THE SPATIALITY OF THE SOCIAL RESPONSE TO WATER PRIVATISATION: THE CASE STUDY OF THE COCHABAMBA WATER CONFLICT (1999-2000)

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Abstract

This article is a critical discussion on the case study of the Cochabamba Water Conflict in 1999-2000. The focus is on the spatiality of the popular opposition which led various local organisations to join forces in order to oppose the privatisation, and the result was the creation of a social movement called "La Coordinadora", composed by both urban and rural associations. This movement was able to bring together protesters from all classes, ages, occupations, and ethnicities; it was capable of creating a sense of "us" and of belonging between the people, as well as the perception that their society was at risk. And, through this organisation, protesters sought to take and make place in a different way compared to the dominant one. The paper points out how social relations are spatially constructed and shape local people's decisions and how spatial relations are central in the dynamics of movements such as the *Coordinadora*. It relies mainly on secondary sources, backed by academic studies that investigated the theoretical debates surrounding social movements and the role of spatiality in social conflicts.

Questo articolo è una discussione critica sul caso studio del conflitto per l'acqua di Cochabamba nel 1999-2000. Il focus è sulla spazialità dell'opposizione popolare che spinse diverse organizzazioni locali a unire le forze per opporsi alla privatizzazione, creando un movimento sociale chiamato "La Coordinadora", composto da associazioni urbane e rurali. Questo movimento fu in grado di riunire manifestanti di tutte le classi, età, occupazioni ed etnie; di creare un senso di "noi" e di appartenenza tra la gente, nonché la percezione che la loro società fosse a rischio. E, attraverso questa organizzazione, i/le manifestanti cercarono di prendere e fare spazio in un modo diverso rispetto a quello dominante. L'articolo evidenzia come le relazioni sociali siano costruite spazialmente e diano forma alle decisioni delle popolazioni locali, e come le relazioni spaziali siano centrali nelle dinamiche dei movimenti come la *Coordinadora*. Si basa principalmente su fonti secondarie, supportate da studi accademici che hanno indagato i dibattiti teorici sui movimenti sociali e sul ruolo della spazialità nei conflitti sociali.

Keywords:

Introduction

The city of Cochabamba is the third largest city in Bolivia, and it is located in a valley between the area of the Chapare and the *altiplano* (the Bolivian highlands). The city has a long history of problems linked to access to water. To worsen the situation, the expanding population and a drier climate in time turned Cochabamba's once lush valley into an increasingly arid environment. Problems with access to water were thus not new for the residents of Cochabamba. By 1997 the performance of the municipal company, the SEMAPA[1], was very poor. Only approximately 57% of the residents were covered (Dangl; 2007) and the losses due to leakages amounted up to 50%. Also, SEMAPA mainly focused on developing the water services in the richest neighbourhoods of Cochabamba (i.e., in the centre and in the north of the city), whereas the neighbourhoods inhabited by poorer residents (i.e., the south of the city) were almost completely neglected and had therefore solved the issue by creating a great number of "independent water committees" and, through these, the local people worked together in order to drill wells and find ways to obtain water.

