored political mobilisation in the context of Hugo Chávez' instigation of what was called a 'Bolivarian process' or 'Bolivarian revolution' (named after the Venezuelan hero from the Wars of Independence, Simón Bolívar). Venezuela's popular sectors played a pivotal role in this process, both as supporters of the government and collaborators in executing government policy, but also as grassroots activists in and for themselves with their own genealogy and agendas. In political discourse, from above and from below, Venezuela's poor and coloured were cast as political subjects essential to the process of radically altering society; epitomised in the phrases 'el pueblo' (the people), 'poder popular' (popular power) or 'poder constituyente' (constitutive power). However, 'the organized community' (la communidad organizada) or just 'the community' (la communidad) were other denotations frequently invoked as the locus for political subjectivity and collective agency. As I will show, this choice of wording was not just idiosyncratic political discourse. 'The community' as a collective political subject was embedded in the spatial, sociocultural, and political dynamics and histories characterising popular sector neighbourhoods. These features had evolved through the Venezuelan state's earlier state building projects engendering the formation of informal neighbourhoods and popular social identities, and the historical genealogy of these settlements on the margins of the modern urban fabric and middle- and upper-class society. On this background, 'the community' in the context of Bolivarian discourse represented a distinct mode of imagining and organising sociopolitical community, serving to mobilise for action, making claims to legitimacy, and enacting political struggles both internally amongst grassroots activist and vis-à-vis the state.

The article is structured in the following way. First, I outline some key aspect related to how 'community' has been problematised by anthropologists for several decades. Consequently, I contextualise my ethnographic field in Venezuela politically and historically, before I disentangle the multiple meanings of 'community' as grounded in the social, political, and material context of Caracas' barrios. Finally, I briefly reflect upon how this article contributes to clarifying some of anthropology's persistently unconcluded concerns with 'community'.

Theorising 'the Community'

'Community' frequently appears in anthropologists' field material; being invoked in the context of some of our key analytical foci; social organisation, political systems, cultural heritage, social relations, collective practices, identities, and so on. Exactly because of its omnipresence, it is also elusive. We sense that 'community' refers to a network or group of people that holds some features in common; whether it is

grounded in shared territory, or fellowship derived from a shared or imagined (Anderson 1983) sense of meaning and identity (a distinction that Victor Turner (1969) and Edith Turner (2012), in different ways, brought out through the concept of 'communitas' as a sense of transcendental togetherness in contrast to 'community' as a social structure). From here on, however, the precision of the concept starts to slip, prompting repeated discussion about how to define it, how to use it, or whether its fuzziness infers that it should be discarded from our analytical vocabulary altogether (Creed 2004: 57).

'Community' is often harkened back to the foundational discussions of the social sciences; from Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinchaft* and *Gesellchaft* in the late nineteenth century, to Marx's, Weber's, and Durkheim's efforts to theorise what a society is and how social life could be studied and analysed (Grodzins Gold 2005: 1–2). Early anthropological structural-functionalist perspectives, approaching communities as internally differentiated, yet externally bounded social units serving as systems for social cohesion and social reproduction, eventually lost their authority in the face of inadequate explanatory tools for change, conflict, and instability, and its unresolved tautological implications. Later, symbolic and interpretative anthropology rendered visible that 'community' presents us with problems similar to those of other troublesome concepts such as 'society' ('state' and 'nation' are others); terms that inevitably bring up the most troublesome leitmotif of them all; 'culture'. As Roy Wagner (1975) problematised for example, anthropology's efforts to capture human relations and meaning-making processes at our field sites entail perpetual processes of cultural production on two ends; for one; the continuous and creative re-interpretations of social, symbolic, and practice-based life taking place in the interrelationship between individuals and local worlds, and secondly, anthropologists' creative (re) interpretation of those processes and symbols of interpretations. From that perspective, any attempt to orderly band together spatial orders, human communities, and socio-cultural 'content' is to ask the wrong question. Later, Marilyn Strathern (1988) dismissed the notion of 'society' as an inroad for analysing her research in Melanesia altogether, searching rather for other modalities of connections and disconnections that gave form to peoples' evolving understandings of sociality, collectivity, and individuality. Though these discussions are too complex to pursue further here, they remind us of the incommensurability of searching for coherent imbrications of bounded social groups and stabilised shared meaning, whichever 'unit of analysis' we try to deploy.

Against Structure

Anthony Cohen (1985) explicitly brought out the challenges of approaching 'community' as a matter of social structures, yet without dismissing its emic importance as a culturally meaningful social referent. He contended that 'community' is above all a symbolic concept, forged through the spinning of webs of significance in Geertzian terms (Cohen 1985: 17). Moreover, with reference to Fredrik Barth, he maintained that 'community' is a matter of boundary-making 'because communities interact in some way or other with entities from which they are, or wish to be, distinguished'

(Cohen 1985: 12). The notion of 'a community' is thus created through an act of interpretation, which 'tends to be made within the terms characteristic of a given society, and influenced by its language, ecology, its traditions of belief and ideology and so forth' (Cohen 1985: 17). These interpretations are thus not static; their symbolic meaning can be changed (re-interpreted) through interactions between individuals and between and across societies (Cohen 1985: 17–18).

Cohen's dismissal of looking for 'the inner stuff' that defines and delineates 'community', and rather to investigate how notions and contours of communities are organically and continuously produced, might seem evident today, more than 30 years later. Yet so, concerns regarding analytical representations of 'community' in our research is recurrent in the literature. As Creed notes: 'Whether fieldwork is rural, urban, multisited, transnational, or virtual, most contemporary anthropologists define their foci as communities, and they do so with almost no specification of what that means' (2004: 57).

