Syracuse University
SURFACE at Syracuse University

Dissertations - ALL | SURFACE at Syracuse University

5-12-2024

"When the water stops but the bills never do": Contentious water politics and collective action in El Salvador

Claudia Isabel Diaz-Combs
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/etd

 Part of the Geography Commons

Recommended Citation

Diaz-Combs, Claudia Isabel, ""When the water stops but the bills never do": Contentious water politics and collective action in El Salvador" (2024). *Dissertations - ALL*. 1945.
https://surface.syr.edu/etd/1945

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the SURFACE at Syracuse University at SURFACE at Syracuse University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations - ALL by an authorized administrator of SURFACE at Syracuse University. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Abstract

This dissertation explores the water crisis in El Salvador, a small Central American country surrounded by abundant freshwater resources that is nonetheless plagued with chronic water shortages, contaminated drinking water, and expensive water bills. For nearly two decades, competing groups pursued water legislation intended to address these multi-faceted issues. Finally, in December 2021, President Nayib Bukele codified the Law of Water Resources, bringing the protracted struggle to a conclusion. Yet a few years later, water issues persist, and no one is satisfied with the policy. I approach this issue through the perspective of five different social groups: the environmental movement, the intelligentsia, the labor movement, the state, and the business community. In this study, I seek to understand how each group articulates water justice, and how these interpretations inform approaches to water governance. I argue that attempts made by some social groups to codify water justice were unsuccessful because they didn't sufficiently link water injustice to the everyday desperation and anxiety of chronic services interruptions coupled with high bills that poor and working-class Salvadorans receive. Rather than articulate water justice as a productive approach to deliver dependable and affordable water services, the environmental movement, intelligentsia, and businesses emphasized the need for representation and participation in the deliberative process that informs water policy. Analyzing the Salvadoran water crisis through the trajectories of these social groups reveal uneven burdens across the Salvadoran waterscape, and insights over comfort, health, everyday economic anxiety, workplace grievances, and solidarity.

"When the water stops but the bills never do": Contentious water politics and collective action in El Salvador

by

Claudia Díaz-Combs

B.S. The University of Arizona, 2013
M.A. The University of Arizona, 2018
M.P.H. The University of Arizona, 2018

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

Syracuse University

June 2024

Copyright © Claudia Díaz-Combs 2024
All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgements

I always enjoy reading acknowledgements because they give a bit of insight into the author's life and what social forces came together to produce that particular piece of writing. The prospect of writing my own, however, was daunting. I hope I can do justice to everyone who helped me along the way as I conducted research and wrote this dissertation. First, I am grateful to everyone who took time out of their day to speak with me when I was in El Salvador. This research would not have been possible if not for their graciousness in meeting with me throughout the entirety of my fieldwork. I want to give a special thanks to Melvin and his fellow workers in SITRAUES at the University of El Salvador (UES). When we met, I was at a particularly low point early on in fieldwork. I had just had an interview cancel on me for the second time while I was in the Uber on the way to their offices. Not wanting to go back home, I asked the driver to drop me off at the UES. I figured I could take some pictures of the murals depicting student activism of the 1970s and 1980s, and perhaps visit the bookstore. As I was observing one of the murals painted on the side of an inconspicuous building, a man who was sweeping outside asked me what I thought of the paintings. We got to talking about Salvadoran history and politics, and as I explained my research to him, he said he was part of a union of workers at the university who represented groundskeepers, janitors, construction workers, and security guards, and whether I would be interested in interviewing any of them. Fifteen minutes later, I found myself sitting in their offices with Melvin and another worker named José Emilio, talking about water, workers, neoliberalism, and class struggle. I saw both of them a handful of times at marches during my fieldwork, and Melvin gave me a few books about labor and the FMLN, and a T-shirt from their union. This experience was emblematic of the kindness, warmth,

openness, and enthusiasm that I came to associate with Salvadoran unionists every time I interviewed or saw them at events.

At Syracuse, Tom Perreault was a wonderful advisor. His endless patience, encouragement, mentorship, and wealth of knowledge has not only made this dissertation into a work that I am very proud of but has made *me* very proud to call myself a political ecologist. I look forward to many more years of friendship. Thank you to the rest of my great committee: Farhana Sultana, Matt Huber, and Gladys McCormick for their thought-provoking feedback from the origins of this project that sharpened my thinking and writing. I also benefitted tremendously from all the classes I took in the Department of Geography, from Farhana, Matt, Tom, Jamie Winders, and Tod Rutherford. I attended the Nature-Society workshop at Temple University in early Fall 2023, which included a dissertation writing workshop. Thank you to my chapter reviewers, Andrea Marston, Diana Ojeda, Wendy Wolford, Joshua Cousins, and Kim Thomas, for your helpful comments on the introduction chapter and suggestions for the rest of the dissertation.

I've been lucky to be surrounded by great colleagues in the geography department, and I would like to thank Ainhoa, Akemi, Chad, Collin, Dominic, Jamie, F., Jamie G., James, Jared VR, Jewell, Katie, Khila, Maddie, Mirella, Mike, Nicole, Stephen, Sohrob, and Tiago for the many laughs and meaningful conversations. Outside of geography, I want to especially thank Shanel Khaliq for being a great roommate and friend here in Syracuse. We endured a lot of difficult, house-related challenges, and despite that, you always found a way to make me laugh about them. I want to also thank Alexia and Karina, for our long friendship since Roskruge Middle School. Your support of me after all these years means the world. Thank you also to Sarah and Mary, two wonderful women I met during my master's programs at the University of

Arizona and have continued friendships with to this day. I would be remised if I didn't thank Jennifer Bregande for our weekly conversations. She's seen the evolution of this project, and of myself, always reminding me how far I've come. Finally, a special thanks to the librarians at the East Syracuse branch of the Onondaga Public Libraries for always making me feel welcome, despite my nearly exhausting your thriller/mystery section this year.

I would not have been able to get through graduate school without the endless support of my family. To my sister, Sarah Maria, thank you for the chats, funny photos and videos, and encouragement when I was feeling homesick in El Salvador. I want to give a special thanks to my dad, Amilcar, for all the support and interest he's shown in this work. Getting to travel with him to his hometown, *donde el ombligo esta enterrado,* as the Salvadorans say, is an experience I will always cherish. I want to also thank him for taking my calls any time this year while I was writing my dissertation to help me interpret certain phrases or slang that I wasn't so sure about. To my mom, Mary Carol, thank you for our weekly video chats, and letting me vent my frustrations over something research, writing, or politics related. You always had the perfect thing to say that set me back on track, and through this process, I've been so lucky to learn about your own radical past with El Salvador.

