



Downtown Asunción, Paraguay: A Democratic Place for Graffiti in Response to Rural Injustices

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Abstract

Since the end of President Stroessner's 35-year dictatorship in 1989, the downtown area of Asunción, Paraguay's capital, has become a center for protest, with numerous political graffiti pieces painted on public and private property. The president's office and Congress are located in the same area. In this article, I examine political graffiti photographed in 2016 and 2017 in Downtown Asunción; I focus on pieces that comment directly or indirectly on rural issues. An analysis of graffiti messages identifies protest narratives against genetically modified crops and other land uses linked to conflicts between small-scale farmers and broad-scale agricultural producers. These graffiti pieces illustrate complex relationships among small-scale farmers, Asunción residents, and the Paraguayan state. In exploring the political discourses imbued in Downtown Asunción's vandal graffiti, this article reveals an "intrinsically moral" urban project that seeks to challenge state neoliberal projects that contribute to rural injustices in Paraguay.

Keywords

Graffiti; Paraguay; smallholders; soy; neoliberalization



Introduction

The title of this article could be written as irony, as Paraguayan democracy still feels immature to a number of political analysts and sectors of Paraguayan society (Sondrol 2007; Richards 2008; Romero 2016; Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017). From 1954 to 1989, the country endured a military dictatorship under President Alfredo Stroessner. In addition to being authoritarian, Stroessner's regime is characterized as one of the most corrupt in South American history (Nickson 1997). Although all Paraguayan governments since 1989 have been elected democratically, power struggles among political factions have threatened or cut short election results, affecting the country's political stability. Such threats have included an attempted *coup d'état* in 1996, the assassination of the Vice President and the President's resignation in 1999, and the impeachment of the President in 2012 (Gomis Balestreri 2016). During these years, old and new elites—mostly within Stroessner's *Partido Colorado* (Red Party)—have continually fought to seize or regain access to the national government and, allegedly, obtain financial gains from public, state resources (Pérez-Liñán 2007; Gott 2008; Levy 2013; Marsteintredet, Llanos, and Nolte 2013; Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017). Scholars argue that democratic governments in Paraguay have upheld Stroessner's corrupted form of oligarchic governance, thus maintaining a “predatory state” that prioritizes the interests of the ruling elite over citizens' economic and social wellbeing (Lambert 2000; Sondrol 2007; Richards 2008; Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017).

Despite this, recent governments have come a long way from the profound repression and censoring that Stroessner's government exerted on the media, artists, and social movements. The Stroessner years saw a civil society afraid of protesting; both public demonstrations and covertly planned insurgencies often resulted in the imprisonment, torture, or murder of political dissidents (Nickson 1988; Zoglin 2001; Zárata 2017). By contrast, today dissenting voices have at their disposal both legal and illicit (but somewhat tolerated) venues to express their views and engage in political protest—largely without the extreme consequences experienced during the dictatorship. In this article, I examine the rise of political graffiti in public space and private property in the downtown area of Asunción, the Paraguayan capital. The President's office and the two houses of Congress are located in close proximity in this area. Since the end of the dictatorship, protests against the national government have concentrated here. Dissent has mainly taken the form of grassroots groups' marches (Gott 2008; Richards 2008) and graffiti. I argue that examining graffiti in post-dictatorial Downtown Asunción is essential for understanding both recent political protest in Paraguay and the production of Asunción's cultural landscape as a political forum for the Paraguayan urban-rural gradient—rather than as a strictly-urban project.

The discussion is based on evidence collected during walks in neighborhoods within and near Asunción's downtown area in June and July of 2015, 2016, and 2017. I photographed and noted the locations of non-

commissioned political street art and graffiti writing. I focus on protest graffiti that denounces policies and economic models that have impacted small-scale farmers. Following Hanauer's (2011) approach to examining graffiti as political discourse, I review the political content, context, and urban settings of these graffiti messages in order to explore their function as discourse that problematizes rural-urban connections within the country's capital. The identification of such themes on these graffiti pieces helps to explain their location—crafted to create a specific “rural narrative” with increased visibility near government buildings, where neoliberal policies that affect small-scale farmers are instituted. I discuss Asunción's graffiti as a moral geographic project that denounces morally questionable state projects. In providing evidence that Downtown Asunción has become a hotspot for protest graffiti linked to rural injustices, this article contributes to understandings of the evolving morality of places where external acts of vandalism are seen as legitimate acts of protest that denounce acts led by the state to the detriment of marginalized peoples like subaltern rural groups.

Graffiti and moral geographies

Graffiti is a drawn or written form of communication imprinted on walls and other visible surfaces within publically accessible locations (Cole 1991; Hanauer 2004; Finn 2014). Graffiti writers usually add to the cultural landscape without regard to consent from property owners or those in charge of the upkeep of public space. Graffiti can be considered transgressive irrespective of its textual content because it is typically criminalized as vandalism (Cole 1991; Hanauer 2004; Campos 2015). The simple act of tagging (someone writing their street name on a wall) is a form of protest: “Through tagging, the spray can provides a method for an otherwise invisible, marginalized youth to shout back at a society that has left them behind, saying essentially *FUCK YOU, I EXIST*” (Finn 2014, 226).

Marginalized groups have employed graffiti to challenge the spatial segregation of their respective communities and other forms of repression (Cole 1991; Ferrell 1995; Cresswell 1996; Valle and Weiss 2010; Finn 2014). Certain graffiti pieces are considered works of art, and some scholars and artists argue that such graffiti pieces should be somewhat legitimized on the merits of their aesthetic value (Felisbret and Felisbret 2009; McAuliffe 2012). By contrast, Stefano Bloch (2016a, 448) contends that legitimizing graffiti in such a manner diminishes its power as protest: “Mainstreaming graffiti by bringing it under the banner of legitimacy removes one of the most visibly transgressive and contestative acts from the public sphere. Such an act further relegates subversive, creative, and bottom-up uses of space to the margins, as those with identifiable ‘skill,’ ‘talent,’ proper motivation, and legal spatial literacy contribute to the reinforcement of socio-spatial parameters issued from the top-down.”

The morality of graffiti is usually discussed as a complex issue. In a normative sense, vandal graffiti is immoral because it is a crime. However, civil society and researchers may find much worth in graffiti pieces because of their

artistic value or contestative implication. Examining the emergence of graffiti in New York City in the 1970's, Cresswell (1996, 166) illustrates this moral dichotomy: "The existence of graffiti in New York's public spaces hinted at the possibility of a less authoritarian public space more reflective of polyvocal points of view. And yet it would, in my view, be foolish to put forward the lifestyle of the graffitist as the basis for the proverbial 'revolution.'" The fact that a norm in a particular place was transgressed to create art or compose a message is essential to understanding graffiti's meaning and significance.