Arguably, the discipline's evolving methodological, theoretical, and conceptual challenges contribute to its continuous contentious usage. From a starting point whereby 'the field was the community and the study of communities, read as a convergence of place, people, identity and culture [which] was construed as the proper subject matter of anthropology' (Amit and Rapport 2002: 15), the discipline since the 1960s became increasingly preoccupied with social, political, and cultural formations and processes traversing and cross-cutting time and space. However, we nevertheless remain firmly grounded in our methodological hallmark; qualitative methods. The exigency to locate our empirical research in a concrete *somewhere* and *with someone* thus continue to engender challenges as regards how to demarcate and define this somewhere and someone in our textual and analytical representations.

Alternative terms such as 'categories', 'networks' and 'groups' proved to come with their own analytical and conceptual imprecisions (Amit and Rapport 2002: 17–25), and attempts to replace 'community' with 'localities' and 'local social systems' (Cloke *et al*. 2006: 69) did not gain foothold. The caveat is that by deploying alternative concepts in hope of enhanced analytical clarity, we do not only risk reifying emic knowledge and conceptualisations, but we also risk losing out on valuable ethnographic insights. The better solution is thus, in my view, that rather than holding the concept at an arm's length, we should strive towards incorporating a cautious, critical, and explicitly clarified usage of the term as part of our analytical 'standard' script, as well as to clarify our methodological application of the term. Arguably, these two dimensions are intrinsically intertwined, as they shape how we capture and conceptualise spatial and human interconnections as well as the formation of multiple (imagined) communities.

During my recurrent fieldworks in Caracas, I travelled between and within several different barrios, and for a long time I was unsure of how to conceptualise 'my unit of analysis'. Eventually, I chose to operationalise and define my field of research as ethnographic research that engages with community activists and residents belonging to different barrio communities (some of which I know more in depth than others); a definition that indicates belonging to a particular socio-

territorial space, but which do not presuppose neither social nor territorial boundedness and uniformity. This methodological choice was also decisive for shaping my analytical approach to 'community'. It is fruitful to consider the barrios in Caracas as an 'interconnected whole' (Fernandes 2010: 30). This is founded upon the experiences and identities (through highly heterogenous) derived from living in barrios as opposed to living in 'formal urban society', as well as the flows of people and interaction between (and of course beyond) different barrios. People do indeed refer to 'the community' or 'the communities' in a wider sense, as an imagined community of barrio residents. On the other hand; as this article demonstrates, different localities possess different qualities; material, environmental, social, economic, and otherwise, shaping the specific facets of what it means to belong to *a particular* community in different spatial territories. These different notions of 'community' are produced through human practices and meaning-making in an organic relationship with their surroundings. Furthermore, 'community' in the context of grassroots mobilisation harboured a broader political and ideological bearing, pointing towards evolving notions of *political community*. By disentangling these distinct usages of the term, I aspire for methodological accountability, at the same time as I demonstrate that we cannot presuppose what constitutes 'community' a priori, or that emic usages of the word entail a uniform or stable idea of what a 'community' is.

Homogenising 'Community'

A recurrent critique of 'community' is its romanticised notion of unity and homogenisation (Creed 2004: 57; Joseph 2002; Williams 1976). Because of its inherent positive connotation, 'community' tends to be invoked 'by any and everyone pressing any sort of cause' (Joseph 2002: vii). Moreover, terms and techniques such as 'community development' and 'community-based environmental management' have become global blueprints (Grodzins Gold 2005), enveloped in the continued hegemony of 'development' as a global paradigm (Hickey and Mohan 2004), and forming part of deeply political modalities of global capitalism, policy making, and governance. Purporting to be sensitive to local populations, implicit connotations to 'community' as a site of problem-solving and collective agency in such contexts risk glossing over heterogeneity, conflict, and power relations in place-based communities as well as in local, national, and global relations. Hence, scholars studying e.g. natural resource management have levied substantial criticism against uncritical usages of the term (Grodzins Gold 2005).

Caracas's barrios are indeed characterised by social stratification, whether by age, gender, race, national origin, socio-economic position, and access to networks of power. These features shaped the evolvement of grassroots politics within and across different localised communities within the larger barrio territory. The heterogeneity of socio-territorial space was often remarked by barrio residents, couched in idiosyncratic terms about 'the culture', 'the history', or 'the characteristics' of different barrio sectors. These features were constitutive of local identity formations, affiliating people to 'my community' and 'my neighbours' as opposed to the

community or the people ‘over there’. The barrios’ heterogeneity was also integrated in the state’s policy approach to grassroots organisations, through an explicit aim to develop local organisation grounded in ‘organic’ community formations. Yet so, ‘community’ as evoked in political discourse also frequently underplayed heterogeneousness, as popular sector communities were morphed into a singular body politic vis-à-vis the state.

Colonialism and Community

Exploring ‘community’ in a post-colonial setting requires particular attention to the production and articulation of differentiated socio-territorial formations. The colonial project entailed a restructuring of space and peoples through the exploitation of labour and the dispossession and expropriation of land, in parallel with the essentialization, re-arrangement, and hierarchical ‘classifications of culture’ (Pels 1997: 167). For the Latin American post-colonial state, in face of its contested and conflictive integration, it was paramount to gain spatial and social control through a multiplicity of techniques of state governance. The regulation and surveillance of towns ‘became instrumental in the territorialization of the state and the construction of state, society, economy, and politics as separate spheres’ (Stepputat 2001: 289). Concurrently, the post-colonial nation building project required forming an imagery of national cultural distinctiveness as well as racial integration through the idea of *mestizaje* (racial mixing). However, the crafting of a body politic, drawing on liberal principles from Europe, was meshed into a colonial social architecture through which rights and privileges were not universally ascribed, but distributed according to racial and class-based hierarchies (Wiarda 1971).