Finally, to Carlo. It's impossible to express my appreciation and love to you in these acknowledgements. Know that you influence every page of the dissertation. I am so excited to continue our little life in the big city.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Acronyms

AECID - Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development)

ALAMES - Movimiento por la Salud Doctor Salvador Allende (Movement for Health Dr. Salvador Allende)

Alianza Nacional en Contra la Privatización del Agua – National Alliance Against Water Privatization

ANDA - Administración Nacional De Acueductos y Alcantarillados (National Administration of Aqueducts and Sewerage)

ANDES 21 de junio - Asociación Nacional de Educadores Salvadoreños (National Association of Salvadoran Educators)

ANEP - Asociación Nacional de Empresa Privada (National Association of Private Enterprise)

ARENA - Partido Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance)

ASA - Autoridad Salvadoreña Del Agua (Salvadoran Water Authority)

CAFTA - Tratado de Libre Comercio entre Centroamérica y los Estados Unidos (Central American Free Trade Agreement)

CAMAGRO - Cámara Agropecuaria y Agroindustrial de El Salvador (Agricultural and Agroindustrial Chamber of El Salvador)

CAMARASAL - Cámara de Comercio e Industria de El Salvador (Chamber of Commerce and Industry in El Salvador)

CASALCO - Cámara Salvadoreña de la Industria de la Construcción (Salvadoran Chamber of Construction Industry)

CATS - Central Autónoma de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (Autonomous Center for Salvadoran Workers)

CECOT - Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo (Terrorism Confinement Center)

CEPAL – Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean)

CESTA – Centro Salvadoreño de Tecnología Apropiada (Salvadoran Center of Appropriate Technology Friends of the Earth)

CIDH – Comisión Interamericano de los Derechos Humanos (Interamerican Comission on Human Rights)

CISPES – Comité en Solidaridad con el Pueblo de El Salvador (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador)

CNTS - Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (National Confederation of Salvadoran Workers)

COMURES - Corporación de Municipalidades de la República de El Salvador (Corporation of Municipalities in the Republic of El Salvador)

FENASTRAS - Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (National Federation of Salvadoran Workers' Trade Unions)

FMLN - Farabundo Martí Liberacion Nacional (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front)

Foro del Agua – The Water Forum

IUDOP - Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (Public Opinion Institute)

LGA - Ley General de Aguas (General Water Law)

LPG – La Prensa Gráfica (The Graphic Press)

LRH - Ley de Recursos Hídricos (Law of Water Resources)

MAG - Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería (Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock)

MARN – Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources)

MTP - Movimiento de los Trabajadores de la Policía (Movement of Police Workers)

NAFTA – Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte (North American Free Trade Agreement)

NI – Nuevas Ideas (New Ideas)

NIMD – Instituto Holandés para la Democracia Multipartidaria (Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy)

PATI - Programa de Apoyo Temporal al Ingreso (Temporary Income Support Program)

PLANAPS - Plan nacional de agua potable y saneamiento (National Plan for Potable Water and Sanitation)

PNC – Policía Nacional Civil Salvadoreña (National Civil Police of El Salvador)

PNGIRH - Plan Nacional de Ingestión Integral de Recursos Hídrico (National Plan for Integrated Water Resource Management)

PRISMA – Programa Regional de Investigación sobre Desarrollo y Medio Ambiente (Regional Program for Reserach, Development, and the Environment)

REVERDES – Movimiento Rebelión Verde El Salvador (Rebel Greens El Salvador)

SEJES 30 de junio - Sindicato de Empleados Judiciales de El Salvador (Union of Judicial Employees of El Salvador)

SIES - Sindicato de la Industria Eléctrica El Salvador (Union of the Electrical Industry of El Salvador)

SIMEDUCO - Sindicato de Maestras y Maestros de la Educación Pública de El Salvador (Union of Public School Teachers of El Salvador)

SIMETRISSS - Sindicato de Médicos Trabajadores del ISSS (Union of Medical Workers of the ISSS)

SIMUTHRES - Sindicato de Mujeres Trabajadoras Remuneradas del Hogar de El Salvador (Union of Paid Household Women Workers of El Salvador)

SITMAG - Sindicato de Trabajadores del Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería (Union of Workers for the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock)

SITRAFOPROLYD - Sindicato de Fondo de Protección de Lisiados y Discapacitados a consecuencia del Conflicto Armado (Union of the Institute for the Protection of the Disabled from the Armed Conflict)

SITRAIMES - Sindicato de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores de la Industria Maquiladora, de Comercialización, Servicios y Afines de El Salvador (Union of Workers in the Maquiladora Industry, Commercialization, Services and Related Industries of El Salvador)

SITRAL - Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Asamblea Legislativa (Union for Workers in the Legislative Assembly)

SITRAMHA - Sindicato de Trabajadores del Ministerio de Hacienda (Union for Workers in the Ministry of Finance)

SITRAUES - Sindicato de Trabajadores Administrativos de la Universidad de El Salvador (Union of Administrative Workers at the University of El Salvador)

SITTEAIES - Sindicato de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores de la Industria Aeroportuaria de El Salvador y Conexos (Union for Workers in the Airport and Other Related Industries in El Salvador)

SOICSCES - Sindicato de Obreros de la Industria de la Construcción, Similares y Conexos de El Salvador (Union of Workers in the Construction and Related Industries of El Salvador)

STISSS - Sindicato de Trabajadores del Instituto Salvadoreño del Seguro Social (Salvadoran Social Security Institute Union)

UCA – Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (Central American University José Simeón Cañas)

UES – Universidad de El Salvador (University of El Salvador)

UNES - Unidad Ecológica Salvadoreña (Salvadoran Ecological Unit)

UNT - Union Nacional para la Defensa de la Clase Trabajadora (National Union for the Defense of the Working-Class)

Chapter 1 - Introduction

When the water stops, but the bills never do

I sat with a group of agriculture workers at a table in their air-conditioned union office, grateful to be out of the blazing mid-day sun of Soyapango, a working-class suburb of San Salvador, El Salvador's capital. Soyapango had recently suffered a three-week long water shutoff. "It's a constant headache," Oscar,[1] one of the workers, responded when I asked what everyday life was like navigating the water crisis. "We got a call from the water authority on Sunday to let us know there would be water service interruptions for a little while. But the water had already been shut off for two days."

An ever-worsening water crisis in El Salvador mean that experiences like Oscar's are common. Around ninety percent of the country's surface water is contaminated, and none of the main rivers can be purified, filtered, or chlorinated enough for safe levels of human consumption (Gies, 2018b). For decades, the absence of state regulation on waste discharge meant that most of El Salvador's industrial, agricultural, and domestic effluent gushed into rivers and coastal areas without any treatment. One of El Salvador's main rivers, the Acelhuate, drains into San Salvador, and is so highly contaminated with heavy metals, domestic, and industrial waste that it's considered a biohazard (Patterson and López, 2013). "Our water sources are treated like a garbage dump, instead of a source of life," Víctor, an environmental activist, told me during one interview in 2019. "And we even can't boil or chlorinate the water anymore to drink it, like we

[1] I will use pseudonyms for all interviewees in this dissertation, except for well-known politicians; SITMAG, February 28, 2023; author interview.

used to. I remember years ago, we could just go to the river, move the little leaves aside, and drink that freshwater, no problem, you wouldn't get sick. Not anymore."[2]

Salvadorans also endure regular service interruptions and receive expensive water bills. In 2017, a video on Facebook went viral, after a man who identified as "Chris" contested a water charge that was four hundred percent more expensive than his last bill. After the municipal water provider refused to accept his appeal, he protested by attempting to pay the entire amount in pennies, nickels, and dimes. "It's insulting, unjust, and corrupt. I'm just one person who uses water for the bathroom and I do everything I can to save water. They send us contaminated water through the pipes, sometimes it doesn't even come, but the bill is always there on time," he told the Salvadoran newspaper, *La Prensa Gráfica* (LPG).[3] These issues were further exacerbated under the COVID-19 pandemic, when Salvadorans were instructed to use more water for handwashing and bleaching clothes or shoes, on top of the already fragmented and contaminated water supply (Cuéllar, 2020).