When the so-called *Guerra del Agua* broke out in 1999, it had approximately 500,000 residents and the public water network only reached about 60% of the population of the city (Dangl, 2007). In 1999, the World Bank (WB) pushed the Bolivian government to open to the private sector in order to be able to obtain foreign debt relief and the investment required to restructure and further develop the water services system. Eventually, on September 3rd, 1999, during a closed-door meeting, the Bolivian government signed a forty-year contract to privatise Cochabamba's water system with Aguas del Tunari (AdT) - a multinational consortium led by the British firm International Water, a subsidiary of the United States Bechtel Corporation. This concession was supplemented by the adoption of the Law 2029 one month later with the aim of regulating the water sector through a set of rules. This regulation created the legal framework which authorised private-public partnerships (PPP) in the water field by enabling private firms to acquire legal responsibility for water sources and service provision (Choucri; 2015). Through the concession contract, AdT obtained exclusive rights of exploitation of water resources and provision of water services in the area and extendable to the adjacent valleys. These valleys were the settlement of a great number of associations of *regantes* (users of irrigation waters) and small communities. Therefore, this clause of the Contract ended up affecting the rights of all these people. Indeed, as a consequence, local citizens would have to pay for all sources of water, from raindrops to the water in community-built wells. As a matter of fact, there was a great variety of autonomous water systems. However, Law 2029 established that such systems were not legal in the territory subject to a privatisation contract and that only the company under contract could allocate water. Furthermore, the Act imposed limitations on the peasants, who could not build tanks in order to collect rainwater anymore but had to request permissions from the superintendent of water. Also, the *regantes* feared that water for irrigation would soon be charged. Local organisations instantly raised concerns over the scope of this Law and over the Concession Contract. It was a period during which neoliberalism was the prevailing economic strategy, yet it was being met with increasing opposition. Both with the Concession Contract and then with the Law 2029, the representation and the participation of the local people were very limited. And the privatisation only reduced popular participation and control even further. Furthermore, subsidies were eliminated, and the company increased prices also due to

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[1] Servicio Municipal de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado.

the need to reflect the real economic cost of the service. Peasants in the neighbouring areas were among the ones most affected by this regulation since they had to start paying for water used for irrigation that was previously free of charge. The measures implemented had significant impacts for citizens since 70% of the population lived below the poverty line (Choucri; 2015). Also, the Contract guaranteed to the licensee a return rate of 16%. Yet, in order to get this return rate, it was necessary to raise the tariffs. In January 2000, this charge was approximately 35%, but it also happened that it reached levels of 150%.

Despite the fact that in the course of its first months of activity AdT was able to successfully reduce the amount of leakage loss, it must be highlighted that approximately half of the population still remained without an access to the central water supply system. But the promise had been of lower costs, a more efficient management, and an improved distribution. However, in Cochabamba privatisation had the opposite effects: costs skyrocketed, distribution faltered, and the poorest citizens were hit the hardest (Dangl; 2007). All these factors eventually converged and led to the Cochabamba Water Conflict between 1999-2000 and to the creation of the *Coordinadora*, a heterogeneous rural-urban multiclass organisation, through which protesters sought to take and make place in a different way compared to the dominant one.

Methodology

This paper brings a critical discussion on the case study of the Cochabamba Water Conflict and aims to investigate how spatiality influenced the formation of the social movement of the *Coordinadora*, and the role that spatiality played in the social conflict in Cochabamba.
In addition to the examination of writings by key figures in the *Coordinadora*, such as its leader Oscar Olivera, the research methodology of this paper includes a range of secondary sources. These sources include scholarly articles, books, and reports that contribute to a multifaceted understanding of the Cochabamba Water Conflict and the social movement under consideration. By delving into the insights provided by social activists, the paper aims to uncover the historical context and motivations driving the opposition. Furthermore, it explores the organisational structure and dynamics of the social movement, shedding light on the intricate network of the people involved. The analysis extends beyond the immediate participants to consider the broader implications of the *Coordinadora*.
Moreover, the research delves into academic studies that investigate the theoretical debates surrounding social movements and the role of spatiality in social conflicts, providing a conceptual framework to interpret the *Coordinadora*'s significance. The investigation extends to explore the role of spatiality in social conflicts, examining how spatiality contributes to the creation and development of such social movements and highlighting how spatiality extends beyond mere physical geography as it encompasses the symbolic significance of places and thus their political meaningfulness. This multifaceted approach aims to enrich the understanding of the *Coordinadora* and contribute to the broader discourse on how spatiality influences the formation of social movements and their intricate dynamics.

The *Guerra del Agua* (1999-2000) and the *Coordinadora*

As a protest to Law 2029, in November 1999, the FEDECOR[2] blocked the highways that led in and out of the city for one day. Afterwards, the Federation of Irrigators met with Oscar Olivera, the president of the FDTFC[3] and, in a meeting with a group of people consisting of farmers, industrial workers, etc., it was discussed that a unified mobilisation – both rural and urban – was necessary against the government's aim to control irrigation water and to impose rate hikes on the water users. The result was the creation of the Coalition for the Defence of Water and Life[4], or *Coordinadora*, through which this group of people started to organise themselves for collective action (Schultz; 2008). As argued by Schultz (2008), this organisation arose not only as a direct reaction to the Concession Contract and Law 2029, but its members considered it as a response to local institutions which should have protected the public's interest but completely failed to do so.