In post-colonial Latin America, racial and class-based hierarchies are construed along complex intersectional scales. Latin American social models have ‘generally privileged culture over race’ (Mullings 2005: 678), implying that systemic racism co-exists with official ideology denying racism as well as lacking judicial protection against racialized discrimination (2005: 678). Simultaneously, poverty has been associated with innate pathologies among the poor, forging complex imbrications of class and race that naturalise and legitimise social hierarchies. Hence, differentiated forms of citizenships have been carved out and extended into the ‘modern’ nation state of the late twentieth century. Territorial expansion and urban development imbued different localities – and its inhabitants – with different statuses, rights, and forms of recognition vis-à-vis-the state. Boundaries between formal and informal territories, infused with templates invoking notions of civilised and uncivilised space (Coronil and Skurski 1991; Karst 1971: 558) were drawn up. Across Latin America, dense social imaginaries surround popular sector neighbourhoods – whether called barrios in Venezuela, favelas in Brasil or villas miserias in Argentina – engendering structural and individual discrimination and marginalisation. We will soon return to Caracas’ barrios to explore how these historical trajectories informed contemporary, multi-layered notions of ‘community’, but first we need a better contextual understanding of the political epoch in question.

Venezuela's Bolivarian Process

Hugo Chávez (1954–2013) came to power in Venezuela in 1999, after more than two decades of escalating economic crisis and social unrest. Chávez, a former lieutenant coronel with a modest family background and mixed racial heritage, represented a seismic shift in Venezuela's political history. His rise to power displaced a political elite pact which since 1959 had ensured that two dominant parties had alternated in government offices; a period often referred to as the 4th Republic or the Punto Fijo epoch. During those decades, Venezuela was molded by its possession of one of the world's largest oil reserves, creating an economy dependent upon oil export and imports of goods, high rates of urbanisation and centralisation, a bloated petro-state (Karl 1997), and a society characterised by socio-economic inequalities and spatial segregation.

Chávez was spearheaded into the public in 1992 when he led a coup attempt against then-president Carlos Andrés Pérez from the social democratic party Acción Democrática (AD). The coup failed, but Chávez became a popular hero. Part of the coup makers' justification for the attempted putch, was the state's response to a popular uprising in 1989, called 'el Caracazo'. The uprising, which was met with massive state violence, was triggered by the sudden implementation of a structural adjustment packet that Pérez had secretly negotiated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Moreover, escalating corruption and a series of political scandals, had produced a perception of the ruling political class as depraved, and that new political actors were needed.

Chávez' electoral bid initially drew support also from parts of society's establishment, but they turned against him when it became clear that his anti-establishment campaign was not just talk. Between 1999 and 2002, Chávez convoked a constituent assembly and referendum on a new constitution, and introduced new laws enhancing the state's control over key economic sectors such as land and hydrocarbons. In 2002, the country's former elites orchestrated a coup against the government. The coup failed, partly because of massive popular mobilisation in defense of Chávez. In late 2002/early 2003, the same oppositional sectors also unsuccessfully attempted to shut down the economy and force Chávez from office.

Chávez' electoral campaign generated broad popular enthusiasm, and a popular grassroots movement gradually took form in the years following his victory. This was not a uniform movement; rather it consisted of different groups, many claiming 'distinct genealogies that predate Chávez' (Fernandes 2010: 5), with different ideological leanings and differing allegiance to the state. However, the ordeals of 2002 and 2003 were followed by several years of popular mobilisation, including extensive cooperation between the state and grassroots activists in the enactment of pro-poor policies and experiments with bottom-up democracy. The Bolivarian movement, spearheaded by Chávez, took inspiration from a heterogenous assemblage of anti-neoliberal, nationalist, anti-imperial, and anti-colonial ideologies and sentiments. Meanwhile, other leftist presidents coming to power in the region inspired belief in the coming-of-age of a new era in Latin America.

Venezuela has been a controversial subject in academia for over two decades. Viewpoints have ranged from characterising Venezuela under Chávez as an authoritarian regime (see e.g. Corrales and Penfold 2011) to considering it a seminal moment of decolonialisation and popular sovereignty (see e.g. Kingsbury 2016). For anthropologists, it has been a fertile haven for studying the unfolding of radical political change and popular activism (see e.g. Fernandes 2010; Kappeler 2015; Valencia 2015; Strønen 2017; Schiller 2018). This literature exposes that even though Chàvez' political figure and charismatic qualities loomed large, the most interesting feature of those years is arguably found elsewhere: namely in the energetic activism and mobilisation taking place in Venezuela's many informal urban neighbourhoods and impoverished villages as people seized upon the window of opportunity that Chávez's arrival to power had opened. The 'new' Bolivarian state, headed by Chávez, vocalised a discourse of social justice and popular sovereignty, accompanied by a series of social programmes in housing, alimentation, culture, education, work training and sports rolled on in popular sector neighbourhoods and rural communities. Furthermore, recurrent electoral mobilisations spurred intense network-building between political figures and popular leaders.