Legal battles to secure clean, dependable, and affordable drinking water was a terrain of struggle led by environmental activists, NGO workers, and universities since 2006. But the protracted legal fight regularly confronted conservative and business forces with the intention of curtailing regulation on water use. I turned my discussion with the union to this fifteen-year long water battle. "What do you think of the attempts to pass a water law to resolve these issues?" I asked. Héctor, the general secretary for the union, chuckled and said, "Ah yes, this famous water law. Water is so central to everything we do; you'd think they would have tried to fix our problems already. But still, we have so many issues with water, with access, with cost, with

[2] UNES, July 11, 2019; author interview.
[3] LPG, 2017a.

contamination. You see people who month after month, without fail, their water bill comes, but the actual service doesn't come." [4]

The fifteen-year long struggle to codify a water law subsequently came to an end on December 21, 2021, when President Nayib Bukele codified El Salvador's first comprehensive water policy, the *Ley de Recursos Hídricos* (Law of Water Resources, henceforth LRH). Bukele hailed the new law for its ability to address decades of service interruptions, contaminated tap water, and high costs for consumers, promising that he was "settling a historic debt accumulated by past governments who never wanted to guarantee the human right to water for Salvadoran citizens" (Legislative Assembly Press, 2021b). Yet one year later, water issues have not improved. "I don't think that many people even know we have a water law, because our problems haven't changed," Héctor says. "These water issues, well, these are rights of the population that aren't being fulfilled."

Finally, I asked about a recent strike the agriculture workers union held in December 2022, in which they demanded back pay from their employer. "*Mira* Claudita," Hector said, "We had to fight back. We hadn't been paid since September, and they said it was because there was no money, but we know that's not true. It's like with water, with businesses who opposed regulation because they don't want to pay for water, even when they make huge profits. But what about us, the workers? We have bills to pay, and things are so expensive. Yet for workers, there is never any money. So, we have to fight for what is ours." Héctor, Oscar, and the rest of the union ended up winning backpay and bonuses for their workers. While most Salvadorans were not

[4] SITMAG, February 28, 2023; author interview.

involved in the fight to establish a water law, all people are affected by the ability to access clean, affordable, and reliable water, and can benefit from strategies to win these demands.

The two faces of water in El Salvador

Salvadorans rely on a disparate, fractured network of water institutions for service. In cities, water and sanitation are provided by the centralized public water authority, the *Administración Nacional de Acueductos y Alcantarillados* (National Administration of Aqueducts and Sewerage, known as ANDA). Headquartered in San Salvador, ANDA covers about two-thirds of the population, or four million people (Karunananthan and Spronk, 2015). Rural and peri-urban communities rely on a patchwork of non-centralized providers that include public municipal companies, community *juntas de agua* (largely self-funded organizations that install and maintain pipes, pumps, and wells, and distribute water),[5] communal and private wells, and bottled or tanked water (De Burgos, 2013).

These water institutions are underfunded, and water users endure chronic service interruptions. Nearly half of Salvadoran households suffer from disruptions once a month, one third of households' experience shortages once a week, and fifteen percent of households suffer daily shortages that can last anywhere from one to eight hours (Segura, 2020). These episodes are largely concentrated in poor and working-class neighborhoods like Soyapango, where water is only available twice a week for five to twenty minutes, and usually only in the early morning (Carranza, 2022). When water does flow through the taps, families scramble to fill every possible container – plastic buckets and barrels, oversized jugs, empty bottles, jars, even coffee mugs. Meanwhile, affluent San Salvador neighborhoods like Colonia Escalón and San Benito enjoy

[5] Community water boards. There are approximately 2,325 *juntas de agua* in El Salvador that service 1.5 million people.

uninterrupted access to water. Speaking to the online investigative journal *El Faro*, one resident expressed their frustration with this uneven distribution, and the lack of state attention to water disparities. “We just want ANDA to resolve these issues, so we have drinking water with dignity, like they do in Escalón, where they have enough water even to fill their pools” (Rauda, 2020).

Interrupted flows of water mean that people are left uncertain about when services will again be available, and therefore must face *doble gasto*, or “double pay,” where they still pay their monthly water bill to ANDA, but also spend around $20 a month on bottled or tanked water.[6] In addition to *doble gasto*, monthly water bills fluctuate with no explanation. In 2017, *La Prensa Gráfica* interviewed a resident who saw his water bill rise from $3 to almost $3000 a month. He told LPG that his household of four people and one rabbit only lived off his pension, and bills like these caused them “severe economic desperation” (LPG, 2017b). Later that year, LPG revealed that former president of the International Trade Fair Commission Miguel Antonio Menéndez, who at the time lived in a mansion in one of the most exclusive enclaves in El Salvador, paid around $2.39 a month for water (LPG, 2017c). “They have us all screwed here when it comes to water,” Milton, a construction worker, told me during one interview, “I have a pending case with ANDA because they charged me $110. I don’t understand, we live in a humble house, we don’t waste water, but we’re still charged that huge amount. If we went over to Escalón, or San Benito, I bet even they don’t pay this much. The truth is that it’s unjust.”[7]

Salvadorans have leveled complaints about water injustice for years, often met with indifference, or worse, with contempt. Officials in the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Health said these demands were overblown or uninformed (Escobar, 2020). The

[6] *Foro del Agua* (The Water Forum), June 29, 2019; author interview.
[7] SOICSCES construction union, October 6, 2022; author interview.

president of ANDA Rubén Alemán (a former environmental monitoring scientist for USAID) responded to backlash from rising costs of water by saying that Salvadorans don't really understand the complexities of water services. "As a Salvadoran, I can say that we don't how these things work. We don't really have that socio-economic value of water. It's a finite resource, we have to take care of it, and be very careful with it, which most people aren't doing" (Diálogo con Ernesto López, 2022). Worse still, blame for the water crisis is often directed at poor and working-class neighborhoods for supposedly installing illegal wells due to lack of knowledge on proper channels for water delivery (La Tribu Radio, 2023). ANDA lists several numbers that Salvadorans can use to report water issues, including their direct WhatsApp line called *Gotita.*[8] During my first months of fieldwork, the water suddenly shut off at my house and didn't return for hours. I called and texted the *Gotita* line four times, and only received an automated "Thanks for contacting *Gotita*!" but no response to my concerns. Salvadorans' complaints about water issues may not be based on lack of information, but rather on the lack of useful avenues where these issues can be addressed.[9]

As water issues steadily worsened, various social groups across El Salvador presented competing water law proposals as the best way to resolve the crisis. For fifteen years, Salvadoran administrations across the ideological spectrum fielded proposals from Salvadoran environmental movements, factions of the Salvadoran intelligentsia (universities, think tanks, and NGOs), and the Salvadoran business community, dominated by agribusiness, real estate development, and the bottling industry. The bills from environmentalists and Salvadoran

[8] *Gotita,* or "Droplet" is an anthropomorphized drop of water used as ANDA's mascot.
[9] One exception is during elections. "The best time for us is during campaign season. ANDA prioritizes poor people, politicians from all the major parties get us water, and tell us they are going to install more pipes," said one resident from San Marcos, a working-class San Salvador suburb (Valencia, 2010).

intelligentsia called for the recognition of the human right to water and presented a participatory governance framework comprised of the public sector and civil society. A researcher at the *Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas* (Central American University, or UCA) explained their approach: "Our strategies are about collaborative models and political alliances that discuss mechanisms for the institutionalization of good governance of water. We want local, municipal, and national participation. This is the best way to ensure the future of water."[10]

The business community focused on the regulatory committee, though it insisted the structure include seats for the private sector (Díaz, 2020). "Our proposal was written so that no one group on the board had total control over water, least of all the government. We think decentralizing control is the best way to ensure there will be enough water for families and for business today and tomorrow," a representative from the business lobby, *Asociación Nacional de Empresa Privada* (National Association of Private Enterprise, or ANEP), told me during one interview.[11] ANEP's proposal, titled the Comprehensive Water Law, was colloquially known as the "privatization law," and presented a regulatory board consisting of five members: one from the Ministries, one from the private sector, one from universities, one from the association of municipalities (dominated by right-wing parties allied with business), and one seat for the president (González, 2021). The business sector rejects the privatization label, claiming water services were never going to be privatized. Yet Salvadoran worried what control and decisions over water allocation would look like when in the hands of private entities.

