

**Guerrilla Auditors and Duplicitous Documents:
Information, Transparency and Land Struggles in Paraguay**

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This paper is a chapter from a book manuscript that is in the final stages of editing. I have added some pages and notes from the introduction to the book to frame the argument a little better, and considerably shortened the rest of it for the colloquium, hopefully leaving it intelligible. One aspect of the argument that I have not fleshed out here deals with recent Paraguayan history and with what I call the rise of *new democrats* as an unnamed political constituency during the transition to democracy that began in 1989 with a coup against General Alfredo Stroessner, who had held power for 35 years, from within his own Colorado Party. The overarching argument is that democracy allowed a small segment of the urban middle class to establish itself as the ethical center of Paraguayan political life and self-representation through their use of mass media and alliances with international NGOs and donors, even while they remained marginal to a state still governed by the Colorados. In this chapter, I look at the role that the idea of transparency and the bureaucratic reforms carried out in its named played in securing this new position, and how over the following two decades it allowed them to slowly change the state apparatus. A rhetorical device I use to describe the new democrats' form of power is to call it a *Lettered City* after Angel Rama's (1996) depiction of colonial and post-colonial bureaucratic practices in Latin America. Rama argued that colonial Latin America and the post-colonial republics created in the 19th century were ruled through the circulation and production of documents by *letrados* ("the literate," usually referring specifically to academic or legal literacy).

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At the turn of the 21st century a peculiar promise held sway in international development circles. Its central premise was that modern bureaucracies, managing transparent information, were the key to promoting equality, freedom and prosperity. This model of development emerged at the end of the Cold War alongside a host of other projects we have come to know as “neoliberalism”: structural adjustment programs including privatization of state industries, outsourcing of public services, deregulation of markets and trade. Most neoliberal projects, and the premises on which they were based, have been widely critiqued,¹ and in the wake of financial collapses in Asia, Latin America and Europe and the United States, neoliberalism and unfettered deregulation have become bad words in mainstream political and economic thinking. We have entered, we are told, the era of “post-neoliberalism.”² And yet the model of governance based on bureaucratic reform remains, and with it many of the catchwords that were popular in the early 1990s: transparency, accountability, efficiency, anti-corruption. If anything, these promising tropes have thrived and have been invested with even greater burden than before. With deregulation off the table, suddenly development is to be achieved solely by eliminating waste, streamlining paperwork, making service providers accountable. But if there is one thing that we should have learned from the 20th century, it is that simple solutions, premised on simple narratives of development, rarely work out quite the way they are intended.

The research for this paper began during a conflict between peasant farmers and large soybean producers in rural Paraguay, a place and event that might seem far removed from the concerns of bureaucratic reformers or the politics of transparency. But it is precisely on such margins that transparency becomes an interesting research topic. I argue that like many liberal ideas that came before it, the idea of government transparency presents itself as a universal good which is nonetheless inherently exclusive, and it is people who live inside this contradiction, both embraced and repelled by universal promises, that have the most to tell us about what the phenomenon entails. One of the primary characteristics of being a peasant or *campesino* in 21st century Paraguay is that while one’s poverty and victimization are necessary targets of democratic reformers, one is simultaneously considered a threat to the transparency project. Transparency and democracy are supposed to cure rural poverty, but the thing that most stands in the way of this cure are the rural poor themselves, whose way of being and thinking is somehow inherently undemocratic.

In Paraguay, the word *campesino* usually refers to small farmers, with or without land, living in the fertile eastern half of the country. They are numerically important, accounting for at least 20% of the national population, and at least 83% of the farms, although they only own about 4% of the total cultivated land.³ The word is also culturally, racially and linguistically marked. It connotes both the original Paraguayan mestizo population, thought to represent a true Paraguayan traditional way of life, and the population most likely to speak Guaraní as a first language (see Rubin 1968).⁴ But the real story of the *campesinado* in Paraguay in the 20th and 21st century is about the long struggle of rural people to become involved in national development. People who call themselves *campesino* in Paraguay today implicitly identify with a struggle for land that has been going on unabated since the early 1960s, when a cotton boom made it possible for smallholders to make some money with family labour, enter the market economy and become full citizens of their nation.⁵ They believed, with rural people all over Latin America, that they and their country could become prosperous if only the vast landholdings of a handful of elites were redistributed to the poor, and if they and their children did back-breaking work in the cotton fields under the 45 degree sun. They were supported in this belief by a government that rarely kept its end of the bargain, and by an intellectual class that believed rural development would eventually bring about democracy. But as the Cold War ended, the developmental theories of those in power began to shift.

Ever since Paraguay began its post-Cold War experiment, a protracted transition to democracy that lasted from 1989 to 2008, *campesinos'* attempts to participate politically in their country's development has been regarded by many urban democrats as though it undermined democracy itself. *Campesinos'* supposed illiteracy, economic irrationality, and above all their predilection for populist leaders make them a frightening reminder of what Paraguay's new democrats think of as the recent, authoritarian past, the very thing that transparency reforms are supposed to get rid of. Perhaps most surprising, though, is the fact that most *campesinos* I know have not reacted to this absurd catch twenty-two by resisting the ideas of transparency and bureaucratic reform. Many have openly embraced and used these ideas, trying to make transparency their own, adopting new political practices which insinuate themselves into the nooks and crannies of bureaucratic reform. These legally-minded *campesino* leaders are rarely successful in accomplishing their political ends. But their presence as unwanted interlopers in a

system based in the idea of openness and inclusion serves as a fascinating vantage point for a re-examination of the politics of transparency after the Cold War.

In this paper I juxtapose three different creatures at work in Paraguay's archives: campesino activists, international bureaucratic reformers, and anthropologists, and show that their activities are surprisingly similar even while they often run in political opposition with each other.

Guerrilla Auditors

At the center of this story is the group of young women and men whom I call “guerrilla auditors,” and with whom I did ethnographic research between 2004 and 2006. This is really a small group of campesino activists from around the town of Vaquería,⁶ who form the leadership of the Movimiento Agrario y Popular (MAP), and who created a novel form of political organizing using documents. The MAP shared many characteristics with other regional organizations which had grown out of liberation theology “bases” created in the 1970s (Telesca 2004; Fernandez 2003). They were also involved in some creative political activity, that while quite novel in 2002 when they started, soon became a staple of the other organizations as well. Unlike the larger national organizations that had important sources of funding, either from large, dues-paying membership or from international support from groups like Via Campesina, the MAP could not afford lawyers, and so they had to teach themselves enough about the law to be able to make their cases to bureaucrats and judges. The more literate members of the regional leadership spent a great deal of time retrieving documents from bureaucracies in Asunción and getting to know them very well. They were led in this project by a man named Jorge Galeano.

Jorge and his acolytes never spoke about what they did as “audit.” In fact, they rarely spoke about it as a separate activity at all, and it took me some time to understand the complexity of what they were doing on their periodic trips to the city. I spent much of my free time looking at an archive that Jorge was building in his house, thousands of pages of photocopied documents of all sorts pertaining to the land he was fighting over. I mulled over these pages for hours, often understanding very little of what they said, trying to cross-reference the texts with old copies of the Civil Code and the *Estatuto Agrario*, the land reform law passed in 1963 that was still in effect. And I eventually acquired a rudimentary understanding of Paraguayan land law. But during those first five or six months I never really saw the documents *as documents*. I had not

yet seen his archive as itself an interesting fact – I just saw it as a short-cut to the information I was after, saving me trips to the city.