The *Coordinadora* was led by the charismatic figure of Oscar Olivera, shoe-factory labourer and president of the FDTFC, as its president and by Omar Fernández, the president of FEDECOR, as its vice-president. This composition allowed the organisation to have an important rural-urban dimension. The headquarters of the organisation were located at the FDTFC, which had a strategic position since it stood on a corner of the colonial central square of the city, Plaza 14 de Septiembre (Assies; 2003). Soon, a red banner appeared outside the headquarters of the Coordinadora (see fig.1) and it read: "*¡El agua es nuestra, carajo!*" (The water is ours, damn it!).

Figure 1 – The Banner *"¡El agua es nuestra, carajo!"* (The Water is Ours, Damn It!) at the Headquarters of the *Coordinadora* (source: *Coordinadora*)

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[2] In the 1990s, there were a series of conflicts (wars of the wells) which led local rural-based organisations to join together into a defence committee, which, in the mid-1990s, transformed into the FEDECOR, the Federación Departamental Cochabambina de Organizaciones de Regantes - The Cochabamba Department Federation of Irrigators' Organizations.

[3] The Federación Departamental de Trabajadores Fabriles de Cochabamba - Departmental Federation of Factory Workers of Cochabamba (FDTFC) is noteworthy for its attempts to try and find a creative response to the crisis that affected the Bolivian trade-union sector in the mid-1980s. Ever since, the FDTFC has tried to keep the population informed about labour conditions through the media and has tried to enhance the organisation of unions also in smaller factories and shops (Assies; 2003).

[4] The *Coordinadora por la Defensa del Agua y la Vida*.

In January 2000, the people connected to the municipal water supply system received their first water bills with severe raises in the tariffs – it happened that these also reached 150%. This was met with angry reactions by the affected users. A great number of people turned to the FDFTC in order to express their discontent about the water charges. The *Coordinadora* was thus able to receive some media coverage, through which it asked to refuse to pay the fees. The reaction of AdT came from its manager, Geoffrey Thorpe, who warned that, in case of non-payment of the bills, water would not be supplied to the users (*ibidem*; 2003). On January 10th, 2000, the *Coordinadora* organised a meeting. A great number of people gathered for the meeting: upset citizens, professional figures attacking the flaws of the Concession Contract, members of various organisations (e.g., FEDECOR, trade unions, etc.). The result was the decision to close down the city from January 11th. As a matter of fact, Cochabamba was successfully immobilised: the various organisations involved were able to close strategic roads and set up some barricades. On the following day, despite the end of the strike, in the rural areas and the periphery, the roadblocks still continued (*ibidem*; 2003).

On January 13th, the government invited the *Coordinadora* to meet their delegation at a specific time, however the latter arrived late, making the protesters who had gathered in the city square even angrier. There was tumult in the city: after the start of the negotiations, the police began to throw tear gas against the crowd. The outcome of the meeting was an agreement in which the delegation committed to revising the Concession Contract and Law 2029 and creating a commission to analyse the water tariffs (Olivera and Lewis, 2004; Assies, 2003). However, there was a refusal to revise the rate hikes (Olivera and Lewis; 2004). Yet, it was agreed that private water systems (e.g., wells) in the area subject to the Concession Contract would not be under AdT monopoly (Assies; 2003). According to the agreement, the government had a period of three months in order to respond to these points. Meanwhile, the *Coordinadora* organised an assembly in order to consult the people about the agreement, and the decision was to organise a peaceful demonstration for February 4th, 2000, in order to encourage the government to comply with the agreed points. The inhabitants of the city called this peaceful march "*la toma de Cochabamba (the takeover of Cochabamba)*" (Olivera and Lewis; 2004, cit. p.32) and it consisted in the symbolic occupation of the central plaza of the city, Plaza 14 de Septiembre, as a demonstration of the opposition of the citizens to the government and to AdT. However, on February 4th, the day of the march, soldiers had been positioned on the cardinal points of Cochabamba (where the marchers were grouped together) as government officials and the local business élites feared this "takeover" (as the protesters called it). The soldiers soon repressed the crowd of marchers with tear gas and violence. In spite of this, the marchers were able to get closer to the central square of the city and were soon joined by many local citizens. Eventually, the clashes ended on February 5th, with the "Cochabamba Agreement" to revise the tariffs and open negotiations on proposals for changes to the No. 2029 Act.