With privatization threats looming, environmental movements mobilized the largest mass marches for water justice in Salvadoran history. In 2018, thousands came out to the streets

[10] UCA, July 10, 2019; author interview.
[11] ANEP, April 18, 2023; author interview.

demanding the Legislative Assembly halt deliberation on the Comprehensive Water Law, and keep decisions on water allocation, services, and delivery in public hands. This collective action proved successful, and legislators shelved the proposal. But water policy debates never progressed, and Salvadorans became increasingly disillusioned with the state's ability to address their environmental precarities, interpreting lack of progress as indifference to the everyday experiences of ordinary Salvadorans. "They never tried to pass a water law. They would pick it up [in committee], throw it out, pick it up again. That's how it was for 10 years. No urgency," said Roberto, a public transportation worker.[12] The current LRH is a pastiche of the many proposals presented over the years and was intended to finally put the legislative water struggle to rest. Despite the fanfare, it's clear that one year after its implementation, none of the competing social actors are happy with the legal outcome. Worse still, the confluence of water issues impacting everyday Salvadorans persists, and in some cases, has worsened.

In this dissertation, I will analyze the trajectories of the different social groups involved in the struggle to establish a water law. While my analytical entry point is policy, I'm animated by two interrelated questions that go beyond legislation itself: First, why do Salvadorans still not have reliable access to drinking water? And second, how can they get reliable and affordable access to drinking water? I understand these queries as fundamentally about justice, and because of this, my study about the Salvadoran water crisis explores how water justice is interpreted, and how these interpretations inform approaches to water governance. I also use these theoretical frameworks for the dissertation because the social actors entangled in the water battle evoked justice and governance in ways that both overlapped and were in tension. I will trace the relationships between these groups, their influence on the Salvadoran state, and their resonance

[12] Roberto, SITTEAIES transportation workers union, February 20, 2023; author interview.

amongst the broader Salvadoran population, to understand why the efforts to resolve the water crisis have largely failed.

Overall, I argue that attempts made by these social groups to codify water justice were unsuccessful because the social actors reacting to the water crisis did not sufficiently link water injustice to the everyday desperation and anxiety of chronic service interruptions coupled with high bills that ordinary Salvadorans receive. These social actors articulate water injustice as different groups' lack of representation and participation in the conceptualization of, and deliberative process that inform, water policy decisions. A more productive approach would be one that centers on the potential for water justice to deliver dependable and affordable water services for ordinary Salvadorans, provided these governance decisions are informed by the daily water injustices poor and working-class people endure. Moreover, how these social groups articulate the water crisis reveals uneven burdens across the Salvadoran waterscape, and insights over comfort, health, everyday economic anxiety, workplace grievances, and solidarity. Struggles over the institutionalization of water justice go beyond the resource itself; these are power struggles over control of public and private institutions.

Water justice and water governance

Water is an illustrative lens through which to understand mechanisms for power, precarity, and justice because water flows through all aspects of social, economic, political, and cultural life. Liberal approaches to justice suggest fairer procedural and distributional models for delivering individual rights within normative legal-philosophical frameworks (Rawls, 1971). Yet calling for more equitable distribution of goods and rights alone doesn't sufficiently address historically embedded processes that underpin maldistribution in the first place (Perreault, 2014). Iris Marion Young argued for a more critical approach, one that identifies how social differences

experienced by varied social groups results from structural inequalities, domination, and oppression. A complete theory of justice shifts away from individual treatment and towards identifying how decision-making, division of labor, and culture are structured, produced, and reproduced within social relationships (Young, 1990).

Elevating social justice elucidates how environmental changes reallocate resources and power, and what procedural, distributive, and restorative forms of environmental justice might be. Environmental justice has long been a conceptual and political call for deeper engagement with unequal exposure to environmental harms and lack of access to environmental benefits (Bullard, 1990; Pulido et al., 2016). Political ecologists use environmental justice as an analytic to theorize the root causes of injustice and reveal how power, access, and control over resources contribute to uneven socio-spatial distribution of water. Water is never only a resource onto itself but is inseparable from the productive and consumptive social forces that give it meaning (Harvey, 1974; Budds, 2004). Cities are crucial settings through which to observe entangled social relations of power with water (Swyngedouw, 2004), and urban waterscapes illustrate how certain governance processes produce and sustain injustices (Yates et al., 2022). Academic endeavors also center plural epistemologies that value decolonial water justice struggles against extractivism (Jerez et al., 2021), and embrace diverse ontologies that reconceptualize access for humans and nonhumans alike (Ulloa, 2020; Harris, 2022).

Environmental governance (of which water governance is a sub-set) extends the focus of environmental *management* to encompasses institutional arrangements consisting of laws, norms, and customs that structure how environments are *governed* (Bridge and Perreault, 2009). The reconfiguration of "government to governance" includes economic liberalization, administrative decentralization, and the growth of non-state and market-based interest groups

who govern socio-natures (Himley, 2008). Many governance debates emerged in the 1980s with the rise of neoliberalism, after arguments about 'state failure' were used as generalized explanations to justify the privatization of public water (Bakker, 2003, 2013). Market proponents argued that private sector water provisioning would catalyze water efficiency, spur more appropriate water allocation, reduce costs, and increase investment (Furlong, 2012). But neoliberal governance structures also failed to adequately deliver water to urban populations, thrusting millions more into poverty while funneling more money to the richest in society (Bakker, 2010). In extreme cases, degraded water networks led to civil unrest and violent protests. Mason (2022) explains how neoliberal state-building projects in southern Iraq delayed water infrastructure maintenance for years, eventually unfolding into angry street protests in 2018, with Iraqis decrying failed water governance. Coincidentally, on the other side of the world, El Salvador also saw mass social protests that same year, with Salvadorans condemning attempts to privatize their public water system.

Water conflicts are multifaceted, and it's important to scrutinize the malleability of concepts like governance, justice, and rights, and be clear about how they are produced, shaped, and deployed (Perreault, 2014). Further, understanding water governance in the present, not-quite-neoliberal moment is increasingly complex. By no means is neoliberal capitalism over but is perhaps better understood as a mutated hybrid where state control and marketization are complementary, rather than contradictory (Sheng and Webber, 2019). In the Latin American context, scholars somewhat uncomfortably affix 'post-neoliberalism' to chronicle a process that's not a complete rupture with Washington Consensus-neoliberalism, but as a break from certain neoliberal policy prescriptions (Yates and Bakker, 2014; Ruckert et al., 2016). Post-neoliberalism's amorphous quality means that expressions of water governance simultaneously

challenge and reproduce neoliberalism. In some cases, years of neoliberal austerity that devastated poor and working-class communities means the public demands water service remunicipalization and a return of the state (McDonald, 2020). Other instances demonstrate a continuity of neoliberal water governance through the proliferation of 'philanthrocapitalism,' where diffuse networks of NGOs, billionaires, and celebrities intent on solving the global water crisis use marketization and philanthropic initiatives that are effectively insulated from any public engagement (Menga et al., 2023).

Mapping access to social and physical water infrastructures are still useful ways to trace networks of power that shape inequality and reinforce marginalization (Kooy and Bakker, 2008a; Birkenholtz, 2009). Recent work builds on these discussions, and nuances public/private dichotomies, rather than rejecting them. Paerregaard and Andersen (2019) use Bakker's (2007) commons/commodity debate as a point of departure to explain modes of water governance in Peru that defy these binaries, demonstrating how state, private, semi-private, and rural community organizations work in conjunction to provide water services. Renewed interrogations of the state still necessitate critical appraisal of its role in struggles for water justice (Angel and Loftus, 2019). Similarly, Harris (2020) advises a cautious recentering of the state as purveyor of water services in response to decades of private sector control and public service cutbacks.