On his own, or in small meetings with the top representatives of the Movimiento Agrario, Jorge would pore over these documents for clues as to how particular bureaucratic processes were unfolding. At least that is how I read it at first, because what they were doing looked an awful lot to me like what I was doing: research. They consulted the archive as I would for information. Until then my understanding of how bureaucracy worked was not far from the Weberian description which permeates international development thinking about “good governance” (Weber 1946). I imagined it as a procedural apparatus intended to manage information about the relationships between citizens and the state. And the infuriating Kafkaesque stories that everyone in Paraguay told about their encounters with bureaucracy I assumed to result from a combination of inefficiency, corruption, mismanaged information systems and the maddening calculated indifference with which bureaucrats imperfectly perform the separation between public and private (Herzfeld 1992). In other words, before I seriously entered the halls of the Paraguayan state, I still imagined that it was useful to think of it in terms of its deviance from an ideal type. Since all I wanted to do at the beginning was read some documents to clarify my own understanding of what I was hearing in the campo, I figured none of these deviations really mattered to me, except as an impediment to research. But I couldn’t have been more wrong, for I soon discovered that there was no useful distinction between information and bureaucratic process, between content and form, between record and politics, or between history and the aesthetic of inscription.

The central bureaucracy in which campesinos were interested was the IBR (Instituto de Bienestar Rural), the agency created in the 1960s to administer the land reform, and the central hub for virtually all land conflicts in the eastern half of the country. The IBR’s system was fairly straightforward. All requests for information were processed as files or *expedientes*, which themselves became the containers for information which could be consulted later. Expedientes changed as they went through various formal procedures or *trámites*. Guerrilla auditing (in fact most effective campesino politics) was made possible by the understanding that bureaucracy, and the legal power that it wields, is nothing more than the creation, circulation and endless interpretation of documents. For campesinos, information does not exist in documents, nor does it exist prior to documents, merely to be inscribed there by a state that seeks to control its

citizens. Information, and therefore state power itself, arises not so much in the inscription of documents as in their reading. Documents do not store information from the past for the present, but make information possible. Information, in other words, is a quality of documents that always belongs to the document's future as a form of possibility. I have argued elsewhere (Hetherington 2009) that in the campo, various kinds of documents relating to land ownership were valued because they were the product of labour, and considered effective because they served to gather allies among those who could call on or dismiss the police. Expedientes circulating in the IBR function in much the same way: they are powerful insofar as they create the possibility for political action. Exceptional guerrilla auditors are good at what they do insofar as they are able to create files, find others, keep track of the movements of multiple related documents and control their interpretation.

This sort of reading built on intimate practical knowledge of institutions concerned, deep knowledge of particular people and forms of transactions that Jorge insisted campesino leaders needed to develop in order to be effective. I would add that researchers in Paraguay need the same sort of knowledge. For while I learned to see this technique as a specifically campesino form of bureaucratic engagement, nothing in those months of conversations in Jorge's living room could have prepared me for the difficulties I would encounter getting simple answers to my questions in the bureaucratic maze of the IBR, the Public Registry and the Ministry of Agriculture. I had hoped in vain that the IBR would prove to be a massive store of information managed through the movement of files. I finally learned to see it as a complex maker and mover of files, each of which had the potential for many interpretations. My initial approach to the institution was built on a representational view of information, a view that had made me ignore the physical properties of the documents I was dealing with. Put another way, I had approached research in the institution as though the ideal relationship to information was one in which the movement of documents themselves was invisible. Armed with unspoken expectations of governance, I found myself approaching the archives with the same semiotic naivety and zeal of international development economists, hoping to find, or somehow manufacture, transparency.

Transparency and Opacity after the Cold War

The idea that transparency is a bureaucratic virtue is not entirely new, but in the 1990s it became a prominent idea in at least two international reform projects, one having to do with governance, the other with economic development, each with its roots in the Cold War. The first had its roots in Western criticisms of propaganda and censorship, and state intelligence-gathering in communist countries. The idea that oppressive states manipulated and withheld information from their citizenry was one of the key ideological weapons of the west during the Cold War, to the point that censorship came to be seen as equivalent to totalitarianism (see Pietz 1988; Franco 2002).⁷ The implication was that democracy naturally followed from having “more information” available in the public sphere,⁸ and that states which curtailed or distorted information were undemocratic.⁹ The arguments made by liberals against propaganda were particularly important, since they implied that there are two kinds of information circulating in the public sphere; those which are transparent or objective, and those which are deceitful, manipulative, and *political*. By 1989, the belief that government ought to be based on strong democratic institutions open to its citizenry and streamlined in the way it produced and used information had become the cornerstone of what the World Bank called “good governance” (World Bank 1989; 1999). This was a stripped-down, procedural model of democracy that was devoid of specific or local content so that it could be patterned into the workings of any state (see Diamond 1989). The state became democratic so long as its citizens were adequately informed about their choices, and free to participate in occasional rituals of choice-making like elections. As such, democracy was in fact formally similar to capitalism – a rule-based playing-field on which the rational political choices of citizen-consumers equipped with transparent information were to discover and elect optimal governments.

The conceptual similarity between procedural democracy and liberal economics is not coincidental, for transparency’s other life began in a branch of micro-economics known as the “economics of information,” based on a rejection of Soviet-style control economies. The principle questions of this economics were laid down by Friedrich Hayek (1945) when he argued that state attempts to control information were not only anti-democratic, they were also a drag on the economy.¹⁰ Hayek spawned a relatively marginal branch of microeconomics during the Cold War which came into its own in the 1990s, popularizing the premise that markets cannot achieve efficiency if participants are ill-informed (or asymmetrically informed) about the goods that they

are buying and selling. Development economists could then find ways of making markets more efficient by improving the availability of information to participants in the market, or by devising end-runs around certain things that were simply unknowable.¹¹ In a decade where “information technology” was expanding everywhere and countries were announcing their entry into the “information age,” the idea that the production and dissemination of information could have such positive effects was appealing to people of all sorts of political persuasions. Indeed, the strongest advocates of the “information-for-development” approach include conservative disciples of Hayek and Milton Friedman (e.g. North 1990; de Soto 2000) as well as outspoken critics of neoliberalism (e.g. Stiglitz 1994, 2002).

During this period, information became the grease of both the market economy and democracy. The failure of democracy and of markets in the third world were both attributable to a lack of transparent information available to the citizenry.¹² What’s most striking about this as a world view is the way in which it seemed to avoid criticism. Even as neoliberalism came under increasingly harsh condemnation in the late 1990s from people within the development apparatus, the argument that information could solve both political and economic ills of all sorts actually increased its influence under what development experts now think of as “post-neoliberalism.” Explicitly turning away from state-slashing austerity projects, the World Bank would suggest in its 1999 World Development Report that investing in “information” and solving multifarious “information problems” were the key to guiding the developing world out of poverty (World Bank 1999). Around the same time Hernando de Soto’s best-selling book on development, *The Mystery of Capital* (2000) claimed that one of the greatest problem faced by the slum-dwellers of third-world mega-cities was “missing information.”

If development models depend so crucially on this thing called “information,” it’s worth stepping back and asking what exactly it is, regardless of how obvious that might seem.¹³ There are two curious attributes which are worth paying closer attention to. First of all when development experts use the word “information” what they generally mean is a kind of abstractable and quantifiable form of knowledge.¹⁴ To “have information” is to know something, but it is also to possess something. That is, information is an object in itself, independent of the context in which it is created or interpreted, possessed or missing. Another way of putting this is that information is knowledge in commodity form. It can be owned as Intellectual Property, bought and sold, or made public and communal, but in itself it is separate

from the relations of production and exchange that surround it. Secondly, though, information is a kind of language, and it is overwhelmingly a “representational” language. Information is not meant to be poetic, to evoke or to stir, it is meant to refer to something in the world outside, and it is meant to do so truthfully. In other words, information’s value is not intrinsic, but only as a tool for gaining access to something else.