In the present article, I argue that part of the graffiti activity in Asunción constitutes a moral geographic project despite being a normatively immoral activity. I conceptualize the moral geographies of Asunción's graffiti pieces from the perspective of their function as political discourse and protest against injustices. In the particular case of Paraguay, concepts of criminality are infused with post-dictatorial narratives that equate democracy with the emergence of civil disorder after the fall of Stroessner (Romero 2016). In conceiving of Asunción's political graffiti as a moral project, I seek to distinguish it from other illicit activities that have become more common in post-dictatorial Paraguay, especially those linked to violent forms of political protest.

This discussion draws from Robert Sack's (1999) "geographic theory of morality." Sack (1999) suggests that geographic morality should consider (1) justice, (2) truth, and (3) humans' relations to nature within complex places. Sack (1999) proposes that these dimensions can/should be seen in two different ways. "Instrumental geographic judgments" regard "justice," "truth," and "nature" as relative to the norms established for a place (Sack 1999). "Intrinsic geographic judgments," however, seek to reveal the "real," intrinsic truth and nature of a place to establish whether a geographic project in this place is just and moral (Sack 1999). Following Sack's (1999) argument, geographic projects should aspire to realize two conditions so as to be compatible with the intrinsic qualities of places: (1) create awareness of the reality of—and intrinsic truth attached to—places, and (2) mirror the geographic complexity of a place. Sack (1999) illustrates how some projects may obscure these conditions and, consequently, produce morally questionable places even when norms are followed. The Iron Curtain project, for instance, attempted to forcibly homogenize multiple aspects of the intrinsic geography of the Soviet Union and related communist territories (Sack 1999). The autocratic states of the Iron Curtain imposed austere architectures, economies, and cultures; they suppressed free speech and virtually imprisoned their peoples within political boundaries in an attempt to isolate them from the West and non-communist nations. The project of the Iron Curtain was "good" from an instrumental perspective because it advanced and maintained for a time the "reality" of the communist state, but it was a questionable project from an "intrinsic" perspective because communist norms attempted to suppress geographic truths (Sack 1999). As a reaction, graffiti on the western side of the Berlin Wall became a countering project that brought attention to the repressive communist

regime and also criticized other aspects of the politics east and west of the wall, revealing geographic complexities and truths that repressive norms were obscuring (Stein 1989). It is in this sense that I identify Asunción's political graffiti as a moral project: It raises awareness about aspects of the intrinsic geographic complexity of Paraguay and the injustices the Paraguayan state—based in Downtown Asunción—institutes on small-scale farmers through unchecked neoliberal projects.

Downtown Asunción

Downtown Asunción embodies the convergence of various sectors of Paraguayan society. Locally known as “*el centro*” (“the center” or downtown), the area is comprised of the neighborhoods *La Encarnación* (The Incarnation) and *La Catedral* (The Cathedral), which together house the administrative centers of the national government and the Paraguayan Catholic Church (Mérida 1973). The President's office at *El Palacio de los López* (Lópezes' Palace) and the *Palacio Legislativo* (Legislative Palace, which encompasses the Chamber of Deputies and the Chamber of Senators) are both in the *La Encarnación* neighborhood. Several Ministries and other major national government offices are also located in the downtown area and adjacent neighborhoods. *La Catedral*, on the other hand, encompasses the Historic Downtown, with monuments to past politicians and war heroes, like the National Pantheon of the Heroes and Asunción's first Town Hall, which later became the nation's first Congress building (Mérida 1973).

Different grassroots movements and opposition political parties have organized marches in the downtown area to protest the government, predominantly targeting Congress, since 1989. *Campesino* (traditional peasant) and indigenous organizations with predominantly rural membership frequently head these protests, leading marches that often start in the outskirts of Asunción and end at or near the *Palacio Legislativo*. These rural protesters march advocating agrarian land reform and policies to boost small-scale farmers' economy (Gott 2008; Dobrée 2013; Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017).

In terms of its architecture, appearance, and land use, Downtown Asunción is an unlikely mosaic of dilapidated vacant buildings and lots, historical colonial buildings, public squares, government offices, banks, various businesses, hotels, bars, restaurants, and some areas with considerable real estate value that remain well maintained. Equally diverse neighborhoods surround the downtown area, which is also immediately adjacent to some of the poorest slums in the city, like *La Chacarita* (Flores López Moreira 2009). Residents of nearby slums come daily to downtown and engage in informal economic activities or panhandle for money and food. Informal vendors sell a number of products and food items during office hours to workers from different institutions and businesses.

Downtown Asunción is a dynamic part of the city, but also one in need of renewal. There have been various government-led projects to revitalize the area

(Velázquez Moreira 2017). Some of these projects have tried—with some success—to relocate and improve living conditions for populations in nearby slums, which have much of their housing stock in flood-prone areas (Flores López Moreira 2009; SENAVITAT 2017). These projects have been met with resistance: Many residents have refused to relocate, considering these projects' ultimate purpose is to ward poor locals off and promote gentrification in the downtown area (Flores López Moreira 2009). In addition to the proximity of these slums and the abundance of vacant buildings, the relative high density of graffiti in Downtown Asunción has been used to highlight the rundown character of this part of town and the need for further revitalization projects (ABC Color 2005; Velázquez Moreira 2017).

Many locations in Downtown Asunción appear to have become what Bloch (2016b) describes as “spots” for graffiti writers—locations where graffiti pieces last. This phenomenon extends beyond vacant lots and now affects public squares and in-use private properties. In August 2016, Asunción's municipality partnered with the Peruvian street art project *Latido Americano* (Latin Heartbeat) to hold a festival in which Latin American artists—including nine from Paraguay—painted 40 large murals portraying Paraguay's indigenous communities and natural resources, mostly in Downtown Asunción (Última Hora 2016; *Latido Americano* 2017). The project may have been an attempt to curb the spread of graffiti in the area; similar programs have been implemented with this purpose in other cities (Craw *et al.* 2006; Moss 2010).

Methods

In June 2015, I visited Paraguay for the first time in 11 years. The high density of graffiti in Downtown Asunción and its open engagement with political issues (in particular, those pertaining to the countryside) caught my attention. In June and July of 2016 and 2017, I walked the downtown area and photographed and noted locations of rural-related protest graffiti using an iPhone (5c in 2016 and 6s in 2017). In addition to looking for new political graffiti in 2017, I revisited the graffiti documented in 2016 and noted whether they had been removed or modified. The sample is not an exhaustive or representative survey of all graffiti in the area. Instead, the 17 graffiti pieces captured for this article represent at least one instance of each observed political commentary linked to rural issues or political discourses connected to such rural issues. The analysis in this study follows Hanauer's (2011) approach to examining graffiti as political discourse. First, the content of the photographed graffiti (e.g., presence of drawings and/or text, languages used, etc.) and location of graffiti are described, among other informational characteristics. Then, these characteristics are linked to the political function of the graffiti (Hanauer, 2011). I employ this type of analysis to connect the graffiti in Downtown Asunción to an urban project that seeks to counter rural injustices, ultimately bringing attention to this capital city as a place to illustrate the

complexity of rural issues and the connections between this urban center and the country’s periphery.