State-community Relations

Thomas Blom-Hansen and Finn Stepputat note that 'state-centered representations have worked to incorporate communities in a hierarchically organized yet homogenous nation-state through strategies that relate certain identities to certain spaces [and] time sequences' (2001: 25). How popular sector communities are represented in political discourse and engaged with though state practices, is revealing of the state's boundary-making practices. In Venezuela, 'the popular sectors' have been imbued with different connotations throughout the twentieth century. With the advent of electoral democracy in 1959, the emerging 'modern' nation state was crafted upon the ideology of racial democracy with a strong populist-nationalist streak. Until the onset of the social, economic, and political crisis from the early 1980s onwards, the lower classes held a legitimate social position, as 'virtuous, albeit ignorant, and therefor in need of guidance' (Coronil and Skurski 1991: 326). Despite persecution and repression of leftist politics and popular dissent, Venezuela on the surface appeared as a success-story of cross-class political consensus. The dominant parties Acción Democratica (AD) and COPEI entertained extensive clientelist bonds through their party machineries as well as through the unions, with AD in particular catering to the rural and urban lower classes. Neighbourhood committees in popular sector communities served as brokers (Ayuero 2001) for the population's integration into the state through clientelism and patronage. As Karst wrote in 1971:

> [The *juntas de vecinos*' – Board of Neighbors – mission] is to secure for the barrio such public works as water pipes, electric power lines, roads, stairways and sewers. Thus most juntas have ties to the political parties that control the agencies of government that are in a position to assist the barrio in achieving those goals. (1971: 564)[1]

The penetration of the state- and party machinery into popular sector communities has by Venezuelan sociologist Edgardo Lander been coined a system with a 'populist-paternalist-clientelist character' (Fernandes 2010: 46). However, the crisis of the 1980s and the 1990s re-reshaped the relationship between the popular sectors and the state. As the oil rents dried up and public sector funds were slashed through neoliberal reforms, the system's integrative effect waned and turned towards increasing antagonism. This period was characterised by a sharp rise in street protests in face of declining living conditions, as well as increasing open hostility towards the country's poor and coloured. Chávez' arrival to power in 1999 thus marked a shift from almost two decades of increasing vilification of the popular sectors in parallel with popular collective action aimed at impelling the state to assume responsibility for social welfare in marginalised communities.

The Communal Councils

We can thus observe a historical continuation with a twist: the invocation of 'community' in the Bolivarian project pointed backwards in history to the tradition of channelling material resources and political attention via local community leaders and semi-formal neighbourhood committees. Concurrently, it also reverberated with the historical legacy of viewing popular sector neighbourhoods as a semi-autonomous space with its own social rules and forms of authority (Karst 1971); a perception which was also deeply held by the popular sectors themselves. At the same time, 'community politics' in the context of the Bolivarian project sought to challenge the overt clientelist history of the past by engaging barrio citizens into more collective and universal forms of participation, in par with a discourse that cast popular subjects as the chief protagonists in the construction of a new Venezuela.

From 2006, the state's top priority was the formation of communal councils; neighbourhood organisations with judicial status and recognition, covering between 200 and 400 families in urban areas, and less in rural areas. Backed by the 2006 Law for communal councils, council members were elected through local neighbourhood elections, but the ultimate authority to make decisions rested with the citizens assembly in which every resident above the age of 15 could vote. The communal councils could choose which project to prioritise for the welfare of the community. Usually, they opted for upgrading the residents' homes, or roads, waterworks, electricity, and sports facilities. New state funds were set up to finance such projects.

The communal councils constituted a building block in the state's broader vision to transform the Venezuelan state from a representative to a participative democracy. Rafael Delgado from the ruling party PSUV and a member of the National Assembly, who played a key role in developing the 2006 law, explained to me that

> [Citizens] have to understand that they have to learn to govern … what is being built on the political level is the new model of participatory and protagonist democracy, structures to displace the old government structures, new structures where those who are going to govern are the popular governments, the collective governments, the community governments, the commune governments.

> So people cannot have a vision of the mayor's office, or of the government, or anything like that, because those are institutions of the old State that in some way we are weakening so that the new structures are strengthened … that is where the people have to head, towards the new structures. (Rafael Delgado, personal interview, National Assembly building, Caracas, February 2010)

Delgado's words summarised the ideological and political visions that undercut the introduction of the communal councils. It was a way to 'learn people to govern', through fomenting not only local organisations, but also local consciousness and political and civic agency. These processes engendered new forms of political activism, as well as enhanced self-consciousness and re-valorisation of the human, social, spatial, and material qualities characterising and shaping communal life.

Caracas' Barrios

To capture this latter aspect, we need to explore the historical formation of popular sector neighbourhoods in Caracas. The barrios started to emerge in the 1930s, but their expansion did not accelerate until the end of the 1950s (Karst 1971: 552–553). Following the fall of the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1958, and in pace with population growth and the oil-rent induced rural-urban migration in the 1950 and 1960, former peasants flocked to the city in search for better life opportunities. At the time, Caracas was undergoing a process of metropolitan re-vitalisation, intended to modernise and 'rationalize the urban space that was until then characterized for its dispersion and provincialized appearance' (Duno-Gottberg 2009: 150). However, this urban remodelling did not include catering to the influx of immigrants. Consequently, the scattered dwellings in the hillsides surrounding the city gradually densified and turned into the peri-urban neighbourhoods they constitute today. Shacks of cardboard and corrugated iron were replaced with homes of bricks and cement, while new shacks popped up on the fringes. As more relatives arrived, or children started their own families, barrio homes were expanded, horizontally and vertically. New rooms or floors were added, new pieces of land cleared. Roads were paved, paths were trodden, and water-, sanitation-, and electricity facilities were improvised. Politicians and state officials were lobbied to improve the communities' lot or called upon through public demonstrations, and the wheels of clientelism and patronage prompted the arrival of donations and public works. Above all, barrio dwellers themselves struggled and worked diligently through individual and collective efforts to upgrade and dignify their living conditions.