Towards the end of February, there was a stagnation in the negotiations. In March 2000, the *Coordinadora* organised a "*consulta popular*" (popular referendum) and, beginning on March 26th, for three days, activists set up throughout Cochabamba to ask local people about their opinion on the water tariffs and the water law. More than 50,000 people participated on a voluntary basis, and 90% of the voters were in favour of the annulment of AdT's contract (Schultz; 2008).

At the end of March 2000, the *Coordinadora* declared that they would launch a civil strike with roadblocks on April 4th and that it would continue until their main demands were carried out by the government. Their demands were the following: the annulment of the Concession Contract and the abrogation of the Law 2029. On April 4th, the so-called "*Última Batalla*" (Final Battle) began and the city was closed down by the protests. On April 8th, a "state of siege" was declared in the country for 90 days. Despite this decree, the protesters gathered in the central square and in the streets, but tear gas was fired at them. In order to avoid the diffusion of the news, the military forces cut the power supply to several news stations in the area. Meanwhile, the clashes in Cochabamba intensified: cars were burnt, municipal offices were attacked and Plaza 14 de Septiembre was occupied once again.

Eventually, on April 9th, there was the official announcement of the withdrawal of AdT. And, on the following day, the "state of siege" was finally revoked (Bustamante; 2004).

The spatiality of social movements: analysing the *Coordinadora* and the *Guerra del Agua*

Spatiality holds a crucial role in the genesis and mobilisation of social movements (Nicholls *et al.*; 2013) and the *Coordinadora* serves as a compelling case study, offering insights into the multifaceted ways in which spatial dimensions contribute to the creation and development of social movements and shape the decisions of local communities.

Leitner *et al.* (2008) have argued that there are five spatialities that shape and form contentious politics: scale, place, networks, positionality and mobility. In their analysis, "scale" refers to the varying levels at which political action occurs, from the local to the global. "Place" emphasises the significance of specific locations in shaping political conflicts, considering the unique characteristics and meanings attached to different spaces. "Networks" involve the interconnected relationships among actors, both individuals and groups, that contribute to the formation and dynamics of social movements. "Positionality" underscores the importance of the relative position of individuals and groups within social structures, acknowledging how power differentials impact participation in contentious politics. Finally, "mobility" recognises the fluid movement of people, ideas, and resources, emphasising the dynamic nature of political action. In the case of the Water Conflict of Cochabamba, these spatialities have played a big role. The notion of "scale" is evident as the conflict involved actors at various levels, from local communities to international organisations (e.g. the WB). Indeed, political and economic structures were scaled in order to both legitimise and to challenge the power relation between the government and the residents of Cochabamba. The concept of "place" is fundamental in understanding the symbolic importance of the specific locations in Cochabamba where the most crucial moments of the social conflict took place. As a matter of fact, it is possible to identify four moments during the conflict when the objective of the mobilisation was to disrupt social order through the control of space: the "*bloqueo indefinido por la dignidad civil*" (11th January), "*la toma de Cochabamba*" (4th February), the

"*consulta popular*" (3rd March) and the "*Última Batalla*" (4th April). In particular, the appropriation of Plaza 14 de Septiembre represented a major issue in the conflict (Uhel; 2019). The strategic

importance of the main square is explained by the presence of buildings that reflect relations of economic, political and ideological domination, extending the symbolic charge accumulated by this site since the city's foundation (Montano and Marina; 2003). This square is the location of political and military (City Council, police and army headquarters), economic (Chamber of Commerce, banks) and ideological institutions (cathedral and church). It also housed the FDTFC headquarters, which served as a meeting and decision-making place for the *Coordinadora* (Uhel; 2019).