Figure 1 shows the locations of the graffiti discussed in this article (Figures 2 through 18) and how proximate these graffiti pieces are to government and historical buildings. Notable, also, is the presence of some graffiti in the public square *Plaza de la Democracia* (Democracy Square). More than exploring semiotics, I match a visual/textual analysis of the pieces and their urban setting to a review of the political context that may have triggered their creation, particularly as protest themes relate to the transformation of Paraguay’s countryside for the benefit of mechanized, genetically modified (GM) agriculture, and the consequent displacement of small-scale farming communities. I complement the analysis with insights from my research in traditional peasant communities in Eastern Paraguay.

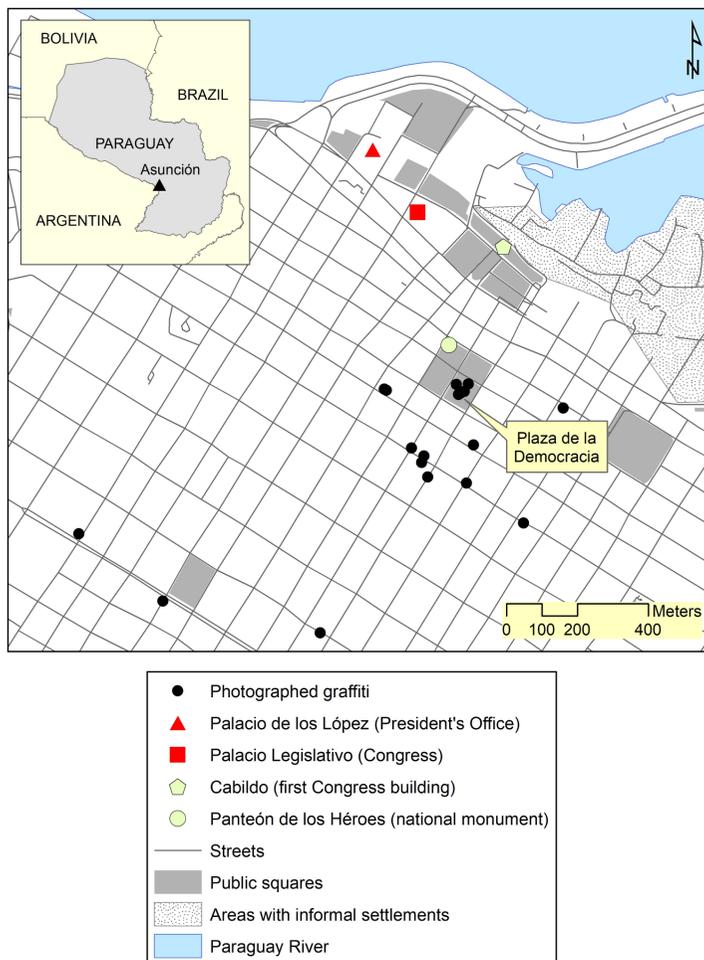


Figure 1: Locations of photographed graffiti in Downtown Asunción. Map prepared by the author.

Small-scale farmers and the ongoing mechanization of the countryside

Campesinos constitute one of the most prominent populations of small-scale farmers in Paraguay. Traditional/historical peasants, *campesinos* are typically *mestizos* of Amerindian-European mixed heritage, whose native tongue is the indigenous language Guaraní. Many *campesino* communities in Paraguay have struggled with land-tenure security and remain landless. During Stroessner's dictatorship, large expanses of rural land were gifted or sold cheaply to a number of Stroessner's friends and fellow politicians. Stroessner's government also incentivized *campesino* colonization of Eastern Paraguay's interior, opening smallholding parcels in public lands and providing financial help and technical assistance for *campesinos* to grow cotton and other crops (Richards 2011; Correia 2019; Hetherington 2018). After Stroessner's fall, some of the large rural estates that elites obtained during the dictatorship were occupied by and eventually given to *campesino* communities.

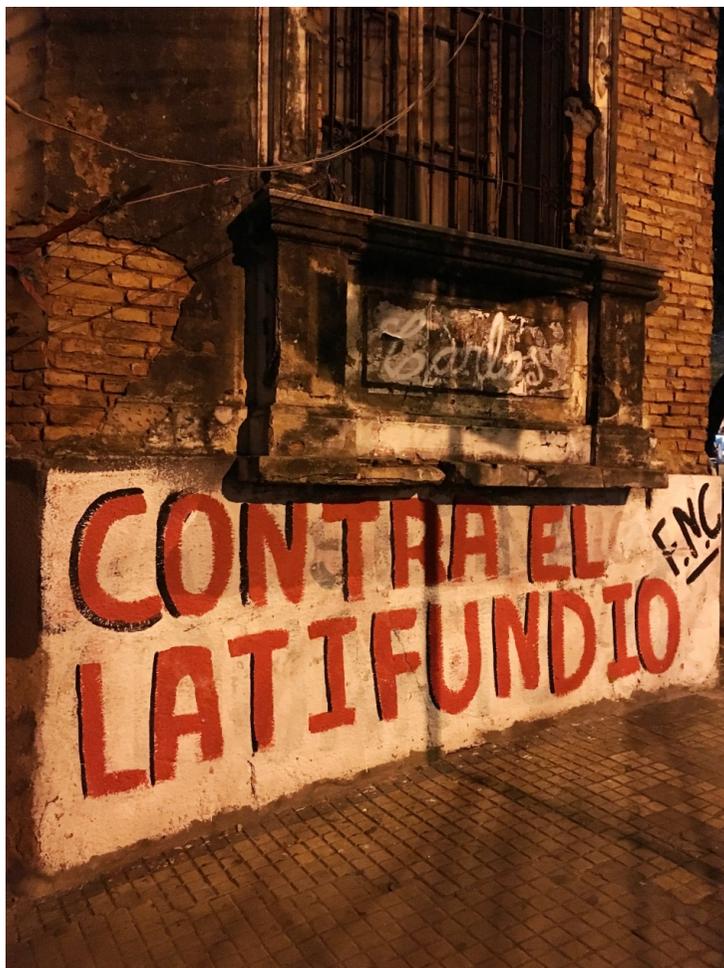


Figure 2: “Against large agricultural estates, FNC.” 2017

Scholars, however, report that the area linked to small-scale farming has been shirking, and that elites still control large expanses of Paraguay's rural lands, as broad-scale agriculture continues to expand into *campesino* and indigenous territories (Elgert 2016). Foreigners, especially Brazilians, own and control a considerable share of these agricultural lands in Eastern Paraguay (Ezquerro-Cañete 2018). The graffiti in Figure 2 is signed by the *Federación Nacional Campesina* (FNC) (*National Campesino Federation*) and directly voices concern about this situation with the message "against large agricultural estates." The graffiti in Figure 3 is related to animal rights; however, in a country where the beef industry is largely linked to land-use conflicts with small-scale farmers, protests against this industry resonate with other social dimensions. Many of the lands gifted to Stroessner's friends were developed into cattle ranches; also, beef production continues to be associated with more affluent rural residents (Elgert 2016).