Language, of course does many things other than represent. But bureaucracy functions by ignoring the aesthetic and agentic qualities of its own instruments in favour of seeing these as information (see Riles 2000; 2006; Brenneis 2006).¹⁵ Following Webb Keane (2001), we might say that bureaucratic practice is governed by a “semiotic ideology,” the belief that language can, or ought ideally, to work this way. There is a strong argument to be made that the representationalist view of language has been deeply ingrained in European understandings of truth and power since the enlightenment, and remains intrinsic to most social science.¹⁶ This symmetry between bureaucratic rationality and social scientific critiques poses an analytic problem as well. The talismanic claims that transparency cures corruption has predictably given rise to anthropological analyses invoking magic, fetishism and ideology. Transparency is the new fetish of economic development (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Sanders 2003; Zizek 1997; Morris 2000; Freidberg 2004). The appeal of this analytic is obvious. As McCarthy Brown (2006) sums up nicely, for burgeoning 19th century liberals, the fetish was the opposite of transparency, the site of representational confusion, and it was Marx’ stroke of rhetorical genius to put the fetish at the center of liberalism’s most rational sphere, the market. In the 1980s and 1990s, as anthropologists reread Marx through a post-structuralist lens, they used the fetish to deconstruct the state, arguing that the state is not a proper object but a metaphysical projection of power relations which gets confused with an object (Taussig 1992, 1997; Coronil 1997; Mitchell 1991; Abrams 1979). Marx is clear: “the religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life ... generally present themselves to him in a rational form (1867: 173). The purpose of critique, then, is to render transparent, and in the extension of this analytic proposed by Zizek, the Comaroffs and others is to claim that transparency itself has become a sort of fetish object, a reified abstraction that conceals the true working of power.¹⁷

As important as such a critique is in counteracting the grand claims made by the likes of Hernando de Soto, it seems incapable of escaping a tit-for-tat argument about visibility. Power

in both stories remains a story of revelation and concealment. If de Soto claims the information is missing, the critics claim the information is present but represents the wrong thing – i.e. it offers proof of possession but elides the power relations that create possession and the whole edifice of capitalism. Documents appear to have power only because they elide the material relations behind them, relations which critique reveals anew. The magical state is shown to be just a name given to a set of practices, processes and power struggles with blurry margins. Put another way, the fetish-sign detached from its signified, is non-transparent, but critical revelation makes it transparent again (Levine 2003). Once the object of critique becomes transparency itself, the analyst has done no more than say that transparency is opaque. The critique either implies the possibility of a different, truer transparency), or rests its case about the impossibility of transparency on the known non-correspondence between language and the Real. Neither of these offers much purchase for an empirically-minded appreciation of what is going on. Nor does it help to determine the semiotic ideologies at work amongst bureaucrats, campesinos, anthropologists *or* new democratic reformers.

What seems to be happening here is a trap that linguistic anthropologists have been warning us about since even before the full ascendancy of post-structuralism in the discipline. The discipline is by and large still stuck in a peculiar episteme that “gives ideological priority to the referential function of language and to the text understood as an objectification of that function” (Crapanzano 1981: 123; Silverstein 1976; 1979). The linguists’ answer to this problem goes through Peircian view of language in which “signs give rise to new signs in an unending process of signification” (Keane 2005: 187). Following this view, documents, like any other signifying device, cannot have stable meanings. In fact they do not “have” meanings at all. Their meanings are actualized in the process of reading as they come into dynamic relation with other signs, a relationality which always necessarily has to do with the materiality of the signs in question. This model of signification, I would suggest, is far closer to the strategic approach that campesinos, and Paraguayan bureaucrats, use to negotiate their relationship with the state than anything de Soto might bring to the table. With that in mind, let me look more closely at campesinos’ documentary pragmatism, so the we can rebuild a critique of transparency from there.

You Can't Win Anything on Paper

In eastern Paraguay one often hears this strong critique of documents: *ndojeganai mba'eve kuatia'ári*. “You can't win anything on paper.” Guerrilla auditors have a more nuanced approach to this, but the majority of campesinos I spoke to were fiercely skeptical of the claims made about modern bureaucratic documents. Expressions like *pe'a kuatiente* (that's only paper), *kuati'a ndovalei* (paper is worthless), and especially *kuati'a ricomba'e* (papers are things of the rich) all express this sense of the uselessness of paper to the rural poor. Paper, campesinos often claim, is an instrument of exclusion which they are better not to put much hopes in.¹⁸



Figure 1 This picture of Stroessner supporting a campesino's arm as he holds aloft a land title appeared on the front page of a number of Juan Manuel Frutos' books about the land reform.

And yet despite refrains about the uselessness of paper, certain papers are also held with great reverence by their owners: almost every political activity that I engaged in involved trying to win things on paper. Most of these struggles were over land, and no one ever considered themselves to have won land until its possession was materialized by paper, the land title. Those who already possessed such documents, or some version thereof, kept them carefully protected, often with identity documents and family photographs. Some people refused to show me their titles and *derecheras*, fearing that my seeing them might cause them problems, while others were eager to display them, waiting while I read over the details on the page. Early in my research, I was intent on attributing the aura of property titles and other documents to a history of state

education. In effect, they often reminded me of pictures on documents produced by the land agency in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, which depicted campesino men holding up documents as the ultimate expression of inclusion in the republic.¹⁹ The iconic image of the campesino holding up a piece of paper was also repeated constantly in meetings, where campesinos would hold up papers as proof of bureaucratic victories, as when Jorge returned from Asunción to show us all what he'd accomplished by opening a folder full of photocopies. The new campesino leader, holding papers in defiance of authority was an extension and reversal of the campesino subject created by the land reform. No longer holding up titles, the documents used as props in such speeches were about bureaucratic procedures, newspaper clippings about government corruption, or angry letters addressed to the president. These documentary gestures made claims about battles and partial victories on paper. Campesinos also produced documents, and adopted documentary practices from modern bureaucracy like writing out highly protocolized minutes of their meetings. The FNC even produced identity cards for its members similar to those handed out by political parties. I came to understand this contradiction in campesino statements and practices around documents as a fundamental tension over how to engage in politics. This tension over how, when, and how much to engage documents happened at every level of the organization, and permeated all of their activities.

It was during one of my forays to the IBR with Jorge that I realized just how complex this tension was, and how the negotiation with documents involved all sorts of perils and seductions. Jorge had invited me to a meeting, along with five other members of the MAP, some of whom were entering the IBR for the first time. With the help of two other leaders and Digno Britez, an Asunción lawyer who worked for a Jesuit legal aid organization, Jorge had managed to book a meeting with the IBR's *Gerente General* or General Manager, to discuss six intractable cases. All of the cases involved land with multiple claims. Two, including Tekojoja, had recent counter-claims, while the others dated back twenty to thirty years, land which had been settled by squatters, but which had never been fully redistributed to them because the history of ownership was too tangled to fix with a simple expropriation or buyout. The communities living there were under constant fear of being evicted by one of the past claimants. Especially after 1999, when the soybean boom had begun pushing up the value of the land, many of the heirs to long-forgotten land titles were threatening to do just that. Resolution to any of these cases rested on the government settling an account with a claimant or forcing a legal decision out of a very

sluggish court process, and in each case the IBR had waffled for years, producing expedientes that would multiply and grow but never be resolved. So long as the IBR didn't clean up and close the expedientes, the legal situation remained murky enough that violence remained an every-day possibility.