Barrios as Built Social History

Popular neighbourhoods in Caracas (and elsewhere with similar urban formations) are visually impressive. They are also by many outsiders perceived as chaotic, anarchical, dangerous places. Representing the anti-theses to spatially ordered middle- and upper-class communities, one can easily get lost if one does not know one's way. From the insider's perspective, however, shantytowns are 'finely differentiated congeries of

micro-locales' (Wacquant 2008: 172), each with their own social characteristics and built qualities. The barrios are often named after a national hero, the date of a famous event, a feature of the local topography (Karst 1971: 559) or built environment, or one of the community founders. Once you become used to moving around, it begins to make sense why and how perceptions of the inner and outer edges of different localities are formed. Ridges, highways, and viaducts often separate one barrio from the other (Karst 1971: 554). Passages, alleyways, stairways, and mini-plazas are physical markers for particular sectors, having their origins in the foundation and expansion of the community.

People often identify strongly with the social and built history of 'their' community within the larger barrio territory. Theorists of space and place-making are concerned with 'how people form meaningful relations with the locales they occupy, how they attach meaning to space, and transform "space" into "place" […] how experience is embedded in place and how space holds memories that implicate people and events' (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 13). These meanings and experiences of being-in-space and constructing-place can be grasped through narratives (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 16), representing a manner of confirming, transforming, and reproducing the relationship between ourselves and our surroundings. Take the example of Rosa, a woman in her sixties, who could tell me in detail the history of 'her community'; who helped to build it, how they resolved their challenges, who had lived there, how had people's children and grandchildren fared, who were the community leaders in different epochs. She was six years old when her mother, father, herself, and five siblings moved into their new home atop of a steep hillside. This home consisted of a triangle built of two walls made of planks and the third wall covered with bed sheets and blankets. The family had arrived from San Christóbal in the interior state of Táchira a few years earlier because Rosa's father had an acute health problem. Through a family member in the army he received treatment at the military hospital in Caracas. Initially they were living in another part in town. However, the place was infested with rats, and when they came upon a rat eating off the plate of Rosa's baby brother, in front of the baby, her father had decided that enough was enough. Rosa's aunt's husband had told Rosa's father that people had started to squat at a hillside in Western Caracas, and her father decided to join them. Rosa said:

> so in the afternoons, on weekends, he would come … we all came, to what we called to bank the land, which was to flatten it, to shape it to start building, my dad came, my mom, my aunt's husband, my aunt … we were one of the first inhabitants of this sector. And well, little by little and as [the Venezuelan folk singer] Ali Primera says, the government gave you planks and iron sheets to build shacks (*ranchos*).

Over the next years and decades, more people started to occupy the hillside. Today it is occupied to its brim, only the parts in acute risk of landslide are still not habited. Through seeking out building material and donations through clientelist connections, the community had tried as best they could to set up infrastructure, Rosa told me. However, it was not until the government of Luis Herrera Campins (1979–1984) that they got wastewater channelled into a tube system, and the alleys and stairways

paved. This happened because Rosa's family knew the man who organised the local electoral campaign for Campins. Before the elections, Campins came to their house to mobilise votes and talked with Rosa's mother about what they needed. When elected, he kept to his promises and sent someone to improve their infrastructure.

Community and Security

Today, Rosa's home is spacious, with a patio and two extra homes (built by her two sons) added to the main building. Here she has raised five children and taken care of her parents until they died. Rosa took pride in the leadership role that her family, including herself, had held over the years as one of the community's founding families. However, even if she had lived in the area for nearly her whole life, she had a clear sensation of where 'her' community was in the sense of the immediate socio-territorial space to which she felt belonging. This included the settlements surrounding her own home, and the adjoining main street where the shops, bus stands, health station and street vending stalls were located. Her local habitat was circumscribed and structured by her social bonds; bonds that were forged through physical proximity, personal knowledge of people, and their collaborative efforts to develop their surroundings. For example, she would rarely follow the stairways below her house which led down to the bottom of the hill, because she did not know enough people there to feel safe. Neither would she venture into the worn-down apartment blocks that were standing atop of the hill, just a stone's throw away, which she considered to be populated by people of doubtful character. Once she commented that I had visited a larger part of the area than she had, even if she had lived there her whole life.

Rosa's reluctance to visit areas where she did not have personal bonds also reflects a key feature of barrio life: crime. Caracas is, by all standards, a highly unsafe city, and Caracas' barrios are notorious for their insecurity. Pink (2008) argues that 'it is by attuning her or himself to other people's practices that the ethnographer might be able, through her or his embodied experience, to make and thus comprehend the places she or he seeks to analyse' (2008: 175). What I learned through living in a barrio and moving around with informants, is that assessing security and risk is in many ways an embodied compass more than an objective assessment. It requires acquired knowledge of social and material space, and careful demarcations of boundaries between safe and unsafe places through the establishment of internalised security 'signposts'. These signposts include closeness to people you know and who know who you are, illumination, the built environment's field of view, degree of solitude or presence of people, the presence of presumably dubious people, closeness to established or rumoured 'risk zones', time of day, and generalised gut feeling. For myself, as a European, relatively young, Caucasian woman, this assessment was even more critical than for local residents. Yet so, they too were cautious about stepping out of their known environment, and they, as me, were scanning their surroundings for signs that might rise their alarms. The fear of crime thus circumscribes your being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 2002), but it also shapes your sense of community. 'My community' is where you have multiple points of social and material references, where you

know if the drug addict or youth gang on the corner is a threat or not, and where you know whom to trust or not trust. When people talked of 'my community', it could therefor often be inferred from context that it was this immediate space they referred to. At other times they talked about 'community' in progressively wider circles, meaning a larger part of the area, the whole parish, or 'the communities' in the sense of barrio communities in general.