The concept of "networks" comes into play as diverse groups and individuals, including social activists, local communities, and international supporters, came together and formed interconnected alliances to advocate for their water-related concerns. Indeed, the protesters came from all classes, ages, occupations and ethnicities and they were united in their resistance towards the privatisation (Simmons; 2016). Indeed, the *Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y de la Vida* was a rural-urban multiclass coalition that became an organisation on November 11th, 1999. It was composed by various groups with a heterogeneous background: the FEDECOR, which consisted of local professionals, including engineers and environmentalists - the first ones to raise concerns over the scope of the Water Law 2029; a federation of peasant farmers who relied on irrigation; and the FDTFC led by Oscar Olivera, one of the main leaders of the protests against the privatisation of water. As Olivera himself (2004) pointed out, the intention of the organisation was to "*call upon the whole population to join the struggle*" (*ibidem*; 2004, cit. p.28) with the main aims of cancelling the Concession Contract and modifying the Law 2029. And it is important to highlight how, despite the heterogeneity of its participants, the *Coordinadora* succeeded in constructing a political alliance around a common demand, i.e., water. Indeed, it became the core of the opposition to the policy (Otto and Böhm; 2006). "Positionality" is evident in the power dynamics between different stakeholders, such as the government, multinational corporations, and grassroots movements. Indeed, in this struggle, many different scales were involved. Indeed, the IMF and the WB were responsible for pushing the Bolivian State to privatise water, and this led to a response from civil society. Global forces were able to position themselves in the middle, between national and local spaces, and this secured them the ability to maximise their influence on both spaces (Nicholls *et al.*; 2013). Lastly, "mobility" is evident as ideas and strategies for resistance and advocacy have traversed various spaces, contributing to the dynamic and evolving nature of the Water Conflict of Cochabamba.

Morevorer, "*place is often attributed symbolic meaning that constitutes the basis for the memory, identity, and ideology construction*" and "*although the spatial form of a community is socially constructed and reflects socio-economic relations, once it is formed, it can functionally act as a social structure and its impact on social actions cannot always be reduced to socio-economic relations*" (Zhang & Zhao; 2018, cit. p.99). In this regards, the *Coordinadora* used slogans such as "The Water is Ours, Damn It" and "The Water is of the People" (Simmons, 2016; p. 44), which were capable of creating a sense of "us" and of belonging between the people, as well as the perception that their society and their home was at risk (*ibidem*; 2016). As a matter of fact, protests are surely a way of resisting power, but they should not only be seen as symbolic or direct confrontations with power because the protesters also seek to take and make place in a different way compared to the dominant one (Anderson; 2015). The protest activities carried out by sub-groups of the *Coordinadora* consisted of arranged roadblocks and programmed strikes. Also, open town meetings as well as weekly information journals were organised. Therefore, the

decision-making process was based on a deep sense of involvement and participation (Otto and Böhm; 2006). Through this, they were able to encourage people to think that change was possible. The heterogeneous members developed strong ties among each other, and by attaining from common symbolic frames, they successfully activated collective action and emotions against AdT and the Concession Contract.