The night before, Jorge had prepared us for the meeting, outfitting each one with a folder full of documents that would be important for the event. The room, while large, was an awkward fit for the fifteen people at the meeting, and one of the campesinos squatted by the door through most of it, getting up every two or three minutes to let people in and out. The Gerente sat behind a large desk, which was the only piece of furniture in the room other than a handful of chairs and shelves stacked with expedientes. Three secretaries stood behind the desk, and were dispatched on errands every few minutes, while two lawyers from legal aid took turns on a single metal chair. The rest of us, 8 men and one woman, stood around the opposite side of the wall, also taking turns on three chairs. A pattern developed for each of the discussions. Jorge would announce the name of the community we were supposed to be discussing, along with the number and title of the corresponding expediente. The Gerente would send off one of his assistants to find the file, and one of the campesinos, usually helped by Jorge, would begin to explain the case. She or he would explain details of the documentary trails from memory, explaining to the Gerente what he would find in his own file, and explaining the appropriate bureaucratic action that needed to be taken to resolve the case, making reference to laws of possession and land distribution. Usually campesinos advised the Gerente to send someone to visit the site to witness the falsity of claims made by their opponents or previous bureaucrats.

These interventions were all prefaces to reading: they prepared the addressee to find particular sorts of information in the expedientes. At the beginning, the documents themselves played only an ornamental role. As we talked about the cases, the Gerente's assistants returned with huge and withered packages, hundreds or thousands of pages held together by staples, tape and string. The Gerente glanced at them but did not attempt to read them or corroborate any of the accounts that he was being given orally. Occasionally one of the assistants would begin leafing through the stack, but whatever they found there, it didn't make it into the discussion. The only people who were capable to speaking authoritatively about the documents on the Gerente's side were the legal aid lawyers who had some prior experiences with two of the cases in particular. In fact, while documents were central to this entire political meeting, both as

aesthetic props for indicating authority and bureaucratic agility, and as referents in discussions, the documents themselves were not consulted directly. Their contents were only useful insofar as they had been committed to memory in a highly digested and interested form. And as Jorge and one of the lawyers showed, arguments made about the contents of the expedientes always straddled a line between what was in the documents, and what lay outside of them. That is, they presented the contents as already relational to things that the documents did not contain – stories about what was going on at the site, meta-stories about how the documents were created. Once the Gerente was ready to make a pronouncement, he would get his assistant to draw up a new document, detailing a course of action, which he would then stamp and sign and attach to the expediente. Most of these “courses of action” were orders for legal aid to re-read the expedientes in light of new information gathered either from campesinos or from field visits, and to add these new interpretations to the expediente, thus making it possible for the president of the land agency to make a ruling in the case.

In other words, the conversation, which made constant reference to reading, was actually about writing – it was not about consulting the archive, but about adding to its sediment. This is part of campesino’s documentary strategy – interpretation, they know, is only politically effective insofar as it produces more paper. This tells us something both about campesino views of materiality, and about how Paraguayan bureaucracy functions. For campesinos it shows how there can be a fairly seamless connection between agricultural labour, political labour, land titles, and other sorts of bureaucratic documents. When campesinos engage with such documents, they produce more, and in so doing, produce the legal landscape around them. For bureaucrats it underscores the incongruousness of suggesting that the documents “store” information, or give access to information. Instead, it suggests that information is a potential *quality* of documents as material objects.

I use the word “quality” here to draw attention to the single most important aspect of the document’s materiality. To say that information is a quality of documents is not dissimilar from saying that redness is a quality of apples, and this, as Webb Keane (2001; 2005) reminds us, means that redness is always connected materially to other qualities so as to resist our interpretive attempts to reduce them.

[Q]ualities must be embodied in something in particular. But as soon as they are, they are actually, and often contingently (rather than by logical necessity), bound up with

other qualities – redness in an apple comes along with spherical shape, light weight, sweet flavor, a tendency to rot, and so forth. In practice, there is no way entirely to eliminate that factor of copresence, or what we might call *bundling*. This points to one of the obvious, but important, effects of materiality: redness cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which can become contingent but real factors in its social life. Bundling is one of the conditions of possibility for what Kopytoff (1986) and Appadurai (1986) called the biography of things, as the qualities bundled together in any object will shift in their relative salience, value, utility, and relevance across contexts (Keane 2005: 188).

The specific information in documents comes bundled with fragility and flammability, with loseability and age. It comes marked with stamps and signatures that connect it to parallel biographies of bureaucrats past and present, themselves being amended between readings, disconnected and reconnected to new networks and political entanglements. As it grows it may also begin to disintegrate, and all sorts of contingencies can intercede on its growth to open up new sorts of interpretive possibilities and close down others. Lost pages, accidental or otherwise, are part of the document's surprises. Its size may affect how it is handled, whether it can be carried across a room during a debate, or even read at all. And the very presence of written words may, when they encounter a particular semiotic ideology of transparency, compel people to read in search of a definitive interpretation.

The main point is that the document bundles together many qualities which can never be exhaustively accounted for, they are qualities that are momentarily actualized as information in the multiple readings, negotiations and tussles into which they are introduced. The insight of guerrilla auditors is to never see documents as the end point, but the site of possibility. And perhaps this is the point around which they depart absolutely from the documentary pedagogy of Stroessner's populism. The pictures put out by the regime of campesinos holding up documents were intended to show the effects of the regime's good works. It is to this hollow victory that even Jorge would use the words "you can't win land on paper." But like brick houses, fruit trees, shotguns and cellular phones, a well-made document, carefully managed, can open up possibilities in the endless struggle over land.

Don't approach the table

Over time, I came to see the artful manipulation and production of documents as the primary skill of guerrilla auditors, and the sessions in Jorge's living room as a form of apprenticeship for campesinos from a dozen neighbouring communities. All of these incursions were attempts to shepherd documents into configurations that help campesino political goals. I say artful manipulation, because this was by no means *mastery* in the sense that they could impose their will definitively over the documents themselves. The way they saw it, no one had mastered them. The strategic commitment to the documents' materiality meant negotiating the bundled qualities that documents brought with them.

Toward the end of the meeting in the Gerente's office, an episode highlighted one of the difficulties that campesinos often encountered when they used documents for politics. The case was Yvykui, a squatter community which had been fighting since the early 1990s to get papers for the land they lived on. The story I had gleaned from the meeting between Jorge and Julian Pérez, the main campesino representative from Yvykui, went something like this. Campesinos had originally petitioned the IBR in 1993 for the expropriation of three fractions of land belonging to military personalities who had fallen under suspicion after the 1989 coup. The request had resulted in an expediente that called for the IBR to examine the property of businessman Luciano Olivieri and to send a team to the place to verify that there was a fully functioning squatter settlement named "Yvykui" on the land. They felt certain that this would result in a "reversion" of the land to the squatters. In these cases the quickest resolution for the IBR was to buy the proprietors out as quickly as possible, dividing the fractions into campesino lots, and beginning the long process of colonization and titling. Olivieri agreed to the sale, but an investigation of the title raised questions about the legality of the land, which made negotiations complicated since the institution didn't want to pay for a fraudulent title. At a certain point the expediente dealing with Olivieri went into bureaucratic limbo, and neither side had pressed the issue vehemently enough for it to be resolved. The supposed owner and the campesinos living there had slugged it out for years, accusing each other of theft, false claims and making threats. The IBR was called in repeatedly, sending teams to the area to try to make sense of the conflict, returning with maps and pictures each time, but no clear solution to the problem.

The newest round of negotiations was happening with Olivieri's widow. After her husband's death in 2000, she sent another letter to the institution offering to sell the land for 800 thousand Guaranis per hectare. A series of studies and surveys were carried out, but again the transaction never went through. In 2004, Julian Pérez, leading a new group of campesinos associated with the MAP, had written a letter to the IBR demanding that the case be resolved, and the expediente was dredged up once again. This time the IBR took the initiative and wrote a letter to Olivieri's widow, asking her if she was still willing to sell. The reply was favourable, but she said given the new rural situation (i.e. the increased value of the land due to soybean expansion), the price of the land would be 2.6 million per hectare instead of a mere 350 thousand.²⁰ The IBR was willing to buy, but couldn't come up with that kind of money right away. Moreover, a new problem had emerged as a Colorado party boss by the name of Castillo had fenced off a piece of the property, claiming that the IBR had awarded it to him. The main point on the agenda was to try to convince the Gerente to speed up the process of buying the land from the Olivieri family once and for all. They seemed close to an agreement, and the hope was that they could push it to a resolution by impressing on the Gerente the political urgency of the action.