Figure 3: "Not dead;" "don't eat me." 2016

Soybean production is dominated by wealthy entrepreneurs. The sector causes the most conflicts with *campesino* communities in Paraguay. Especially since the late 1990s, Brazilian entrepreneurs have substantially expanded mechanized GM soy in Eastern Paraguay, bringing capital and technology to establish agriculture that involves little assistance from the state and employs little Paraguayan labor (Elgert 2016; Ezquerro-Cañete 2016; Correia 2019). Paraguay is now one of the largest GM soy producers and exporters in the world, but it is questionable whether the prosperity of the soy industry has benefitted poorer Paraguayans despite significant macroeconomic growth (Cardozo *et al.* 2016; Elgert 2016). Brazilians and other foreign entrepreneurs still control an important part of soybean cultivation and trade in Paraguay, and soy exports are lowly taxed (Ezquerro-Cañete 2016; Correia 2019). Most of the soy produced in Paraguay is directly exported (CAPECO 2015). Cardozo *et al.* (2016) show that some *campesino* households and indigenous communities in Eastern Paraguay have integrated the soy industry to their benefit. This and other studies, however, underscore the violent conflicts and sometimes deadly confrontations that have unravelled as *campesino* communities have fought against soy expansion (Hetherington 2013; Cardozo *et al.* 2016; Ezquerro-Cañete 2016). Entire *campesino* communities have reportedly disappeared in Paraguay—their lands eventually converted to mechanized soy fields after *campesinos* were paid to leave or forced to abandon their lands due to community shrinkage (Hetherington 2013; Cardozo *et al.* 2016; Ezquerro-Cañete 2016). There are accounts of health-related discomforts and intoxications in *campesino* communities caused by spraying of agrochemicals in adjacent GM soy fields (Hetherington 2013; Cardozo *et al.* 2016; Ezquerro-Cañete 2016). Further, GM-related herbicides may reach nearby *campesino* crops that are not adapted to resist such agrochemicals (Cardozo *et al.* 2016; Ezquerro-Cañete 2016). Currently, GM soy is often grown in rotation with GM corn, which also causes concerns in the peasant sector. Fields with Monsanto-developed GM corn cross-pollinate with Paraguayan corn varieties that *campesinos* prefer to grow, which is perceived to lower the quality of native corn (Cardozo *et al.* 2016).

The following sections focus on examining graffiti pieces that (1) reject GM crops, and (2) comment on illegal crops that small-scale farmers may grow to counteract the economic impacts of GM soy expansion. Then, in the subsequent section, I examine political protests linked to the governments of President Fernando Lugo (from 2008 to 2012) and President Horacio Cartes (from 2013 to 2018). Both governments contributed to the expansion of GM crops in a number of ways that are discussed below.

Protesting GM crops

Two prominent graffiti murals that comment on GM crops endured for a few years at *Plaza de la Democracia* since I first saw them in 2015 (Figures 4 and 5). In the three consecutive years I visited this public square, only one wall (with



Figure 4: “Transgenics and agrotoxins kill us.” 2016

one large graffiti piece and a few tags) was cleared to give way for the sign of a small market. The murals in Figures 4 and 5 were only recently cleared, in July 2018. One mural showed a man disgusted at the prospect of eating corn, with the bilingual message “transgenics and agrotoxins kill us” (Figure 4). The adjacent mural was more graphic: A woman cries tears of blood, with an ear of corn partially inserted in her mouth and the message “don’t kill us” (Figure 5, in Guarani). Paraguay is bilingual; many Paraguayans speak both their colonists’ Spanish and the South American indigenous language Guarani. The words “kill us” and “don’t kill us” in these graffiti pieces (Figures 4 and 5) are written in Guarani, the language most *campesinos* prefer to speak. Lack of fluency in either Spanish or Guarani is used to assign social class in Paraguay (Romero 2016). *Campesinos* may not speak Spanish as well as Paraguayans raised exclusively in urban areas. In Asunción, people who primarily speak Guarani—or *Jopara*, a mix of Guarani and Spanish—may be originally from the countryside or live in poorer urban neighborhoods dominated by people of rural origin. Within the social circles, Guarani is often associated with the “more Paraguayan” rural residents, like *campesinos* and indigenous peoples. Despite signs of increasing integration of most rural sectors into the soy industry, soy planters are still perceived to natively speak Portuguese (in the case of Brazilians and Paraguayans with Brazilian heritage) or

Low German, in the case of Mennonite-Paraguayans, a group that grows GM soy at small and medium scales (Cardozo 2018).



Figure 5: “Don’t kill us;” “fuck comunist [sic].” 2016

Guarani in graffiti may be an allusion to marginal urban groups, or (more likely in Figures 4 and 5) *campesinos* and indigenous peoples. The “killing” in these messages is both literal and figurative; it relates to aforementioned conflicts, health issues linked to agrochemicals, and the disappearance of *campesino* communities and their traditional agriculture due to displacement (Hetherington 2013). Further, soy cropping and cattle ranching have been the main causes of deforestation in the country, responsible for the destruction and fragmentation of biologically diverse forests in Eastern Paraguay (Huang *et al.* 2009; Richards 2011; Aide *et al.* 2013; Elgert 2016). The Guarani word “*ore*” (“us”) in these murals can also be construed to relate to all Paraguayans, as a gesture of solidarity towards *campesinos* and indigenous peoples, and, thus, a suggestion that the nation is a sum of all of its parts, and that hurting/killing one sector may impact others. *Campesino* political and grassroots organizations often march in protest of the national government near Congress in Downtown Asunción, congregating in different public squares, including *Plaza de la Democracia*. I interpret that these messages (Figures 4 and 5) told visiting smallholder farmers that “Paraguayans in Asunción speak your language, understand your plight, and stand with you!” *Campesino-*

related political parties also leave messages for Asunción's residents, posting notices on downtown walls to announce when campesinos will protest-march, as shown in Figure 6: "August 15, National Protest," signed by the "PPP," the leftist party *Partido Paraguay Pyahurã*, founded by *campesino* and working class leaders in 1996 (PPP 2015). Anti-GM crop graffiti may also resonate with dwellers of adjacent slums, many of whom have come to live in the city after soy croppers displaced them from the countryside.



Figure 6: "August 15, National Protest, PPP." 2017

At first glance, it may be surprising that a critique of GM crops is symbolized with corn, as soy is by far the most important economic product of GM crop fields in Paraguay (Cardozo *et al.* 2016). The slogan "*la soja mata*" ("soy kills") is common among peasant organizations protesting soy in Paraguay and neighboring countries (Hetherington 2013), and soy fields have appeared explicitly in other protest graffiti in Asunción (Correia 2019). However, including corn in soy-protest narratives relates the modification/destruction of an important native staple, part of the daily diet of Paraguayan households, in favor of a more generic version of it. Indigenous and *campesino* communities are the original developers, growers, and stewards of Paraguayan corn varieties, and the shrinking of these peoples' communities can be seen as a threat to agricultural diversity and traditional cuisine.