Forming Political Community

The above account highlights key features of the social and material milieu encompassing local notions of 'my community' in everyday discourse. We will now explore how these socio-spatial formations served as the *mise-en-scène* for evolving notions of *political* community. As stated above, the formation of communal councils played a prominent political role since 2006.[2] The state had tasked Fundacomunal, a centrally funded public institution, with the responsibility of assisting the communities in the process. Fundacomunal's institutional history harkened back to the early Punto Fijo period, when it served as the regulating entity and dispenser of material aid for the growing informal neighbourhoods. At the time, the institution effectively functioned as a clientelist nodal point for the dominant parties. To facilitate the enactment of the 2006 Law for the communal councils, Fundacomunal underwent an institutional and ideological overhaul, as explained by the then-leader of Fundacomunal in the Libertador Municipality, Eliér Gonzáles, in 2010:

> [Before] Fundacomunal just stayed inside its own space, that is, this was the headquarter of Fundacomunal, that is where everything converged. So the barrio had to come to Fundacomunal, but now it is Fundacomunal who come to the barrio, explaining to them the processes for elaboration projects, explaining to them that the instructions are out there in the communities, that the cultural elements are out there in the communities, that the structural elements that needs to be restructured are out there in the communities and not inside the institutions, [because] the institutions of the Fourth Republic just stayed inside their own space, you see?

This new institutional ethos – that the institutions had to visit the communities, and not the other way around – pervaded political and grassroots discourse. In effect, institutional change was sluggish and incomplete, constituting a key point of contention between popular sector activists and state institutions (Strønen 2017). However, to meet the demand of 'going to the communities', Fundacomunal had created a new organisational figure of street level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) called 'promotores' (promoters). Their mandate was to encourage local organisation, validate communal council elections, oversee projects, and resolve conflicts.

The communal councils were heterogenous as regards social cohesion, enthusiasm, and organisational skills. In many cases, projects were successfully carried out, and the communal council became established as a legitimate locus for local organisation. In other cases, start-up efforts failed to lead to a functioning communal council, money simply disappeared, or local conflicts erupted. Both the state institutions and local inhabitants concurred in that communal councils had to be formed in alignment with local perceptions of space, sociality, and community. To form, elect, and register a

communal council, the preparatory committee had to elaborate in writing the social history of the area – a pedagogical nudge meant to rise local consciousness and sense of belonging. They also had to do a 'social diagnostic' (*diagnóstico integral*) of local material characteristics, deficiencies and needs (e.g. infrastructure, social services, housing), as well as human resources in the neighbourhood (e.g. labour skills, social organisations). Based on this overview, the aim was to develop a prioritised list over which needs were most urgent, and jointly develop and execute projects.

Before the communal councils were put into law, Fundacomunal and local inhabitants had cooperated in delineating the barrio communities into different units comprising the stipulated 200–400 families. However, these demarcations were sometimes contested, and occasionally a communal council split in two. Sometimes, different areas within one communal council represented competing fractions, reflecting that the neighbours living the closest to one another know each other best, trusted each other more, or had more mutual interests than, let's say, those further down the street or on the other side of the plaza.

A 'skilled' promotor as perceived by the promoters and by community inhabitants, was one who had an intimate understanding of the local characteristics of each communal council territory. As Pablo, a seasoned promoter worded it:

> because in Caracas it is very diverse, because there are sectors that are not culturally the same … you listen to people how they express themselves and their ways are totally different, it is idiosyncratic, we are very different, very diverse.

These cultural differences were cast as different social and political dynamics, different habits and customs, and differences in topography, built environment, and infrastructure. Moreover, whilst some communities had a long history of communal work as well as experienced and recognised leadership figures, other communities had none, often making it more challenging to initiate local organisation.

Typical ways of characterising a 'complicated' communal council were that 'they lack community' (*faltan communidad*), e.g. that they had not yet acquired a sufficient sense of shared belonging and solidarity, or that they have to 'form community' (*formar communidad*) before they could arrange elections or decide upon which project to carry out. As I followed the promoters around, they often talked to me about their impressions: who were community leaders, who aspired for leadership, who played out their own agendas. Often, different political fractions competed for leadership positions in the communal councils. It was not given that the fraction ideologically aligned with the government had the upper hand. Rather, such struggles were played out at the local level, grounded in community leadership, neighbourhood alliances, and friendships that may date long back, or diverging skills in networking with public officials.