All of this was known, in more or less detail, to the campesinos standing in the room that day, but the Gerente and his assistants knew almost nothing about it. The job of telling the story fell to Julián Pérez. He was not particularly charismatic, but he could talk for hours about the problem and its history. His land, he said, the piece of the Olivieri fraction that he had been living on for about ten years, was being threatened by Castillo, and he understood that there was no way of solving that problem legally unless the legality of the larger fraction was resolved by the IBR. He made the case quite clearly, but the Gerente's office seemed to make him nervous, and he kept getting lost in the details of the Castillo part of the story, which while important to him, was peripheral to the legal case at hand. He kept looking down at a document in his hand, a photocopy of one of a dozen maps of the property that the IBR had produced in the last ten years, and soon he was getting lost in the details of his presentation. Eventually he saw that the Gerente was eyeing the folder as well. So he got up and moved toward the table, to show him the paper rather than try to explain it himself.

As soon as he did this the mood in the room changed. While three people behind the desk huddled with Pérez over the paper, the energy drained out of the rest of the room. We

could no longer hear what was going on in the conversation or make sense of it, so we became excluded from the conversation. Pérez and the Gerente were no longer looking each other in the eye, instead they were looking down at the paper, and the Gerente kept turning pages, lingering over stamps and signatures and marginal figures. Those around me became unsure what to do with the space. This went on for almost five minutes before Jorge approached the table, and after a few seconds, retreated to the wall with Pérez proclaiming “all of these details will be worked out once the land has been bought.” We then moved on to the last two cases, but campesinos had lost the upper hand in the room, and the Gerente quickly dismissed the last two cases on the pretext that they couldn’t find the corresponding expedientes that day.

When I asked for Jorge’s feelings about the meeting he said he was thrilled that they had managed to pack so many campesinos into the room, and had tied so many bureaucrats up for two hours. The only problem, he said, was Pérez’s mistake. “You can never approach the table,” he said. “As soon as someone approaches the table like that, the meeting is lost.” I would hear this many more times, both as an admonition against people, or in planning for meetings. I saw one meeting with the president of the land agency completely melt down when people started approaching the table with specific requests relating to documents they held in their hands, usually receipts, maps or rights of possession issued by bureaucrats years previously. It was also clear that bureaucrats relished these moments, as campesinos ceded interpretive authority to them. It took the pressure off, collapsed the space of negotiation, allowed them to defuse loud speeches and avoid making eye contact with aggressive campesinos. But more importantly, it reestablished a proper social hierarchy around the documents, which put the technocrats of the lettered city back in control of interpretation.

The case of Yvykui was actually resolved later that year, but the resolution had little to do with anything read off an expediente that day. If the meeting had any effect, it was that it moved the expediente into the orbit of the right people in the institution. At the other end, the widow of Lucia de Olivieri was more persistent than her late husband had been. In April, after Olivieri’s lawyer’s had shown up one last time with a number of pictures of the urgency of the situation (pictures of campesino houses with captions about how they were invaders on private property). By keeping the expediente circulating, and adding fresh pages of urgency, the case of Olivieri stayed on the informal priorities list of bureaucrats. This may have been as simple as the expediente remaining at the right depth of the right pile at the right time. Because the real

break came when the government received an eighty-million dollar grant from the Taiwanese government to help resolve rural conflicts, and Yvykui made it onto the list.

At this point the expediente moved into a new tier of the bureaucracy, and a new speed of circulation, when the general secretary decided to authorize the purchase. His order came with the proviso that he needed three more trámites performed on the file. First, there were now at least ten maps and measurements of the property, which varied in size from the original 398 hectares to 405 hectares. He quickly dispatched a topographer to do another map, now with the GPS which had been newly activated in the area, the new measurement came back at 413 hectares, the largest so far. Secondly, uncomfortable with the newest asking price of 2.6 million/ha, he sent for an evaluation of the value of the property, which came back at 3.5 million/ha, and quickly rising as soy farmers in the area entered a buying phase. Seeing how much higher their own estimates were, they quietly agreed to de Olivieri's asking price of 2.6 million for 398 hectares. But another problem had come to light, which was a pesky receipt from the titles archives suggesting that somewhere in the system there was an outstanding debt on the property (the same problem that had stalled negotiations twice in the previous 15 years). The third order of business was to send out one of the lawyers to look into the problem so that the books could be clean.

A week later the lawyer submitted a fascinating report. From her reading of the documentary trail, Olivieri had originally bought the property from a Colonel named Julio Rojas, who had been awarded the land by the land agency in 1975. But Rojas had never finished paying the IBR for the land, which meant that it was technically nontransferable when he sold it to Olivieri. Legally speaking, Olivieri wasn't the rightful owner. This was a bit of a sticking point, because the IBR was currently mired in controversies, in which their own lack of consistency about this rule was held to blame for much of the problem of land irregularity on the frontier itself.²¹ Technically, now, the sale couldn't go ahead, since the discovery of the illegality of the previous sale meant that the latter would be nullified. The title would be returned to Rojas, wherever he might be, who could then be held accountable for his debt to the very institution that was now considering buying it from someone else. In her striking conclusion to this report, she made her own frustration evident in a page-long sentence of which I will translate a part below (with appropriate English punctuation). "If the institution tried to repossess the land," she said,

the heirs of Luciano Olivieri could claim to have bought the property in good faith, which could lead the whole thing being decided against the interests of the Institute. But even if this were to come out favourably, as has been noted, circumstances would be rewound to the moment of the initial transfer. In other words, Julian Rojas would be the proprietor and we could demand payment. Ergo ALL of the judicial action taken since then would have been a waste of time and resources. It is therefore preferable that the Institution move ahead, on the basis of the current conditions, with the appropriate procedures for the purchase of the property, paying the total value of the property at the time of the transfer. This is my pronouncement.

In other words her reading of the documents led her to the conclusion that if they followed what the documents indicated, they would end up turning the very reading of the documents into a waste of time. The documents could not be allowed to impose their past on the trámites of the present. It was therefore best to proceed as if the documents didn't exist. Luckily, there was another document which could be summoned for this purpose. Article 123 section G of the new law of public contracts²² allowed executives of certain agencies to forgo the legal niceties of acquiring property if there was a sufficiently urgent "social problem" that would be solved by the acquisition.²³ Campesinos had encouraged a reading of urgency into the document, which when translated into the language of the "social problem" could be used to enrol another document in the construction of yet another interpretation. Once again, and more strikingly than before, the outcome, favourable in the short term to everyone involved, was not the result of a simple reading of the documents. Rather, it was a creative juxtaposition of different documents, bringing them into relation with each other by creating new documents which quoted and otherwise indexed the previous ones. The legal decision exploited the juxtaposition of potential interpretations of the archive, pragmatically excluding others, so as to produce a new one. At best this new interpretation is a layer of potential provided to future auditors, bureaucrats and contexts.

Lawyers employed by the IBR shared this appreciation of documents' materiality with guerrilla auditors, and the understanding that it was never entirely advisable to let documents "speak for themselves." When given a chance to express themselves, the expedientes merely unleashed a sort of uncontainable excess. Their inscriptions were always too open for simple consensus, and so could not be expected to "speak for themselves" in political confrontations.

And while this gave campesinos problems, it was also the condition of possibility for guerrilla auditing. The documents' excesses *were* the terrain of struggle for confrontations in the Gerente's office. These were highly indeterminate objects that made possible information, but never in a direct or even predictable way. They refused, in short, to merely represent. They were radically open, and hence the centrepieces for all sorts of disputes about land, about the role of the state, about the relations that the state facilitates. The documents were resting places for signs, but not places where signs could become stable, just where they were held in trust for further deployment into new relational spheres. The work of the bureaucrats was not to traffic in stable signs but to generate new ones, an activity that was highly contextual.