In Figure 5, the corn could be interpreted as a phallic symbol in a sexual assault scene; the woman in the mural cries blood while performing fellatio on the ear of corn. Examining rape scenes in recent Paraguayan films, Eva Romero (2016) relates such violations as a symbol of foreigners abusing Paraguay, in addition to commenting on the abuse of women in Paraguay. In the case of GM crop expansion, the perpetrators of the “rape” are both the foreign entrepreneurs that crop soy and a neoliberal national government that allows and facilitates the crop’s expansion through low taxes, little regulation, and the non-enforcement of laws that could help protect *campesino* communities and the environment (Elgert 2016; Romero 2016; Correia 2019).

Currently, soy planters are taxed indirectly, through taxes applied to the purchase of agrochemicals needed to grow GM soy; direct taxes on export soy remain minimal (Elgert 2016; Correia 2019). After longstanding pressure from different political and civil society sectors, in June 2017 senators approved proposed legislation to establish a 10 percent tax on export soy, but President Cartes vetoed the measure (ABC Color 2017d). More recently, the Chamber of Deputies presented a law proposal to block further attempts to add taxes to export soy, but the Senate rejected this proposal in October 2017 (ABC Color 2017d). These opposing perspectives within the government reflect a lively (sometimes violent) conflict among sectors of civil society, which take the shape of graffiti pieces. For example, in 2016, the graffiti mural in Figure 5 had been vandalized with the misspelled message in English “fuck comunist [sic].” The mural was later retouched and the message removed, as documented by a sighting in 2017. As Congress and ruling governments continue to discuss—and fight over—whether taxing export soy would benefit the Paraguayan economy, left-leaning civil society sectors (including peasants) argue that the current no-taxation policy further deepens the income gap between large and small agricultural producers in the country (Elgert 2016; Correia 2019).

Illegal crops

Other graffiti pieces related to current smallholder economic struggles include comments on marihuana consumption/production (Figures 7 and 8, in Guarani). Cardozo *et al.* (2016) show that some smallholders in Eastern Paraguay find themselves caught in illicit forms of agriculture in order to resist soy-related displacement. Some *campesinos* illegally rent their lands to soy croppers, and some indigenous communities grow soy in their reserves without the state’s approval (Cardozo *et al.* 2016). Other *campesinos* have integrated marihuana production, growing the illicit crop under the patronage of drug gangs (Cardozo *et al.* 2016).

In fact, Paraguay is considered the top marihuana producer in South America; Paraguayan marihuana is consumed both nationally and in neighboring countries (Marirrodriga 2008; Heinze and Armas-Castañeda 2015). Because commercializing dried marihuana leaves is illegal in Paraguay, marihuana trade tends to generate violence as drug gangs fight over territories for the production

and distribution of the drug (ABC Color 2014; Acebes 2015; Cardozo *et al.* 2016). There is a certain connivance between drug trafficking and policymaking in the region: Drug gang members have included officers of local governments in rural communities where the crop is illegally grown (ABC Color 2014). This could signal that in Paraguay, like in other regions of Latin America (McSweeney *et al.* 2017), drug traffickers hold positions of power to control and profit from subaltern rural populations and their lands.



Figure 7: “Weed 420.” 2017



Figure 8: “Let’s laugh I guess.” 2017

Marihuana legalization in Paraguay could lead to safer working conditions and fairer economic returns for the people in the lower ranks of the marihuana trade—namely small-scale farmers growing the crop and the workers drying and rolling marihuana leaves, who may also be peasants (personal communication 2016). In certain communities of Eastern Paraguay, drug lords reportedly “pay” small-scale marihuana growers with household items (e.g., food items, fuel, cleaning products) instead of cash so as to prevent capital accumulation that could turn peasants into independent marihuana producers (personal communication 2016). Further, Cardozo *et al.* (2016, 98) report that *campesinos* involved in marihuana production cannot easily leave the drug gangs because “for drug patrons they would become a liability to be eliminated.”

Based on the use of the Guaraní language, the messages in Figures 7 and 8 could be construed as alluding to small-scale farmers. The writing in Figure 7 states “ka’a 420.” *Ka’a* can mean plant or herb in Guaraní, but in this context it signifies a slang for marihuana. The other term, 420, refers to the unofficial international marihuana day, April 20th, and represents an urban and global symbol for cannabis culture (Waxman 2016). The process from growing to consuming the herb connects urban users to particular rural areas and the violence associated with

the related agriculture. The message “*ka’a 420*,” thus, can be seen as bringing together these different spatial and cultural dimensions of marihuana.

The message in Figure 8 is also written in Guarani; it translates roughly as “Let’s laugh, I guess.” The phrase could relate to any of the multiple reasons those who speak Guarani justifiably have to feel despaired. Next to a marihuana leaf, the expression seems to say “let’s get high and laugh instead of crying,” adding a sense of resignation when faced by more powerful actors. Extending the message to the rural sphere in Paraguay, it could relate to how *campesinos* are trapped once they enter the marihuana trade, as drug traffickers may subject *campesinos* to unfair compensation and life threats, as discussed above.

Recent national governments and *campesinos*

Joel Correia (2019) argues that the ongoing expansion of GM soy monocultures is better understood as the result of waves of soy-related territorialization, or “*sojización*” (“soy-zation”) (Fogel 2015), which have given rise to the current “Soy State” in Paraguay. Correia (2019) maintains that the most recent wave of *sojización* started with the end of President Fernando Lugo’s government in 2012. In 2008, Lugo, a former bishop, became the first leader of the opposition to be elected in Paraguay since the end of Stroessner’s dictatorship. He represented the party *Alianza Patriótica por el Cambio* (Patriotic Alliance for Change), a coalition of small, socialist parties that was also supported by the largest opposition party at the time, the relatively moderate *Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico* (PLRA) (Authentic Radical Liberal Party). With the election of Lugo, Paraguay followed other South American countries that had recently elected left-leaning presidents like Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, among others. This phenomenon seemed to mark a post-neoliberal, left turn in the region in the 2000s (Gott 2008; Becker 2013). In Paraguay, however, the turn was not completed. President Lugo was unable to gather enough political support to reverse neoliberal policies implemented by previous governments and substantially enhance social programs, especially those linked to agrarian reform and the betterment of the rural poor (Correia 2019; Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017). During his presidency, Lugo’s public image suffered from personal scandals linked to children he had fathered while still a priest (Pitts *et al.* 2016). Also, the guerrilla group *Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo* (EEP; Paraguayan People’s Army, involved in the extortion and murder of a number of Paraguayans) grew under Lugo’s presidency (MercoPress 2017).

President Lugo was impeached before the end of his first term, in 2012, following a peasant-led protest turned violent in the countryside, near the town of Curuguaty in the Department of Canindeyú, Eastern Paraguay. Dozens of *campesinos* had been illegally occupying the lands of Colorado politician Blás Riquelme, who had obtained the property during Stroessner’s dictatorship (BBC Mundo 2016). On June 15, 2012, a group of policemen were sent to end the

campesino occupation. The conflict resulted in cross-fire that killed 11 *campesinos* and six policemen. Sectors of civil society and a number of political factions quickly blamed President Lugo for mishandling the operation, and a week after the event, on June 22, 2012, Congress overthrew him. Lugo's Vice President, PLRA politician Federico Franco, supported the impeachment and stepped up as president, completing the final year of Lugo's term. Political analysts now contend that Congress' actions amount to a coup, having manipulated this low point in Lugo's tenure to oust a president in conflict with the main political elites since the beginning of his government (Levy 2013; Pitts *et al.* 2016; Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017).