The promoters as well as engaged community activists spent much time in meetings and assemblies advocating for fostering solidarity and trust; a prerequisite for successfully developing a communal council. This was contrasted with the neighbourhood councils during the Punto Fijo period, fostering clientelism, individualism, social fragmentation, corruption, and apathy in the form of people waiting for the state to

respond to their pleas. It was therefor of key importance to change these attitudes through making people understand that they not only had to assume collective responsibility for improving their living conditions, but also that they were the ones best equipped to do so, became they knew the community best. Thus, it was paramount to nourish the ideal that the communal council comprised the whole community, not just elected representatives. For that reason, those who held elected positions in the communal council work committees were called *voceros* – spokespersons – instead of representatives. Many promoters and activists lamented that people had a hard time adapting to the new conceptualisations of community organisation, especially the older generation who had been formed by the Punto Fijo period. However, this legacy was also pragmatically recognised. Problems such as conflicts, corruption, and apathy were often attributed to the long-term process of 'forming community' in a manner that engendered political and civic agency in alignment with the Bolivarian ideals of social solidarity and bottom-up democracy.

I want to draw out a key observation from the analysis so far, namely that new practices and notions of political community were crafted through the imbrication of the three central ideas. Firstly, the idea of the popular sectors as the *pueblo proper* in Bolivarian ideology. Secondly, the imagery of popular sector neighbourhoods as a socio-territorial space vested with distinct material, cultural, and human qualities and configurations. And thirdly; through the re-articulation of a historically formed state-community relationship consisting of semi-formal arrangement and relations through which the state provided 'assistance' to the inhabitants' auto-construction and auto-development efforts.[3] Thus, whilst the Bolivarian state sought to distance itself from the politics of the Venezuelan state of the past, its approach to re-kindle relations with popular sector communities also evolved from it. It is central to capture, however, that the idea of popular sector neighbourhoods as a distinct space commanding forms of communal governance dissimilar to that of 'formal neighborhoods', was not an idea solely imposed from above by the state. Rather, grassroots activists were highly wary of top-down projects and programmes doing more harm than good. This resistance was rooted in scepticism to state institutions, popular sector identities foregrounding embodied knowledge of local space and place, perceptions of the barrio as a space governed by localised social and political relations, and the existence of collective metís (Scott 1998) evolved through historical efforts to develop their communities in a challenging terrain and with limited resources. Thus, what grassroots activists wanted, was for the state to assume responsibility for remedying its 'historical debt to the poor', but on the community's own terms. This ethos engendered negotiation and struggles with the state; processes that also illuminated the heterogeneity of 'community' beyond the homogenising notion of 'the organized community' as a new political subject vis-à-vis the state.

Negotiating 'Community'

This became particularly clear to me during a lengthy process of community mobilisation in the parish of 23 de Enero, aimed at pushing the state to complete a local

hospital project that had been abandoned two years prior. 23 de Enero (January 23), is the most emblematic popular parish in Caracas, and indeed Venezuela. Its fame derives both from its built environment, and from its particular social and political organisation. The parish was established in the late 1950s on the order of Marcos Pérez Jiménez as an 'ideal' working class area, featuring 56 giant 'superblocks' in addition to 42 smaller blocks, nested around and towering over plazas, schools, recreational zones, and spaces for commercial activity. Now, the parish is also dotted with barrio communities (a sharp distinction is made between 'the barrio' and 'the blocks'). Politically, it has since Pérez Jiménez' ousting in 1959 been known as a leftist hotbed. The parish's notoriety is derived from the presence of groups known as *collectivos* (litt: collective), many of them holding territorial control over distinct areas and displaying a militant and often armed presence (Strønen 2017: 124–127).[4]

In the said case, several long-term community activists initiated a take-over of the abandoned construction site, gathering colectivos, communal councils, and other residents. The purpose was to re-start the construction process and ensure that the hospital was constructed in alignment with the community's interest. Over the next weeks, community leaders drew on networks and contacts to nudge representatives from various state institutions to come to the construction site and discuss in plenary how to move the project forward. Several public offices, including the Ministry of Health and the municipal property development office Fundacaracas came on board, whilst community members cleaned up debris and waste, set up work groups to discuss and vote on various aspects related to the project, and safeguarded it from youths and delinquents at night (the latter was bestowed to the colectivos, after some heated discussions).

It soon transpired that many individuals and groups had diverging interests in, and perceptions of, a range of issues that the hospital generated. This included what would happen with the adjacent baseball and football fields, the proximity of the hospital to the adjacent barrio (whose representatives were worried that human waste disposed from the hospital would attract rats), and the question of who would be employed at the hospital after it was finished (a process which corresponded to health committees in the communal councils close to the building site). Some conflicts were played out in open meetings. In these discussions, claims were constantly made in the name of 'the community'. Sometimes the reference was to a particular adjacent community as constituted and represented by a communal council. Sometimes it encompassed a larger territorial sweep, uttered for example through statements about the whole parish community's right to have a well-functioning hospital. At other times, individuals postulated themselves as 'community' to legitimise their viewpoints. For example, one woman held an interjection defending the colectivos and their role in the community and in the project, claiming that 'I am colectivo, but I am also community, and as community I am going to assume responsibility of doing social comptrollership and involve myself in this'. The two community activists who usually led the meetings worked hard to foster cohesion, warning against letting sectarianism, individualism, and egoism prevail over the whole community's best interest. However, this reconciling endeavour was complicated by the fact that they were not from that exact area, but rather from one kilometre further down the road. That area was considered a different

sector, and hence also a different community, which meant that their authority as grassroots leaders in the socio-spatial territory encompassing the communities adjacent to the hospital was not firmly established.