Who's going to read all of this?

This description of expedientes would undoubtedly be fairly horrifying to reformers of land markets, for whom documents are supposed to be mere conduits of information. The dizzying fuzziness of IBR files meant that they were rarely closed, often spending years sitting on shelves before being requested and brought back into play during some conflict.²⁴ There's no denying that the IBR's system is inefficient by any standard. But it is into this inefficiency that guerrilla auditors have found a way to insert themselves, generating a politics inside the technocratic wall of the state. The new democratic dream of transparency then, is not only to streamline the bureaucracy, trim the civil service, and speed up rural economic transactions, but also to remove campesino politics from the equation altogether. This is why the IBR would be the first building to be closed if the new democrats had their way; to them, it serves no purpose except to slow down commerce, and to bring campesinos and other populist relics into a process that ought to be carried out by technicians. The institutions of the state should work like a machine in which the documents carry only one possible interpretation, and the possibility for politics disappears. If the documents *could* speak for themselves, campesinos would have no purchase in the bureaucracy at all.

But if that is the utopia presented by visionaries like de Soto, the actual mechanics of transitioning toward it are somewhat more mundane. The IDB's project to reform Paraguay's property registry system is a case in point. Having encountered the institutional conditions described above, the IDB (2002) had loaned the Paraguayan government nine million dollars to pay for a handful of experts who would streamline their entire property registry system,

introduce new documentary protocols, and digitize most of the system.²⁵ The original project called for an overhaul of the public registry, the national cadastre and the IBR, but after two years of planning, the IBR had pulled out, recognizing that the plan would render it obsolete. Still, the loan went ahead in revised form. The project now required technicians hired by the bank to systematize millions of land titles housed in the public registry which were as open to interpretation as expedientes in the IBR. They would condense the contents of the titles onto a single page, which would be added to the title, then digitize the form and scan the rest of the pages into a database. Even there, they encountered a terribly frustrating documentary situation that refused to conform to their desires for routinizable information. I was not allowed to examine their work very closely during my stay, although I knew from conversations with IDB staff that they were frustrated by the task. To give a sense of what they must have been confronting, let me relate my own story of trying to systematize information in the public registry.

After months of attending meetings like the one described above, of going to demonstrations, participating in land invasions on the frontier, I was still having trouble untangling exactly how things had come to be so complicated. I had a great deal of trouble understanding the cases as they were unfolding before me, and I thought it might help if I sat down for a few days with some of the key documents that everyone was referring to all the time to see if I might make sense of them. I was, as so many times in my fieldwork, approaching the table, still hoping that in a quieter setting the documents might speak for themselves. After months of toiling in the IBR, I eventually ended up in section 15 of the public registry. The room was long and skinny, perhaps thirty meters deep, with every wall piled floor-to-ceiling in browning property titles. There were easily 100 000 rural titles, some of them 500 pages thick. I read dozens of titles, describing a legal and legislative history of the area I lived in dating back to the 1930s when the registry was established. But I quickly found that this mode of understanding the history of the area was no easier than that of contested oral claims I heard in the campo. Written in a highly protocolized legal jargon in long flowing script, the documents were so aesthetically peculiar as to make it very hard to find my bearings in them. It took several days, and lots of help from the director to even begin to understand how to read them. For me, still guided by a representational semiotic ideology, reading these documents was a fight against form, against the irreducible bundling of signs and qualities, to extract information.

These are the first words of a land title to a huge tract of land bordering on Yvykui:

In the city of the Assumption, on the thirteenth day of the month of December of the year nineteen forty-eight, I proceed to the inscription of a written testimony, presented on this day at seven o'clock and twenty five minutes, drawn up by notary public Don J. Ronulfo Perez on the seventh of December of the current year in which he states in writing that on the twenty fifth of November of the current year, the following men appeared before him: engineer so-and-so...

It is not impossible, but highly strange to try to think of these as formal representations of assets whose stability or transparency bears on their relation to the thing (a right) represented. They are the circumstantial sediment of power negotiated elsewhere, the notes between powerbrokers, indexing of long strings of gentlemanly agreements in the safe halls of the Lettered City. They are histories, but excessive histories, their mundane details spilling over the page so as to resist reduction to simple rules of possession. Transparency projects in such an archive do not change this, just elicit different forms of inscription.

The title is a material object with a certain degree of physical permanence. This of course was the promise of such documents at one time – they were gentlemanly agreements with more durability than memory, consensus or good will. But the title's materiality also made it capable of surprises. A great deal of the work in the registry was accounting for lost titles, or tracking them down to where they had been taken for some kind of consultation. Titles had to be bound and unbound (*desglosado*) and things might go missing for ages before anyone realized it. And then there were all the other problems of archives, tears, mold and worms. Even the writing protocols themselves, those carefully studied ways of sedimenting legal action into the body of the document, could have unforeseen consequences.

The most exquisite and troublesome of the documents I ran across was the title of *Finca 13*, or Farm 13. Finca 13 was one of the largest properties in northern Caaguazu over which people I knew were struggling, reputed to still be 103 thousand hectares in size. The document followed the standard protocol, registered in 1933 during its sale to an investor in the area, and making allusions to a title that had existed prior to the registration. The property changed hands several times over the next few decades, and each time a notary would record in flowing script who was present for the transfer, where it took place, the conditions of sale, quoting the necessary legislation and previous bits of the title that explained the title's layout. Several times

measurements were taken because of disputes over the exact edges of the property, or changes in the laws around topographic technology, and some of the measurements differed from each other by as much as 15 thousand hectares. All of this was recorded in similar flowing script, although the straight pens were replaced with ball-point in the 1970s. It was around this time that a hereditary battle caused a piece of the property to break into several dozen smaller segments. In a smaller hand, now, more hurried, these splits were recorded in black ink over ten pages. These were in turn divided and sold, creating new properties. Each of these divisions was recorded in red ink, over the initial text, at 90 degrees to the black descriptions. Moreover, most of the divisions had a small marginal note in pencil or tight green ink, describing extra conditions of transfer.



Figure 2 Page from a land title in the Public Registry. I was not allowed to take pictures of the documents I worked with, and can't show some of the more spectacular pages from Finca 13. This was a fairly ordinary page taken from a different set of photocopies.

These ten brilliantly colored pages were absolutely extraordinary to look at, but were completely illegible. After a few frustrated hours of trying to extract information from them, I found a note, written in 2003 as a new battle for the property was gearing up between state agencies. “Due to the huge number of notes written on the title,” the note simply said, “it has become impossible to decipher what is written here. I’m therefore authorizing a new measurement.” It was signed and stamped by the director of the registry. When I asked the

current director about this, she laughed and said it was done all the time. It is through these sorts of actions that the registry was changing. New interpretations or problems begat new inscriptions in a new format, adequate to the protocols of the day, titles changed shape as new relations were added to them.

As slow and sedimentary as all of this was, through this process the registry was changing, sometimes through ad hoc decisions of individual bureaucrats or the work of guerrilla auditors, at other times through legislation or the concerted interventions of international lenders. Earlier versions of these inscriptions followed the same protocol, written in long flowing script with straight pens used before 1950 had slowly given way to terser phrasing and less accomplished calligraphy. Numbers that were spelled out in earlier years were replaced by more concise numerals. By the early 1980s, some of these were typed, and in the late 1980s someone had introduced a brilliant innovation of mimeographed pages of protocol with blanks. This had easily been transferred onto computers when most notaries started using those. In 1997, the most radical change had been the use of what were called *fichas*, that did away with the protocol altogether in favour of a chart – here the blanks were logically connected not by narrative language, but by gridlines. Titles were becoming more abstract, but abstraction followed the general rule of bureaucratic procedure – the new rules would be progressively applied, sedimented into the existing archives as problems came up, transactions occurred, or more properties were registered. In other words, like the note which declared the Finca 13 title illegible and opted for a new measurement, titles changed shape as new relations were added to them. The archive changed and shifted through the constant motion of lawyers, gestores, judges, notaries and property owners leaving their marks on things.