The Curuguaty Massacre and President Cartes' administration

In 2016 (nearly four years after his impeachment), graffiti messages supporting Lugo could still be found in Asunción (Figure 9). By then, however, conversations about the "Curuguaty Massacre" had shifted to the standing trials of several *campesinos* accused of killing six police officers. Stencils reproduced in multiple downtown locations called for the release of the *campesinos* held in prison (Figure 10). These trials came to an end in July 2016, during President Cartes' government: Four *campesinos* were given long prison sentences, between 18 and 30 years, found guilty of murder or being co-instigators of the crime, and seven *campesinos* were condemned to shorter sentences in connection to the case (Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017). These results were protested by sectors of civil society that considered the trials unfair and the sentences harsh (BBC Mundo 2016). Further, investigations about the Curuguaty Massacre seemed manipulated to make these 11 *campesinos* appear responsible for the deaths of the fallen police officers (Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017). Proof that the peasants were the first to open fire was not conclusive during the trial (Ezquerro-Cañete and Fogel 2017). The only admission of responsibility in the killing of *campesinos* was related to Lugo's impeachment, which, for many, was not much of a disciplinary action regarding the Curuguaty Massacre but part of an opportunistic, politically-driven *coup d'état*.



Figure 9: "Lugo." 2016

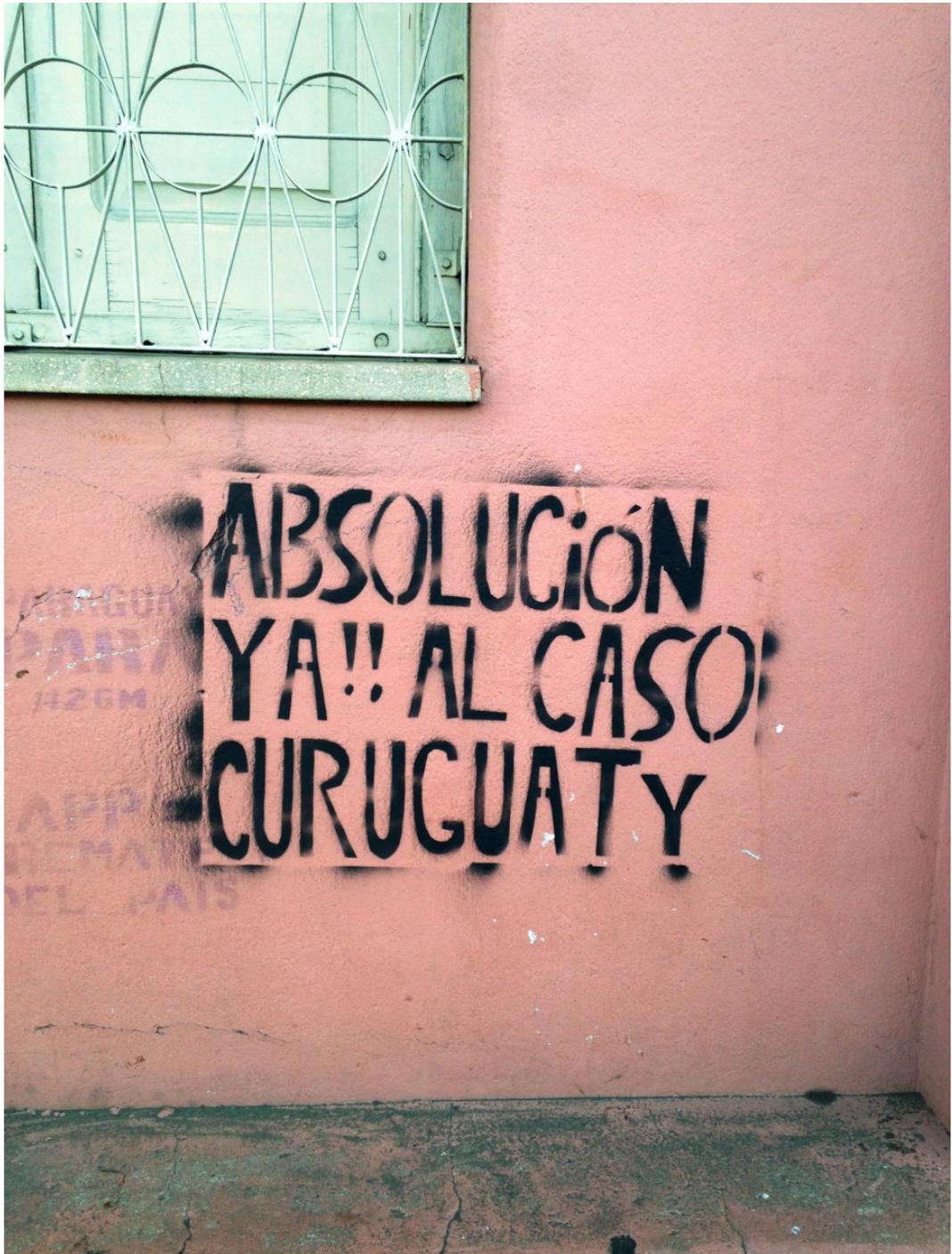


Figure 10: “Absolution now!! For the Curuguaty case.” 2016

Correia (2019) suggests that the failure of President Lugo's government to instate post-neoliberal policies to improve campesinos' situation—violently interrupted by the Curuguaty Massacre—has given rise to a third wave of *sojización* that continues to push *campesinos* away from the countryside in favor of GM soy. The first wave of *sojización* started with the introduction of conventional varieties of the crop in Paraguay in the 1970s, particularly in the borderlands near Brazil (Correia 2019). The second wave of *sojización* was marked by accelerated expansion of Brazilian soy cropping from the borderlands into other regions of Eastern Paraguay in the mid-1990s, an expansion supported by legislation allowing for the use of GM soy varieties (Correia 2019).

The rejection of Lugo's "socialist" agenda—which culminated with his impeachment in 2012—started the third wave of *sojización* (Correia 2019). Lugo's successor, President Franco, added more genetically engineered varieties of several crops—including soy and corn—to the list of GM crops allowed to be grown in the country (Correia 2019), an action that also contextualizes the graffiti mural protesting GM corn in Figures 4 and 5. The neoliberal government of President Cartes (elected in 2013) extended support for soy exports and instated other measures to incentivize the increasing mechanization and mono-cropping of the countryside. Furthermore, in September 2017, President Cartes signed a decree that somewhat relaxed anti-deforestation legislation (ABC Color 2017a). The existing forestry law (from 1973) establishes that 25 percent of the original forest cover must be maintained in properties larger than 50 hectares; these larger properties are usually dedicated to cattle pastures and mechanized agricultural fields (Elgert 2016). The new decree allowed the total clear-cutting of native forests on private properties if part of the land were afforested with any tree species (ABC Color 2017a). The decree is believed to have been an attempt to facilitate more extensive, legal deforestation in private lands. In addition, the measure contradicted a moratorium on deforestation in place since 2004 that forbids agricultural expansion into native forestlands (WWF 2014; Elgert 2016).