The process advanced slowly, with many open and covert disputes. In the community coalitions' dealings with state representatives, however, intense symbolic and discursive efforts were put into underscoring that the community, as a popular body, were not only legitimate participants, but also the legitimate co-executors of the project. Discursive references were made to Chávez' directives for the state to align with the organised community, and for the organised community to unite in the name of popular power. At the meetings, minutes and protocols were signed – by the state representatives and by everyone present – to underscore the formalities in the processes taking place. These processual symbols of officialdom highlighted that this was not a meeting between state representatives and a random collection of citizens. Rather, it was a meeting between the state and the organised community; a form of governance that commanded political legitimacy as an expression of popular sovereignty.

The hospital was not up and running until two years later, and the full story is too complicated to chronicle here (but see Strønen 2017). What the process illuminated, however, was the fruitfulness of paying close attention to speech-acts in which 'the community' is invoked. As Irazábal and Foley note with reference to Venezuela, 'in the tension between the creation and contestation of new political projects, "imagined communities" are redefined, as are new subjectivities of solidarity and belonging' (2008: 160–161). New political practices in the interface between the grassroots and the state revealed that 'the community' was composed by heterogenous groups, networks, and individuals equipped with different and stratified interests and resources. Concurrently, the invocation of 'the community' could also foster collective community leverage vis-à-vis the state. Thus, in practice, new state practices, state-community relations, and local relations were negotiated through everyday political processes on different arenas, involving different actors 'outside' and 'inside' the community as well as public institutions. What is important to capture, however, is that undergirding these emerging – though contested – notions of political community was a deeper script against which it resonated. 'Community' in the barrio is constituted through its material and socio-spatial history, conjuring a multiplicity of symbolisms, histories, and narratives, as well as relations of reciprocity and animosity, bonds of friendship, kinship and alliances, gossip and hearsay, trust, and mistrust. 'Community' also invokes deeper stories about collective suffering, deprivation, struggles, and victories. These are stories that bind together the past and the present, that situate people in both a physical location and a form of sociality, and which bespeak the boundaries (Cohen 1985) between the imagined barrio community and privileged society.[5]

Conclusion

As socialist projects historically tend to do, the legitimacy of the Bolivarian revolutionary state was invoked through purportedly aligning itself with 'the people', whilst

'revolutionary' techniques of governance by way of extending its reach into popular sector communities implied the ordering, re-arrangement and cooptation of local social practices, imaginaries, and networks. However, this analysis has not sought to demonstrate a top-down imposition of 'community' templates estranged from popular perceptions and practices. Rather, I have shown how state-community interaction were forged in the intersections between the state's project, and lived life and established practices in barrio neighbourhoods, and how local social and territorial configurations in decisive ways shaped how the state's policies unfolded.

Above, I noted 'community's' 'romantic' connotations. 'Community' as idiosyncratically voiced in the barrios, is decidedly bestowed with positive attributes, as a desirable state of unity, solidarity, trust, and collective action. However, any anthropologist knows that through staying put, more complex dynamics and histories come to the fore. That does not mean that simple, harmonious narratives are a lie or a conscious attempt to conceal conflictive dynamics, but rather that the stories we tell about our human fellowships are crafted to put emphasise on a particular facet of the story. Through examining the deeper histories and dynamics behind 'community' templates, we also learn more about what the stories that people tell *mean to them;* what they express about their values, desires, norms, and moralities.

The attempts to craft political community in barrio communities in Caracas were permeated with conflicts and contradictions. Yet so, it also responded to a long-term demand espoused by marginalised communities to not only having their collective social needs attended to, but also to be acknowledged by the state as knowledgeable and legitimate political subjects. As 'community' became a discursive symbol vested with political legitimacy, epitomising popular epistemologies, practices and sociality, popular history was also re-valorised and re-signified. Concurrently, new imagined, as well as social and political communities, were crafted.

I conclusion, through approaching 'community' as an object of study, I have turned the concept's multi-layered and multivocal bearings into an analytical asset. I contend that through incorporating into our writing a more critical approach to 'community', our analytical gaze will be sharpened. We are by default in the trade of studying human communities, whether rural, urban, multisited, transnational, digital, imagined, or otherwise. Unshrouding our informants', as well as our own, assertations to 'community' may contribute to render even more clearly the complexities of how human beings group together, for better or worse.

Notes

1. Other figures of local intermediaries between the state and popular sector communities included the AD-supported *Comités de Barrio* (Barrio committees) and *Comités de Base* (Base committees) – partially instituted to displace the influence of the Communist party (Fernandes 2010: 45–46).
2. The commune (*la comuna*) was another novel institutional feature, structured as different communal councils (and other community organizations) cooperating ad-hoc in cross-territorial projects, or forming a long-term collaborative structure. The aim was for such

organizational structures to develop organically as popular organizations multiplied and became more skilled.
3. Middle-class communities could also establish communal councils. However, few did, both for political-ideological reasons, because they had other modalities of civic organization, and because they had fewer social needs.
4. Especially after Hugo Chávez' death in 2013, and the onset of the social and economic crisis in Venezuela since 2014, many of the colectivos have evolved into what can be characterized as vigilante- and mafia groups. However, at the time of my fieldwork, their illicit dealings were less prominent, and many of them were extensively engaged in social and cultural activities, both on their own accounts and collaborating with the communal councils and other social groups. Nevertheless, many residents were wary of their claims to local power, particularly as the communal councils surged as new loci of formal local authority.
5. Evidently, the attempts to envelope popular sector communities with a notion of political communities aligned with the state also draw up new boundaries; not least vis-à-vis those who did not support, or even opposed the Bolivarian project. As I am focusing on political discourse and practices pertinent to grassroots supporters of the Bolivarian revolution, this discussion it is beyond the scope of this article.

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