The director, a woman with a wry sense of humour and a sense of the chaos that I must be experiencing in the room, was very pragmatic about what she did. “All of this will change over time,” she told me. “But what are you going to do? You can’t just throw it out and start again! That would be even worse!” For this reason, among all the corrupt politicians, clamoring lawyers and groveling notaries whom she despised, she had particular contempt for the folks from the Inter-American Development Bank who were working down the hall on their digitization project. That week, four years after it began, the IDB project had been modified because of a serious snag. Although the Bank normally refused to hire government employees to reform government institutions, they couldn’t find anyone else who could understand the

documents well enough to enter them into the database. They had sent a troubleshooting team down from Washington to reconfigure the project, allowing them to hire people familiar with registry to carry out the transfer to computer. In the weeks that I was there, this had just started with a handful of functionaries. When I asked the director, at the end of one of her particularly long rants about the inefficiencies of the registry, she simply smirked. “It’s a nice idea,” she said, “but there’s only one problem.” She motioned at the walls with their millions of decaying documents. “Who do you think is going to read all of this?” Like the expedientes brought out in the meetings at the land agency, one could not expect to read them dispassionately, completely divorced from any particular political encounter. Instead, one carefully figured out what parts of what documents one needed to read at any given moment, then retreated to do so, only to reconvene and start arguing again. The idea that someone might sit down and try to figure the whole thing out once and for all seemed to her derisible.

In fact, the IDB’s silver bullet reforms for Paraguay’s propertied woes was the third project of its kind to be undertaken in only 20 years, even though the mythology that circulates among bureaucrats in the registry made these projects seem much older. Only the oldest hands remembered, with some fondness, a similar project from the mid 1980s, funded primarily by USAID, which had produced a set of aerial maps and reformed the municipal registries for the easternmost departments of the country. The new cadastral system produced by the project had no legal standing, but in 2006 it was still being used by municipal bureaucrats for taxation purposes in a handful of border towns, much to the disgruntlement of staff in the capital. Some of the aerial photographs were occasionally used by the National Cadastre as well, even though the ground that they depicted had been completely transformed over the last twenty years by soybeans. The World Bank had begun a project in 1992 that also promised to overhaul of the entire registry. Saddled by funding and organizational problems, the team had slowly cut down their project to cover only about 5 percent of Paraguay’s territory and down-graded it to a “pilot project,” although the twenty-five million-dollar price tag remained the same. For that small area, they produced a fabulous set of maps and a partial cadastre, and introduced a new kind of ficha. The project finally ended in 1999. Aside from some new maps stored at the ministry of agriculture, the only evidence of the project remaining in 2006 was that one and a half of the eighteen sections of the registry now used a different kind of form for land titles. There was also the question of thirty million dollars in debt, yet to be paid off. When the IDB arrived only three

years later to begin research for their project, they found the World Bank documents completely out of date, the technology already antiquated and the information unusable. They agreed with state officials that they needed to start over again.

Reading a title like Finca 13 one gets a sense of how these new transparency projects are part of a slow shift in the semiotic ideology underpinning the documentation of transactions. The change didn't happen with democratization; it started long before, but picked up noticeably in the late 1980s. Some of the change was technological, from straight pens to typewriters to photocopied forms and now computers. But the straight pen hadn't caused writers to write more details about the transactions. This was a change from a culture of documentary excess – in which detailed inscription was a sign of access to the social technologies of inscription – to a culture of parsimony that saw the document itself as something of an embarrassment, in which the quality and accessibility of “information” are critical to making the economy and the state run efficiently. Transparency is of course the desire that the document will disappear altogether, and the IDB project saw digitization as a way of doing that. To new democrats, all of this would seem to be a modernization of the bureaucracy, perhaps a shift from the lettered city (where the letter *is* power) to the public sphere, where the speed of informational circulation gives the system its legitimacy. But its purpose, as I've suggested, is the same: it creates the boundaries of an exclusionary economy of documents. And from that point of view, the new rules, and new technologies seem designed to shore up what new democrats see as an alarmingly leaky system of privilege.

Ultimately, though, there is no reason to see this kind of archival reform work as different from what campesinos were doing in the IBR. Or rather, its difference was not in kind, but in the scale of its interpretive ambitions, and the resources it could bring to the task. Both groups were merely trying to impose their interpretations on the documents and change the archives to help stabilize those interpretations. Campesinos approached this file by file, using bullying interpretive tactics on a case-by-case basis in the hopes of winning small battles. Like guerrilla auditors, the staff hired by the IDB could do no more than try to generate interpretations of documents in their relations with satellite images, survey data or local bureaucratic knowledge, and create new documents, in whatever form, that narrowed the possibilities of interpretation more closely around their own. But they did this on a massive scale, using the legitimacy of their position to reformat the entire archive so as to make it easier for some to access

(bureaucrats and notaries) and far harder for others. Indeed, from the point of view of campesinos, it was these international allies of the new democrats who were the true interlopers in the archive. Campesinos saw their own guerrilla incursions into the country's most inefficient bureaucracy as finally accessing a right, in the outer trenches of the lettered city, that should always have been theirs. As they were doing this new democrats, and the international reformers they had hired as their own guerrilla auditors, were trying to update the documents so as to take that right away.

Notes

¹ This literature has focused overwhelmingly on two aspects of the neoliberal period: the economic consequences of neoliberal reform in the global south, and the formation of new kinds of subjectivities, both market-ready entrepreneurs and the alternative cultural and indigenous categories that have been produced by these new strategies of government (see Hale 2006; Shever 2008; Colloredo-Mansfield 2002). The literature is by turns bleak about the economic prospects for much of the world's population (e.g. Gill 2000; Gledhill 1995), and at times sanguine about the possibilities opened up by contestatory practices (e.g. Postero 2007; Sawyer 2004).

² Joseph Stiglitz (1998) began using the term "post-Washington Consensus" in 1998, a sign that mainstream international development practitioners were entering a period of auto-critique. In Latin America, Taylor (1999) and Hershberg and Rosen (2006) have used "post-neoliberalism" as a lens for exploring current economic and political conditions. An alternative reading is that provided by Peck and Tickell (2002; also Hart 2002) which suggests that neoliberalism has not really ended, but can be divided into two phases, a "roll-back" phase of drastic cuts to public spending, and a "roll-out" phase in which policy and public spending is aimed at reconfiguring state institutions. Although I don't use the same language, it should be clear from the pages ahead that I largely agree with this latter view.

³ Figures are from the MAG agricultural census of 2008. This was the first census to be undertaken in Paraguay since 1991, and the figures are striking in that they show a considerable concentration of land occurring over that period, with a decrease of 6% in the overall number of smallholdings and a remarkable drop of 27% in the number of medium-sized farms between 20 and 50 hectares.

⁴ This does not mean that all small farmers fit these categories, but only that the term itself connotes them for historical and nationalistic reasons. I have explored elsewhere the violence intrinsic to the way the word is deployed, excluding both immigrants and indigenous peoples who live in these areas, often in very similar ways.

⁵ Campesino struggles date from much earlier, but with considerable changes over time. As this book argues, campesino struggles in the post-Cold War period are related directly to strategies undertaken in the 1960s.

⁶ Vaqueria is about 2 hours north of the city of Caaguazu, itself on the main road between Asuncion and the Brazilian border. It sits in the middle of the land-reform area established in the 1960s, and has been a place of continuing land conflict ever since.