Thus, President Cartes consistently supported legislation designed to aid large rural producers with decreased regulations, and, in this manner, facilitate the establishment of the "Soy State." Also, Paraguayan and international non-profit organizations contend that environmental legislation were not enforced effectively during Cartes' government and preceding post-dictatorial governments; complaints and court suits denouncing illegal deforestation rarely resulted in punishment in the last decades (Aguayo *et al.* 2016; ABC Color 2017b). It is perhaps in part for these reasons that graffiti protestors have labelled President Cartes a "country seller" (Figure 11). This message alludes to the strongly neoliberal aspects of the legislation his government passed, and the laws that his government failed to enforce or create, "selling" the country, for instance, to soy producers and other powerful actors like drug traffickers, adding to and perpetuating the socioeconomic vulnerability of the rural poor.



Figure 11: “Cartes country seller.” 2016

The graffiti in Figure 11 includes the hammer and sickle symbol used by the *Partido Comunista Paraguayo* (PCP) (Paraguayan Communist Party) to self-identify. The party has also authored several anti-capitalist graffiti pieces, like the one in Figure 12, which, taken in conjunction with graffiti denouncing *campesino* plights (Figures 2, 4, 5, and 6 in particular), unequivocally place responsibility for rural political issues in Paraguay on neoliberal policies. The message in Figure 12 suggests that “socialism is life, bread and peace” and that “capitalism is of death hunger and war.” The words “death” and “war” on the message could relate to the violence generated by conflicts between soy producers and *campesinos*, or to *campesinos*’ conflicts with landlords or large estates (such as the Curuguaty Massacre).



Figure 12: “PCP;” “Socialism is life, bread and peace / Capitalism is of death hunger and war.” 2016.

Sectors of civil society also protested measures taken by Cartes that echo authoritarian times. To prevent future dictatorships, in 1992 Congress modified the constitution and banned presidential reelections. In early 2017, Cartes tried to gather support from the senate to amend the 1992 constitution so that he could run for reelection in 2018, when his term ended. Mobilized through social media, a large number of people protested violently in Downtown Asunción in March 2017. They marched against the amendment, called it a coup attempt, and set the front of Congress on fire. Cartes ultimately abandoned the pursuit of the constitutional amendment (BBC Mundo 2017). Fernando Lugo was one of senators who supported Cartes’ reelection amendment proposal because, if passed, Lugo would have been eligible to run for president in the future (BBC Mundo 2017). This unlikely alliance complicated assumptions that Cartes and Lugo represent opposite ends of the right-left political spectrum. In July 2017, *Plaza de la Democracia* (Figure 1) had new graffiti pieces, including one that compared Cartes to Hitler (Figure 13) and a stencil with the message “Japiro Cartes” (Figure 14), an expression in Guaraní that as written could mean “fuck you, Cartes” or “fuck Cartes.” The comparison to Hitler was likely provoked by Cartes’ attempt to amend the constitution. In the same 2017 field visit, I found numerous graffiti messages that explicitly repudiated the reelection amendment proposal (Figure 15) and

declared the state fascist (Figure 16). Besides the graffiti in Figures 13 and 16, other pieces allude symbolically to Cartes' authoritarian qualities. The stencil in Figure 17 adds to the message "Cartes country seller" (Figure 11) a large pig-man having his shoe polished by a small man. The use of a pig to represent Cartes is significant here: Anthropomorphized pigs have been employed in political fiction to represent corrupt or authoritarian figures (Muirden 2008). Furthermore, recent political graffiti in Europe has depicted repressive policemen and corrupt politicians as pig-men (Zimberg 2012; Campos 2015; Zaimakis 2015).



Figure 13: "#Go away drunk Cartes Hitler drunk." 2017



Figure 14: “Fuck (you) Cartes.” 2017



Figure 15: “#No to the coup.” 2017



Figure 16: “Fascist state, highly flammable.” 2017

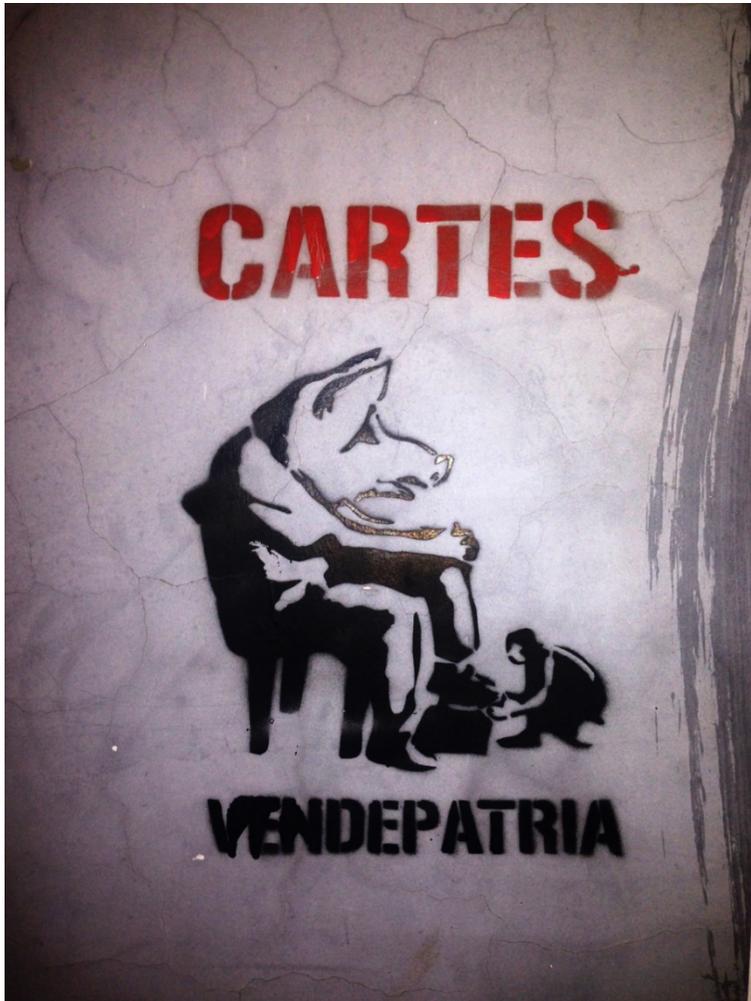


Figure 17: “Cartes country seller.” 2017

In July 2017, I also saw several copies of the stencil shown in Figure 18. Among other politicians from different parties that include presidents Cartes and Lugo, this stencil alludes to President Mario Abdo Benítez, who was elected in 2018 to succeed Cartes. The leader from an opposition faction of the conservative *Partido Colorado*, Mario Abdo Benítez is the son of dictator Stroessner’s private secretary. In connecting politicians who were or would become president, the stencil alludes to the continuity of the Paraguayan state across different administrations, suggesting that the state will not fail to disappoint and stink—regardless of the leader in power or their political affiliation. Still, one of President Abdo Benítez’s first decisions as he assumed office in August 2018 was to annul Cartes’ 2017 decree relaxing anti-deforestation legislation (WWF 2018). Earlier, in July 2018, as Cartes’ defeated faction of the *Partido Colorado* was close to ceding control of the national government, the Paraguayan Supreme Court repealed the

sentences of the 11 condemned *campesinos* in the Curuguaty Massacre case (Última Hora 2018).