Sultana and Loftus (2012, 2020) argue that global water struggles are fundamentally about power, justice, and governance, where coalitions of citizens, states, and NGOs demand rights, accountability, and transparency. Water justice frameworks themselves are rallying cries that center political participation, equitable distribution, cultural recognition, and ecological integrity (Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2014; Boelens et al., 2018). Conceptual advances on water justice promote it as redistribution and democratization in extractive frontiers (Roa-García,

2017), as international coalitions for the right to water (van den Berge et al., 2018), as a bridge with critical physical geography to counter water scarcity narratives (Correia, 2022), and as a force that joins workplace water struggles with struggles for social reproduction (Bieler, 2020). However, its practical applications are not without challenges. Enqvist and Ziervogel (2019) outline the difficulty of promoting water justice in post-conflict countries with legacies of racial inequality, while Razavi (2022) observes the fragmented implementation of water governance in Cochabamba two decades after the water wars. Similarly, water governance approaches that prioritize techno-fixes rather than address structural causes of water crises, work to perpetuate, rather than resolve, water injustices (Velásquez and Wachtendorf, 2023). Salvadorans face a similar challenge, after government officials promised streamlined water governance through geolocation, payment applications, and even Bitcoin. Yet water users are left more confused and frustrated than ever before on how to access water. Finally, participatory governance is encouraged for water justice, but occasionally treats certain groups' involvement as representative of entire constituencies even when dialogue with those constituencies is sparse (Harris et al., 2018).

For this dissertation, I regard participation and representation as important pillars within water justice but am also cautious of their limitations. Empirically, my study demonstrates that working-class Salvadorans are less concerned with representation and participation in governance processes than they are with economic precarity brought on by the water crisis. Conceptually, representative participatory governance assumes methods to secure power through specialized state or state-adjacent institutions and organizations where many working people aren't regularly present, therefore limiting the base of support to win demands. I argue that centering water justice's potential to relieve economic anxieties is an appealing framework for

poor and working-class people, and a strategic advantage for gaining power, since workers as a class have the capability to pressure capital and the state to address water injustices. Workers are one of the strongest expressions of power in society because of their ability to withhold their labor and stop the flow of profit. Water justice is a powerful framework that rouses people who experience injustices daily, injustices that feel particularly acute when related to water. A productive approach to water justice centers workers' economic concerns and inspires worker power as a way to realize that justice.

A century of conflict

El Salvador's history outlines a series of social conflicts marked by maldistribution of power and resources controlled by dynastic families who dominated the coffee economy, political institutions, and armed forces, and employed thousands of impoverished Indigenous and *campesino* workers in their latifundio systems (Ching, 2014). After coffee markets crashed during the Great Depression, wages were slashed, and a third of Salvadoran peasant tenants were thrown off their lands, but the government refused to implement any social reform to ease the crisis (Dunkerley, 1983). The Communist Party, marshalled by Farabundo Martí, led a peasant insurrection in 1932 that was met with a violent military response where 30,000 people, including Martí, were massacred in less than a week (Gould and Lauria-Santiago, 2008). This defining event has shaped modern Salvadoran political history, and El Salvador remained ensconced in continuous social conflicts and confrontations between popular organizations and repressive military dictatorships and ruthless death squads throughout the 20th century (Paige, 1997).

The ceaseless, extreme state violence against Salvadorans exploded into a civil war in 1980, after the assassination of revered Archbishop Óscar Romero, a leading spokesperson for

the poor and persecuted (Grandin, 2021). The armed conflict raged on for twelve years, with the revanchist oligarchy, armed forces (with significant military aid from the US), and right-wing adherents on one side,[13] and the Cuban-inspired guerrilla movement called the *Farabundo Martí Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) and their mass base of civilian supporters on the other (Wade, 2016).[14] At the end of the decade, the warring factions agreed to a negotiated settlement that ushered in a civilian democracy with broad political participation, a drastically reduced military, the creation of a civilian police force, the FMLN's transition from guerrillas to an electoral party, free and fair elections, and a truth commission that investigated human rights abuses during the civil war (Robinson, 2003).[15] The agreement intended to address the root causes of the conflict and bring the country into a more peaceful century.

Post-war El Salvador: The struggle over water

However, the peace agreements were unable to mollify El Salvador's unequal structures of accumulation and distribution. While the ceasefire allowed the transition from armed conflict to democracy, it also opened new terrains for struggle and renewed battles over natural resources (Artiga-Purcell, 2022). The post-war political settlement left ARENA in power, and the party oversaw El Salvador's neoliberal transformation. ARENA privatized banks, the energy sector, telecommunication, liberalized trade, negotiated structural adjustment loans, and dollarized the economy (Spalding, 2014). This political-economic reconfiguration happened concurrently with rapid economic development, and the growth of agribusiness and low value-added

[13] Right-wing forces were concentrated in the proto-fascist *Partido Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA), or Nationalist Republican Alliance party. ARENA's founder, Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, was a military intelligence officer and death squad organizer. It was D'Aubuisson who ordered the assassination of Archbishop Romero.
[14] Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. The FMLN took the namesake of the Communist leader who led the uprising in 1932.
[15] Around 75,000 people were killed during the war, and 95 percent of the deaths and human rights violations were attributed to the armed forces and death squads.

manufacturing, all of which contributed to extensive deforestation and land degradation (Hecht et al., 2005).

Debates on water quality, service, and regulation emerged around the mid-2000s, centering on chronic water shortages, the country's low rates of water availability per capita, and high rates of industrial water extraction (Patterson and López, 2013). El Salvador's main water sources for domestic and industrial uses are the Lempa watershed and the Lempa River, which are transnationally shared with Guatemala and Honduras. Commercial real estate, agribusiness, and bottling sectors strategically located themselves near the Lempa water sources, extracting huge amounts of groundwater, and discharging industrial effluent into rivers and coastal areas without treatment (Montoya, 2021). Run-off, and the lack of regulation for waste disposal means that around ninety percent of surface water is unsuitable for consumption. Additionally, degraded soil permeability has impacted aquifer recharge, and rural areas, peri-urban communities, and even major metropolitan zones are now unable to meet their freshwater demands, rendering the country as water stressed (Cuéllar and Díaz, 2018).

A broad coalition of environmental organizations called the *Foro del Agua* (The Water Forum, henceforth known as *Foro*) presented a regulatory framework called the *Ley General de Aguas* (General Water Law, or LGA) to the Legislative Assembly in 2006, as a response to unequal water access. The LGA framed water as a human right, a publicly managed good, and called for fairer distribution and more just pricing mechanisms. Unfortunately, ARENA refused to negotiate any demands that impacted their vested economic interests in these large industries, so the bill sat in limbo for three years.[16] Then in a momentous victory for the left, the FMLN

[16] FMLN politician, April 19, 2023; author interview.

won the presidency in 2009, changing the balance of power in the executive and legislature. The *Foro* was ready to capitalize on this moment to pass the LGA; however, it found itself competing with other social groups also intent on passing water legislation in their favor. The process to codify water policy waxed and waned over the FMLN's time in office, ultimately reaching a political impasse in 2013, after politicians and their allied social groups were unable to agree on regulatory questions and the distribution of public versus private representation on the supervisory committee.