⁷ Just as, for a time, Soviet scientists claimed that the Western obsession with information was a symptom of idealism, and therefore complicit with capitalism (Gerovitch 2002).

⁸ This echoes a long utilitarian tradition, perhaps most clearly articulated by Mill (1848).

⁹ In this respect one of the most damaging mistakes of Stroessner's in the waning years of his regime was not so much the repression of dissidents, which had become routine, but the censorship of the country's major national newspaper, ABC Color, in 1983, which won him international condemnation.

¹⁰ Economics of information was not formalized until the early 1960s (Stigler 1961; Vickrey 1961).

¹¹ The most common way to "fix" information gaps being the commodification of risk in the form of insurance.

¹² For examples of this line of argument, see the articles in O'Donnell et al. (1986) and Diamond et al. (1988). The actual fall of the Berlin Wall was accompanied by a flurry of writing celebrating the fusion of democracy and capitalism, including articles in *Washington Quarterly* by Diamond (1989), de Soto (1989), Gershman (1989) and Fukuyama's (1989) infamous article on the end of history. For an excellent review of all of this ideological production see Abrahamsen (2000) and Guilhot (2005). Transparency had its role to play in mature democracies as well, as the audit explosion of the 1980s and 1990s created new forms of bureaucratic rituals meant to regularize and technicalize governance in Europe and North America (Power 1997; Strathern 2000; Miller 2003).

¹³ I find it notable how much critical attention the figure of the "rational actor" has received in these debates, and how little has been paid to the equally fanciful, though perhaps more subtle, concept of "information."

¹⁴ The words information and knowledge are often used interchangeably in this literature, although there are important connotational differences. Often information is called a "kind of knowledge" that is abstractable, but just as often knowledge is a "kind of information" that is contextualized and inalienable.

¹⁵ The politics of bureaucracy centers on those infamous artifacts of bureaucratic rationality, documents, the very objects which are supposed to carry information, but whose obdurate materiality always seem to foil the desire for interpretive stability, for transparency. As a burgeoning literature in the anthropology of documents has shown, the meanings made possible by documents are not merely representational, but aesthetic, indexical and material as well. Documents are always encountered by particular people in particular contexts, and their interpretation is never separable from all of the contingencies of the encounter. It is via documents that information necessarily comes to be bundled in particular ways, to circulate in particular areas, to be vulnerable to natural disasters and human deception. Most importantly, it is in the encounter with the document that information is opened to variable interpretation, and to the possibility that the information read off the page is always contextual, always variable, and always volatile. Insofar as the document is the medium of information, it is the documents that transparency reformers wish would just disappear. But the impossibility of this gives rise to bureaucracy's most annoying problem. For the technocratic fix for necessarily unstable information is always the creation of more information (and hence more documents) through audits, investigations and reports.

¹⁶ This argument was made most forcefully by Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1968), and pervades a good deal of post-structuralist thinking. Representationist governance matured in the

colonial period, an era that gave us an enduring fascination with mapping (and geometrical space in general), cataloguing, registering, building encyclopedias all in the hopes of building complete representations of the world. As Timothy Mitchell describes these representational practices, they “set up in the social architecture and lived experience of the world what seems an absolute distinction between image (or meaning, or structure) and reality, and thus a distinctive imagination of the real” (Mitchell 2000: 17). On resonances of this in current social science, see Miller 2003; Strathern 2000; Riles 2004; Thrift 2007.

¹⁷ The critique is further extended through one of the most ubiquitous objects which is said to create, facilitate, or obscure transparency: state documents. In Paraguay, accusations of corruption and claims of transparency are almost always accompanied by the display of pieces of paper covered in writing, stamps and signatures proffered as evidence. This kind of transparency politics, in which people use of state documents to “see” the true workings of the powerful, is an obvious inversion of state’s use of documents to visualize its subjects (e.g. Scott 1998; Caplan and Torpey 2001). But the idea of state fetishism has an answer to this as well. Here the critique of the state is displaced to the document itself, and to speculation about the fetishization of state paper. Documents such as ID cards and land titles, the sort of papers that materialize state practice, have a special role to play in this reification, since they serve as constant reminders of the state’s existence, and so appear to be fetishes in their own right (Gordillo 2006; Wogan 2001). From this we get the suggestion that transparency is only the name given to a magical and illusory quality attributed to state documents (West 2003). This sort of critique offers a good corrective to the easy ethics of Transparency International, but it only takes us part way. The reason why it has become possible to talk about the state in these terms is that Marx’s fetish has been refracted through post-structuralist semiology (Pietz 1993). In this reading, the fetish-object is equivalent to a floating signifier whose salient property is “to register the representation rather than the being represented, the mode of signification at the expense of the thing being signified” (Taussig 1997, quoted in Gordillo 2006: 172). In other words, the fetish is a sort of opacity that obscures rather than enables the viewer from seeing “the thing being signified.” It’s this fetish, solidly grounded in representational theory, that has found its way into the anthropological critique of transparency. The problem is immediately apparent when people start describing transparency as a mask – i.e. transparency conceals – and critique becomes an act of simple inversion. Both the project and the critique are couched in similar “semiotic ideologies.

¹⁸ The reason campesinos disdain such papers is clearer with an example, provided by the differences between between medical practitioners in the campo. Natural doctors (*médico ñana*) and witch doctors (*médico paje*) recite and incant, handing out objects with curative or other powers, including religious images and prayers which hold important powers in people’s homes. But modern doctors (*médico*) give out only prescriptions which are at best seen as an annoying trick for increasing their own revenue. Although many campesinos desire and have faith in the modern medicines themselves, they see doctors as only dispensers of prescriptions, scraps of paper whose only apparent function is to limit patient’s direct access to medicines in the pharmacy. Documents are a form of superfluous mediation inserted by elites into otherwise straight-forward transactions. The charge that doctors levy for the “service” of writing out the prescription is considered entirely unjustified, but given the control doctors have over the flow of drugs, campesinos recognize their dependency on the service. Documents like this are really just a trick by elites to continuously bilk the poor. It’s not difficult to see how this kind of critique

would be extended to land transactions, which seem to get more complicated and costly with every new documentary layer that gets added to the system. Each document, to some degree, both fortifies the walls of the lettered city and creates a vector of exploitation by which bureaucrats can demand small payments from the poor for the privilege of the city's protection.

¹⁹ In 1967 Stroessner passed a new constitution which was mainly intended to allow him to govern for longer, but which also enshrined his development ambitions, including the agrarian reform begun in earnest in 1963.

²⁰ It's worth noting that inflation was negligible during this period.

²¹ See Hetherington 2009.

²² Ley 2051/03.

²³ The language of the "social problem" began during the land reform as the primary justification for expropriation of large landholdings.

²⁴ After almost twelve years of negotiations on a single expediente, the IBR finally settled on a price with Olivieri's heir. But even this decision only created closure in a narrow legal sense. On September 19th, the day that the IBR paid Luísa de Olivieri the 80% of the price of the property required to effect the transfer, Pérez and Galeano sent a note to the agency requesting immediate action on Castillo's activities in the area. This would open up another expediente, just as would Olivieri's complaint several months later, that the IBR was stalling on the last 20% of the payment. The final page of the original expediente when I saw it, some six months later, was the page I had created in asking for a photocopy of the document, creating one of the documentary conditions of possibility for this chapter.

²⁵ I don't have the space here to discuss the challenge to materiality presented by digitization. For obvious reasons, digital information is appealing to those who wish to circumvent the document's materiality. Of course, what they do is introduce another material form with a different set of potentialities and resistances (see Harper 1998, Sellen and Harper 2002). As it turns out, in this particular case it doesn't matter much since the project failed to achieve its goals.

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[NOTE: This is still incomplete and a bit of a mess]

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