Since, as already mentioned, the organisation consisted of various groups and identities, it can be considered as a network-based organisation (Juris; 2005) which deployed many different strategies and ways in order to organise itself. As a matter of fact, common identities and interests are forged through struggles and relational exchanges, and they are not always prior to power struggle (Nicholls *et al.*; 2013). And, in this case scenario, the concept of water assumed the role of "empty signifier" (Laclau; 1996) because it incorporated in itself a plurality of demands and diverse interpretations. According to Laclau, it is important to start studying a movement from its smallest component – its demand. The demand develops the identity of the faction, which in turn is essential to unify "the people". It must arrive to a variety of different actors so that they can join forces, eliminating their dissimilarities. This is obtained through what Laclau and Mouffe have defined as an "equivalential chain" (Laclau and Mouffe; 1985, p. 130). The subjects involved erase their dissimilarities so as to be represented by means of a specific demand. In the case of Cochabamba's water struggle, the common demand of the movement was water and the annulment of the concession contract with AdT. Despite their varied concerns and identities, the members of the *Coordinadora* found common ground in the overarching demand related to water rights. In this process, the "equivalential chain" functioned as a mechanism for solidarity, allowing individuals and groups to transcend their differences and unite under a shared cause in a relation of interdependence (Lilian; 2021). The demand for water became a symbolic rallying point, fostering a sense of collective identity and purpose within the *Coordinadora*. Moreover, the *Coordinadora* may be considered as structured through what Tarrow and McAdam (2005) have defined as the 'brokerage' mechanism, namely the proliferation of mobilisation due to the creation of links among different actors who were formerly unconnected. This mechanism sheds light on how the movement gained momentum and expanded its reach by creating connections among previously unconnected actors. The 'brokerage' mechanism, in this context, facilitated the proliferation of mobilisation by establishing links between various social groups and individuals with distinct identities and/or concerns. The strength of this kind of mechanism is that it greatly increases the potential effect of any kind of collective action, even in cases in which the mechanism is more fragile since the actors possess weaker instruments of social integration owing to the fact that different identities may exist within a same group. Within the *Coordinadora*, diverse actors with differing backgrounds and interests were brought together through this 'brokerage' mechanism, allowing the movement to harness the collective power of previously disparate groups. The creation of links among these actors played a crucial role in broadening the scope of the movement, enhancing its capacity for mobilisation, and enabling a more comprehensive and impactful collective action. This complexity, instead of hindering the movement, contributed to its resilience and adaptability.

In the introduction to their work, *Conceptualizing the Spatialities of Social Movements*, Nicholls *et al.* (2013) have asserted how social relations are spatially constructed and shape local people's decisions, and how spatial relations are central in the dynamics of movements. Also, each spatiality

(e.g., place, space, territory, scale, networks, etc.) influences the formation of social movements and their specific characteristics. Each of the spatial dimensions contribute uniquely to the formation and characteristics of social movements. For instance, the concept of "place" may influence the symbolic and cultural aspects of a movement, while considerations of "scale" can reveal the movement's reach and impact. Indeed, social movements have a multifaceted nature and spatial dimensions intricately shape the dynamics, strategies, and specific features of movements within the broader socio-political landscape. This is clearly demonstrated by the formation of the *Coordinadora* with its specific characteristics. Nicholls *et al.* (2013) have also asserted how it is of great importance for social movements and for the State to be able to control and regulate the flow of resources. Indeed, the creation of territory may be the basis for the construction of a territorial identity and a sense of solidarity in collective movements. This particular scenario may be perceived as what Harvey (2001) has defined as a 'place in itself', i.e., the empowering effect of place-based relations that are able to create a cohesive movement – initially made up of dispersed and unconnected individuals – for social and political transformation. As a matter of fact, the traditional strategy of the States to penetrate places and to hamper them before they can evolve into anti-systemic movements did not succeed in Cochabamba. Indeed, as claimed by Perreault (2006), the organisation and its protests "*became a venue for the expression of manifold frustration on the part of the people with its long history of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation, marginalization and poverty*" (*ibidem*; 2006, cit. p.151).

Last but not least, it is important to highlight that water is a common-pool resource (CPR)[5], and therefore the privatisation of water may be seen as an inequality in itself. And these issues also relate to power: indeed, through the privatisation, global companies could gain the opportunity to profit at the expense of the residents of Cochabamba. As Massey (1991) has argued: "*[...] the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people. Differential mobility can weaken the leverage of the already weak. The time-space compression of some groups can undermine the power of others*" (*ibidem*; 1991, cit. p.4). Moreover, power tends to be unequally distributed, and it is through cultural acts that places are taken or made. Indeed, as stated by Anderson (2015), "*when individuals and groups act, there are always geographical consequences. Traces are made, orders issued, and borders constructed. It is through geography – through taking and making place – that power is exercised, made visible, and has effects. The struggle for place is therefore both the manifestation of cultural struggle and the medium of that struggle, it is in place that power is constituted and played out*" (*ibidem*; 2015, cit. p.54). Power is both domination and resistance, and it is through these two types of acts that traces, places and meanings are fought over, as the case of the Cochabamba Water Conflict has clearly demonstrated.