Failure to deliver on political promises, coupled with ever worsening economic and security crises, led Salvadorans to both reject ARENA neoliberalism and lose faith in the FMLN's ability for social democracy. Trust in establishment parties was further eroded when former ARENA and FMLN presidents were charged with corruption for embezzling millions of dollars in state funds (Perelló and Navia, 2022). This conjuncture created the opportunity for the election of rising star Nayib Bukele to tap into social discontent, casting himself as the outsider candidate who rejected the status quo.[17] With a new administration, the water crisis was once again brought into the political spotlight. In June 2021, Bukele sent his own draft called the *Ley de Recursos Hidricos* (LHR) to the Legislative Assembly. The LRH gestures to the human right to water and public management, but environmentalists are concerned with provisions that allow for corporate control of water for periods of ten to fifteen years without environmental impact studies. "They've used all the same language as us to construct a public bill, but the big difference is using 'water resources' as a catch-all for all water users, not just human

[17] Though stylized as such, Bukele is hardly a political outsider. His foray into politics began in 2011, when he became mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán, a small municipality outside San Salvador, and later served as San Salvador's mayor from 2015 to 2018 under the FMLN ticket.

consumption, but industry too," said Ramón, a representative from the *Foro*.[18] After a six-month deliberation period, the LRH was codified on December 21, 2021. A year later, it appears that no one is satisfied with the legal outcome, and water issues in El Salvador have not improved. *La Prensa Gráfica* conducted a survey one year after the implementation of the LRH, asking Salvadorans to opine on its accomplishments. Around 76 percent of Salvadorans were unaware that a law even existed (LPG, 2022).

The public was generally insulated from legal water debates, despite being those most affected by service interruptions, contamination, and high costs. Those who were involved in the fifteen-year long struggle have largely dissipated or transitioned into working on other socio-environmental endeavors. But there is still a sense of resentment with how this process unfolded, and while at times there was momentum and even collaboration between some of the groups and the state, a full agreement was never reached. Yet to this day, people continue to decry the injustice and indignity surrounding access to water. This dissertation begins at the nadir of the water struggle, using ethnographic methods to answer questions about why such a protracted battle over a critical life resource was not successful. By tracing the positions of each social group, and by including insights from those not directly involved in the legal water struggles, my intervention will help untangle and nuance these conflicts over control, power, and access over natural resources – conflicts that date back nearly a century – and shed light on strategies that can potentially ameliorate water issues that impact ordinary Salvadorans.

[18]*Foro del Agua*, July 28, 2021; author interview.

Methodology and Positionality

My analysis draws on thirteen months of qualitative research carried out in El Salvador's capital, San Salvador, during three fieldwork periods: eight weeks of preliminary fieldwork in June and July 2019; eight weeks of follow-up research in June and July 2021; and nine months of long-term fieldwork between August 2022 and May 2023.[19] My research involved two principal methods: semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I conducted interviews with activists from the environmental movement (n=9), academics and NGO representatives (n=11), unions (n=20), government officials (n=7), and members of the business community (n=5). I attended marches, press conferences, and *conversatorios* (conversations or discussions) organized by environmental or labor movements (n=12). I've also conducted extensive content analysis of press coverage on the social groups mentioned above, and relevant documents on water policy.

I read the local newspapers and social media pages of pertinent social groups when researching people to interview, and to prepare for interviews when they were scheduled. I created profiles for everyone I interviewed, with contact information, relevant historical context, connections to the water crisis, recent political activity, and interview questions in English and Spanish. I called first to schedule interviews, and emailed second when I couldn't get ahold of people via cold calling. My daily, meticulous review of local newspapers became an important part of my method, both to prepare for interviews, and to learn about the everyday lives of Salvadorans. Because I frequently bought newspapers, I got to know the street vender in my

[19] Preliminary and follow-up fieldwork was supported by the Roscoe Martin Dissertation Fund and the Program on Latin America and the Caribbean Summer Research Grant. Long-term fieldwork was supported by the Roscoe Martin Dissertation Fund, the Program on Latin America and the Caribbean Summer Research Grant, the John Burdick Mini-Grant Award, the Conference of Latin American Geographers Field Study Grant, and the AAG Latin American Specialty Group Research Grant.

neighborhood, Mario. Whenever he saw me approaching, he would say, “the usual?” and hand me *La Prensa Gráfica* and *Diario de Hoy* (Diary of Today), two of El Salvador’s oldest newspapers. This preparation gave me the confidence to allow my interviewees to take our conversations in whichever direction they chose during interviews and not awkwardly wrangle them back to my specific questions. Furthermore, I was able to organically weave my political ecological focus into questions on their most pressing concerns, things like pensions, crime, cost-of-living, financial investments, or authoritarianism. I recorded all my interviews and participant observation events, listened to them, took notes, and transcribed as soon as I could.

My first preliminary fieldwork trip (June and July 2019) was significantly different than the ensuing trips because my Salvadoran-born father came with me. He fled the country in 1980 during the Civil War after receiving death threats for his political activism as a student. My doctoral research in El Salvador presented him an opportunity to reconnect with his home country and introduce his daughter to the place where he grew up. Unexpectedly, because of how drastically the country has changed in the post-war period, his return and my first visit were remarkably similar. We visited rural El Salvador where he is from, places I may have not immediately explored since my research focus is primarily urban. But I later discovered during long-term solo fieldwork that interviewees were interested in what other parts of the country I’d visited, and I was able to share my visits with different Salvadoran geographies. I have the advantage of speaking with a Salvadoran accent, something people were often curious about since I am from the United States. These inquiries allowed me to explain my heritage and my connections to El Salvador and its history. Of course, there were many moments during interviews when I didn’t fully grasp the social context in which someone was telling an experience, anecdote, or joke, because the statements are culturally and historically situated in

ways that escaped me. These opportunities allowed for me to reflect on my positionality as an insider and an outsider to El Salvador, and I accept the fact that I don't embody one or the other but am somewhere in the liminal middle.

A researcher's knowledge about a place is always partial, and I would never claim to fully understand what it means to live in El Salvador. However, I nonetheless feel that my identity as a Salvadoran American, and as someone with a socio-historical and political connection to the armed conflict through my father, allowed me a useful entry point to connect with people I interviewed, especially older people whose formative years were during the war. After interviews, I carefully reflected on how my personal characteristics, relative power, and positionality, not only as a graduate student from the United States, but as someone who was able to leave El Salvador, inflected the research process. I never assumed to know all that was going on with people I interviewed simply because of my education or personal connection to the country. In fact, in several instances, I was corrected by participants on certain facts or historical accounts, measures which I took in stride, and later meditated upon as learning experiences. This reflexivity took place when I listened back to interviews, took notes, and transcribed them, identifying how my questions or comments sounded, and how my participants received them. I used this reflexive process to build and improve on all my interviews to ensure I was engaging in ethical research practices.

Chapter organization

The chapters in this dissertation are structured by the social groups involved in the process to establish a water law for over fifteen years. I've chosen this arrangement because these are the actors who've repeatedly emerged as central players in the water battles, and my ethnographic data reveals the particularities of how water justice and water governance are

expressed, and how proposed resolutions are both complementary and in tension. Throughout the dissertation, I will interweave a historical recounting of the water struggle, with each chapter emphasizing the specific role played by the pertinent social group.

In the next chapter, I will discuss one of the social groups involved in the water struggle, the environmental activists, whom I call *los radicales* (the radicals). I will analyze their strategies of advocacy and knowledge generation campaigns to raise awareness amongst Salvadorans on the importance of securing a water law. While the formation of the environmental movement preceded the ascent of the FMLN into the executive office, the movement aligned itself with the FMLN as a method to secure water justice. I argue that this strategy was ultimately unsuccessful because, despite *los radicales* accurately scrutinizing the root causes of the water crisis, the decision to use formal legal structures and lobby the state was severely limited when the FMLN was no longer in power. I will situate my work in literature on water justice, water governance, and geographies of social movements.