Figure 18: “Alegre, Llano, Abdo, Lugo, Cartes, the same shit.” 2017

Discussion

Asunción’s graffiti and rural-urban connections

Focusing on the case of Paraguay, Gregg Hetherington (2013; 2018) has addressed the relationships between the *campesino* class and “new democrats,” whom he defines as left-leaning urban residents that stand against corruption. Hetherington (2018) concludes that *campesinos* and new democrats have at times worked against each other. The two groups came together to elect President Lugo in 2008, united against the *Partido Colorado*, its neoliberalism, and previous corrupt administrations that favored the elites. During Lugo’s government, anti-corruption efforts increased the number of hires based on technical merit in the administration’s civil service sector (Hetherington 2018). Hetherington (2018)

argues that these efforts helped to decrease the number of absent government employees who were common in previous administrations—employees who received a salary but did not work. Hetherington (2018) suggests that Lugo’s new hires in the civil service sector were educated within the fabric of industrialized agriculture. Thus, Lugo’s anti-corruption reform established a new civil service sector programmed to further the mechanized agricultural boom in Paraguay (Hetherington 2018). Perhaps this is one the reasons the Paraguayan communist party withdrew its support for Lugo halfway through his presidency (Prensa PCP 2010). While Lugo’s attempts to establish an agrarian reform to benefit smallholder farmers mostly failed, new democrats’ anti-corruption emphasis seemed to take hold in some form. Therefore, Hetherington’s (2013; 2018) observations signal a significant rift between some urbanites and *campesinos*.

My own observations of rural-related graffiti in Downtown Asunción suggest that some urbanites care about and try to fight against rural injustices. Graffiti, *campesino*-led protest marches, and rural-urban migration show that this area of the city also belongs to and is continually reclaimed by *campesinos*. In focusing on graffiti pieces related to rural injustices and in detailing these pieces’ political discourses, I have sought to underscore how this graffiti showcases the “intrinsic” geographic complexity of Asunción as Paraguay’s capital and largest city. More recent analyses of the “rural-urban divide” attest to the complex relationships among different regions, which defy easy classifications within the rural/urban dichotomy (Dymitrow and Stenseke 2016). Rural areas are largely shaped by markets and governance centralized in large cities and jurisdictional capitals; conversely, urban areas are much influenced economically and culturally by a fluidity of peoples and resources coming from and going to rural areas (Losch 2015; Dymitrow and Stenseke 2016). The present article highlights the integration of Asunción and rural areas through a display of literacy regarding rural injustices as shown by graffiti discourses in Asunción.

Downtown Asunción’s graffiti as moral project

Following Sacks’ (1999) geographic conceptualization of morality, I consider that Downtown Asunción’s political graffiti can be regarded as intrinsically moral because it challenges injustices and illuminates geographic complexities that neoliberal state measures attempt to obscure. At the same time, since it violates commonly upheld norms, graffiti is also instrumentally immoral. As a moral project, graffiti pieces aim at disrupting mainstream positive discourses about GM agriculture in Paraguay—a normalized land use in the Paraguayan “Soy State” (Correia 2019). These discourses tend to highlight the positive impact that the sector has had on the overall economy of the country. As of 2018, Paraguay is positioned as the fourth main exporter and the sixth largest producer of soybeans in the world (CAPECO 2018). Although dominated by Brazilians, the GM soy industry has advanced and brought investments to various sectors of Paraguayan society, including technological progress and education opportunities linked to

agribusinesses (Hetherington 2018). Graffiti pieces, however, show a different aspect of this story. For example, the graffiti in Figures 4 and 5 speak about the costs of agricultural modernization in a country where broad-scale soy planters are given free rein to advance their interests regardless of the socioeconomic costs for subaltern rural classes.

Graffiti may be, at some point in the future, linked to larger political projects (sometimes violent) that claim to seek justice for *campesinos* in Paraguay, and that are at times attributed to communist actors. One of these actors is the guerrilla group EPP, which explicitly pledges allegiance to *campesinos*. Sectors of the Paraguayan population, and certainly the government, act as if the EPP is made up of radical *campesinos* (Martens 2014; Winer 2017). The EPP's kidnapping for ransom (and in some cases murdering) of wealthier rural agents, including Paraguayans, people of Brazilian origin, and Mennonites, could be construed to support the claim that *campesinos* are involved with this guerrilla group. A number of *campesino* communities have been raided by government anti-guerrilla forces (Martens 2014). Targeted *campesino* communities have denied their involvement with the EPP (SERVINDI 2018). Local scholars do not believe that *campesino* grassroots groups are directly involved with the EPP, and claim instead that EPP actions are helping the state's neoliberal project rather than advancing *campesino* rights (Martens 2014; Irala and Pereira Cardozo 2016; Cardozo 2018; SERVINDI 2018). According to these scholars, the association of *campesinos* with the EPP in the state's narrative has contributed to vilifying them as radical guerrilla members and, in turn, infused fear in *campesino* communities through raids, which could ultimately promote these communities' disintegration and provide soy planters with more land to take over (Martens 2014; Irala and Pereira Cardozo 2016; Cardozo 2018; Winer 2017; SERVINDI 2018).

Most anti-neoliberal projects by left-leaning *campesinos* and urbanite activists are nonviolent—these groups usually march and promote political discourses in passionate but peaceful ways. Political graffiti is not usually linked to violence. Movements to curb graffiti in Downtown Asunción are more related to reverting the dilapidated state of historical areas than getting rid of political messages (Velázquez Moreira 2017). The state itself does not seem worried about political graffiti, as authorities do not normally punish graffiti artists; only instances in which political graffiti has been used to vandalize politicians' properties have led to criminal prosecution. For example, political activist Paraguayo Cubas used graffiti to identify the homes and office fronts of allegedly corrupt government officers during President Cartes' administration (ABC Color 2017c). Cubas was prosecuted for these instances of vandalism (ABC Color 2017c). Still, his leftist and anti-corruption political activism (which involved graffiti protest) got him elected as a senator of Congress for the current administration led by President Mario Abdo Benítez. In summary, in post-dictatorial, democratic Paraguay, graffiti has emerged as its own form of protest and political discourse—a geographic project that denounces unjust state projects.

Dissent painted on Asunción could and may contribute to peacefully advancing a state that is a fair steward of all of its peoples.

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