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[5] Common-pool resources are natural (or man-made) goods that share characteristics with both public and private goods: indeed, they are shared but also have a finite nature. This type of goods may be affected by congestion and overuse as, very often, individual and collective interest may clash – for this reason, some scholars argue that these goods tend to be subject to the "tragedy of the commons" (with each person trying to obtain the biggest benefit for himself without thinking about the rest).

Conclusion

During the scenario of the water conflict, the *Coordinadora* played a fundamental role against the privatisation process. According to Laclau, it is important to start studying a movement from its smallest component – its demand. The demand develops the identity of the faction, which in turn is essential to unify "the people". It must arrive to a variety of different actors so that they can join forces, eliminating their dissimilarities. This is obtained through what Laclau and Mouffe have defined as an "equivalential chain" (Laclau and Mouffe; 1985, p. 130). The subjects involved erase their dissimilarities so as to be represented by means of a specific demand. In the case of Cochabamba's water struggle, the common demand of the movement was water and the annulment of the concession contract with AdT. Moreover, the *Coordinadora* was a rural-urban multiclass organisation that succeeded in bringing together protesters from all classes, ages, occupations and ethnicities. The *Coordinadora* used slogans such as "The Water is Ours, Damn It" and "The Water is of the People", which were capable of creating a sense of "us" and of belonging between the people, as well as the perception that their society was at risk (Simmons; 2016). And it constructed a political alliance around a common demand, i.e., water. Through this organisation, protesters sought to take and make place in a different way compared to the dominant one (Anderson; 2015) and, eventually, they were successful in their struggle against privatisation.

In the organisation and development of resistance, spatial relations are central (Nicholls *et al.*; 2013) and this resistance, through mobilisation, transforms into social movements (Wolford; 2004), such as the *Coordinadora*. The dynamics of putting together a great number of different subjects and groups (each one of them with a personal opinion and political imaginary) for defiant actions of spatial appropriation not only highlight how these groups use political modalities of action that are horizontal and democratic, but also show how these modes of actions are backed by ingenious spatial strategies. The decision-making process inside the *Coordinadora* was based on a deep sense of involvement and participation (Otto and Böhm; 2006). Through this, they were able to encourage people to think that change was possible.

The physical layout of urban environments, resource distribution, and access to public spaces are pivotal factors shaping the dynamics of social movements. The creation of strong ties between members of a social movement is enhanced by place and the unpredictability of high-risk mobilisations is diminished by this kind of relations between members of a movement. Hence, place is fundamental as it enables the creation of strong relations, which are necessary to ease mobilisations. Also, places offer the common symbolic frames from which militants attain in order to activate collective action and emotions. The *Coordinadora*'s formation and trajectory are intricately linked to spatial configurations, with contested spaces becoming arenas for dissent and negotiation. Moreover, the role of spatiality extends beyond mere physical geography as it encompasses the symbolic significance of places and how they become imbued with political meaning. Spatial dimensions and the complex dynamics of collective action are deeply interconnected and are central in the dynamics of movements, which is clearly shown by the dynamics of the *Coordinadora* during the *Guerra del Agua* in Cochabamba in 1999-2000: its heterogeneous members developed strong ties among each other, and they successfully activated collective action and emotions against AdT and the Concession Contract.

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List of acronyms

AdT – Aguas del Tunari

CPR - Common-pool resources

FDTFC - Federación Departamental de Trabajadores Fabriles de Cochabamba (Departmental Federation of Factory Workers of Cochabamba)

FEDECOR - Federación Departamental Cochabambina de Organizaciones de Regantes (Cochabamba Department Federation of Irrigators' Organizations)

IMF – International Monetary Fund

PPP - Private-public partnerships

SEMAPA - Servicio Municipal de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado

WB – World Bank