In chapter 3, I will discuss a group I call *los intelectuales* (the intellectuals), who comprise academics, sustainable development NGOs, and think tanks. I also refer to them as "Salvadoran intelligentsia." They relied on advocacy, research, and science communication strategies, stating that the path to better water management necessitated an evacuation of politics and emphasizing the need for expertise in order to achieve what they called "good water governance." I will examine the close political relationship between the FMLN and *los intelectuales* and discuss how the FMLN chose to fill their cabinets with professionals from this stratum of society when they took power in 2009. These choices signaled a turn away from the FMLN's radical roots towards technocratic, expert-oriented governance that sought compromise and bipartisanship rather than reforming institutional structures. I argue that the reliance on

expertise and highly technical policy language did not appeal to the broader base of people most impacted by water issues because they were unsure exactly how these water proposals would alleviate their everyday concerns. For this chapter, I will draw from literature on water governance and water justice, within the context of Left political administrations in Latin America.

In chapter 4, I will focus on another important social group in Salvadoran society: the labor movement. Though not prominently featured in the water struggle, Salvadoran labor unions continue to play a major role in campaigns against austerity and privatization. I will explain how unions have folded water-related concerns into broader economic and workplace demands. I argue for a kind of working-class water justice that uses strategies like strikes, work stoppages, and collective bargaining to secure demands like improved infrastructure (water infrastructure among them), higher wages to address the rising cost-of-living, and the demand to protect public services, as productive ways to frame water justice as a means for alleviating Salvadorans most pressing concerns. The labor movement, or *los sindicalistas*, as I call them, was never really called upon by the other groups to lead the charge for water justice, which I will argue was a missed opportunity as the possibility to adopt labor strategies was then foreclosed upon. Like the chapter on *los radicales*, I will situate this work within literatures on water justice, water governance, and geographies of social movements.

In the following chapter, I turn my focus on the Salvadoran state under the Nayib Bukele administration and water governance through *Bukelismo.* I will also examine Bukele's political party *Nuevas Ideas*, and the strange, hybrid governance model of ultra-authoritarianism, neoliberal austerity, and water management approaches modeled after Silicon Valley tech companies. I argue that Bukele's handling of water governance is an expression of a continued,

but sclerotic, neoliberal global order mediated through punitive security and surveillance policies that grab headlines but neglect everyday concerns for Salvadorans. In addition to water governance literature, I will situate this work within scholarship on authoritarian environmental governance to analyze water policy under *Bukelismo*.

Chapter 6, the last case study chapter, will discuss the final social group in the water struggle: the Salvadoran business community. This group, who I call Salvadoran *empresarios*, presented water proposals that many saw as encroaching privatization, a label that businesses reject. Businesses in turn fault environmentalists and the state for delaying negotiations and codification, and for insufficient water management. The business community use similar language as *los radicales* and *los intelectuales* to address the water crisis, invoking the need for the human right to water, while insisting that politics must be uncoupled from water governance, rendering it a technical or infrastructural issue (Li, 2007). I argue that Salvadoran *empresarios* position themselves as leaders in water stewardship, adopting language of rights, justice, and sustainability, to obfuscate a project of further capital accumulation. A business approach to water policy is essentially a branded, market-provisioned water justice that benefits the capitalist class and not the vast majority of Salvadorans. Furthermore, I argue that the current government's illiberal turn presents an obstacle to that accumulation, causing a rift between the state and capital not seen in previous administrations. This chapter will draw on water justice and water governance literatures to theorize the tensions and power imbalances between capital, the state, and civil society.

In the concluding chapter, I will reiterate the main arguments once more, and draw attention to the need for more research on what strategies social groups can effectively deploy to address and resolve pressing socio-environmental and economic concerns for everyday people. I

will explain once again why water justice is a compelling framework to secure water demands for poor and working-class Salvadorans and situate the Salvadoran water struggle within the context of broader socio-environmental struggles in Latin America. Finally, I will offer insight into what the future of water politics, social movements, and authoritarianism will look like in El Salvador.

Chapter 2 – *Los Radicales*: the Salvadoran environmental movement and the limits of legislating water justice

Shifting in my hard plastic chair, I glanced around the slowly filling room, waiting for the press conference to start. This day, October 31, is Interamerican Water Day, and water justice activists from *Foro del Agua* (The Water Forum) and *Alianza Nacional en Contra la Privatización del Agua* (National Alliance Against Water Privatization) have gathered media and community supporters to discuss recent observations made by the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights (CIDH). "We met with CIDH to present our top concerns with the water crisis," Ramón, a leader in the *Foro,* told the crowd. "We are deeply worried about how unregulated water use for the *Valle El Ángel* project [a luxury real estate development complex outside of San Salvador] will impact surrounding communities. The Law of Water Resources says it protects the human right to water but has no clear mechanisms in place to reign in over exploitation. We see the *Valle* project as a clear violation of our human right to water, and we call on the state to fulfill its obligations to protect and guarantee our access to water."

After the formal press conference, *El Foro* and *Alianza* turned the floor over to the media, which began peppering the spokespeople with questions. One journalist asked the environmentalists what message they would give Salvadorans on how to best conserve water to combat the water crisis. Rosa, an activist with *Alianza*, quickly jumped in to answer the question. "No, we don't have a response to that because we don't get into that discourse. It's not the individual Salvadoran's fault for the contamination, or the shortages. That's because of big

business, because of real estate oligarchs like the Dueñas family.[20] The government should regulate them and protect water resources for its people," she affirmed. The press conference concluded with a demand that the Salvadoran state fulfill its promise of hydro-social protection by approving stronger regulatory frameworks, halting permits for large industries until water was guaranteed to surrounding communities and honoring the human right to water.

Through their activism, environmentalists have accurately pinpointed the root causes of the water crises, and their assertions echo much of what poor and working-class Salvadorans say they experience in their everyday lives. During interviews, water activists described the deeply unequal economic structures that facilitate vast amounts of accumulated wealth and control of capital goods to the most powerful in society, and exacerbate poverty, precarity, and unequal access to water for everyone else. "It's our job to politicize water. They've called us *los radicales* (the radicals), because we are the movement out in the streets with the people," Ramón, who is a founding member of the *Foro*, told me during one interview.[21] Indeed, in 2018, the environmental movement spearheaded some of the largest mobilizations for water justice after the Legislative Assembly was on the verge of passing a water privatization bill. *Foro* and *Alianza* were able to tap into economic concerns plaguing Salvadorans, who came out in droves demanding that water stay in public hands, chanting, "if there is no water for the poor, there will be no peace for the rich" (Calderón, 2018a; Calderón et al., 2018; Gies, 2018a).

But after fifteen years, *los radicales* were unable to secure the water legislation they fought for, and their mobilization now largely consists of press conferences such as the one on

[20] The Dueñas family are part of the infamous "fourteen families" in El Salvador, the oligarchy that controlled coffee production in the 20th century. The Dueñas own *Urbánica*, a real estate company responsible for the *Valle El Ángel*, a development project outside San Salvador consisting of 8000 luxury homes, shopping centers, and churches.
[21] *Foro del Agua;* June 29, 2019; author interview.

Interamerican Water Day. In more combative moments, the movement uses these events to comment on the hypocrisies, contradictions, and inconsistencies within President Nayib Bukele's active water policies. Though they have nuanced summations of the water crisis that reflect the experiences of many Salvadorans, the environmental movement's chosen strategies for collective action failed to realize the water justice they sought. In this chapter, I argue that *los radicales* deployed an activist strategy centered on appealing to morality in pursuit of reforms to legislate water justice, a tactic that is not antagonistic to, and is in fact compatible with, the political structures the movement critiques. While their narratives are discursively radical (and certainly sympathetic), the discernable mechanisms for pressure did not produce an urgency amongst policymakers because the leverage environmentalists hold over political structures is relatively weak**.**

The choice to use morally driven advocacy energized groups of activists already primed to participate in this kind of mobilization, mainly students and college-educated professionals. But given El Salvador's socio-economic conditions, most people were not roused to join the cause on demands for greater democratic participation or rights-based discourse alone. Environmentalists support water justice that gains better material access to water resources, but their campaigns centered on participation, inclusion, and the human right to water. Further, the decision to closely align with the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) proved severely limiting after the party no longer held control in the executive and legislative branches of government.

In what follows, I will situate my analysis within the scholarship on water justice, water governance, and the geographies of social movements, to theorize how demands for water justice are limited when the material benefits are unclear, considering the severity of the water crisis in

El Salvador. I'll then present my case study, which follows the trajectory of *los radicales* and examines their strategies towards codifying a national water law. This section will conclude with an observation of the water justice movement today, where *los radicales* find themselves in a particularly disempowered moment.

Mobilization for water justice

Social movement theory is often used in sociological studies to characterize movement typology or causal mechanisms, but it is also widely deployed in geography to explore the spatiality of mobilization, particularly when related to contentious socio-environmental politics (Perreault, 2008). Movements themselves are diverse, with broad spanning goals that center claims for justice and bring global attention to inequitable structures of distribution (Nash, 2005; Davidson-Harden et al., 2007). In her seminal study on land mobilization in Brazil, Wolford (2010: 9) urges scholars to think of movements as more than just "things, visible entities, or structures," and instead consider them as a "set of discourses, narratives, and ways of thinking about justice, injustice, and a way to imagine change." New social movements arose in the 1960s and 1970s, signaling a qualitative shift in interest groups away from the labor left, opening new spaces for mobilizing that resisted exploitation based on racial, gender, and ethnic identities (Edelman, 2001). Environmentalism was a part of this transition, and environmental movements in the US were populated by professionals who understood existing relations of production in the abstract, rather than personally experienced (Huber, 2022). These characteristics certainly apply to the Salvadoran environmental movement, whose membership is dominated by college educated professionals, with some of its most prominent members trained as lawyers.

Environmental social movements that launched anti-privatization campaigns decried the failure of water privatization projects that governments and aid agencies claimed would increase

efficiency and water delivery to those with least access (Sultana and Loftus, 2012). During the 1980s and 1990s, large, powerful multinationals like Bechtel and Vivendi began expanding their operations around the world, encroaching on public water utilities and transferring ownership over to private companies (Bakker, 2010). Declarations that private companies would provide better financing, higher quality expertise, and more efficient services saw states shift to forms of governance that included marketization, commodification, and devolution (Bakker et al., 2008; Harris and Roa-García, 2013). While these examples portray a retreat of the state, Bakker (2002) demonstrates a state-market balance wherein the state played a major role in organizational and institutional restructuring to facilitate water marketing, what she calls "*mercantilización*." Bakker's analysis of the complexity of public-private relationships resonates with the Salvadoran case, where water services have never been fully privatized, as compared to examples in Chile or the UK (Bakker, 2003; Bauer, 2015). *Los radicales* were most preoccupied with the privatization of decision-making, even with the Salvadoran state responsible for service and delivery. The establishment of a regulatory commission, in which most of the seats were occupied by private sector actors, implied de facto privatization with the state working at the behest of the business community.

This hybrid state-market dynamic is emblematic of how complex water governance configurations can be, where on the one hand, privatization as a tool of neoliberalism has exacerbated inadequate service in urban and peri-urban drinking water systems (Swyngedouw, 2005). On the other hand, the state isn't blameless and has provided public funds to the private sector for services and infrastructure, essentially reconfiguring water governance networks that fuel an increasingly financialized economy (Loftus et al., 2019). Nonetheless, decades of laissez-faire governance that commodified public goods exacerbated urban water poverty, and mass

movements came out against extortionate water prices, resisting further commodification (Bakker, 2007; van den Berge et al., 2018; March et al., 2019). We are now witnessing drastic reversals in water sectors around the world, in which cities with privatized, or semi-privatized utilities are demanding that water be restored back under public control (McDonald, 2018; Muehlebach, 2023). Heterogeneous urban water justice movements resort to a broad combination of contentious and institutional collective action to protect socio-natures (Cartagena Cruz, 2015; Martinez-Alier et al., 2016). While some movements focus on policy struggles related to privatization, governance, or infrastructure (Sultana and Loftus, 2020), others emphasize how critical water epistemologies sustain social movement spaces and imagine social change (Matthews, 2023). Studying the motivation and composition of social movements naturally leads one to consider what strategies they use to secure demands for water justice. Global water justice movements have effectively raised awareness on the social relations of water, and decades of effort by water activists resulted in the United Nations passing a resolution on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation in 2010 (Sultana, 2018). Many continue fighting for this charter to be constitutionally ratified, Salvadoran activists included. In these instances, water justice activists position the human right to water as a counter-hegemonic project to neoliberal water governance (Miroso and Harris, 2012; Maghdal, 2022).

These tactics highlight the interconnection between local water crises and global fights against dispossession, exclusion, and for self-determination (Estes, 2019), in anticipation that moral demands for the human right to water and sanitation will spur action on multiple scales (Beresford et al., 2022). In some cases, water justice advocates successfully championed municipal state intervention to codify the human right to water, notably by linking rights with community demands for improved water infrastructure (Méndez Barrientos et al., 2022). The

driving force in these campaigns were material demands, and despite using discursive rights-based frameworks throughout their struggle, Salvadoran environmentalists saw their most successful collective action when they coupled the fight for a water law with social demands to alleviate economic anxiety. Wilder et al. (2020) find similar tensions in their analysis of Mexico's ongoing battle for water legislation, where citizens' initiatives successfully lobbied the government to commit to democratized water governance, yet the codification of a new law with these promised measures is yet to be adopted. As neoliberalism deepens economic inequality, water activists are increasingly turning to combative methods that go beyond discursive calls for justice. Some of these "insurgent" tactics include highly symbolic actions where people reject unjust pricing mechanisms by burning their water utility bills during protests, as Muehlebach (2023) demonstrates in her study on European anti-water privatization movements.

In Latin America, where water justice has a long tradition, social movements have successfully lobbied the state to defend water and local livelihoods against extractivism (Broad and Cavanaugh, 2021; Acosta García and López Vega, 2023). Salvadoran environmentalists also used anti-extractive discourse to propel the state into establishing the world's first metal mining ban (Bebbington et al., 2019). While this was a tremendous success that should not be taken for granted, Artiga-Purcell (2022) argues that extractive and anti-extractive politics in El Salvador aren't inherently antagonistic, and in fact can be mutually constitutive. As mentioned above, water movements are, albeit cautiously, recentering the state in their calls for justice (Angel and Loftus, 2019), and renewed energy around remunicipalization perhaps brings the state's future role into sharper focus (McDonald and Swyngedouw, 2019). In this sense, *los radicales* were prescient in their impulse to center the state in water justice struggles, but their limitations come in how they can exert pressure on the state to deliver those demands. With their narrow social

base, water justice activists could not instill enough urgency in policymakers, despite the very real urgency Salvadorans face daily regarding the water crisis. In many ways, *los radicales* confronted what Mehmood and Cousins (2022) call "political bonsaification," where political ecological questions, or to use the *radicales'* parlance, the "politicization of water," is siloed to legal institutions in order to contain political action. When activists did manage to mobilize mass marches against water privatization, they were unable to capitalize on these waves of popular discontent because their movement was not rooted in a large working-class base. Because *los radicales* relied on strategies that used morally discursive debate and advocacy mediated through official state channels, they weren't set up to take advantage of moments of mass dissatisfaction like the 2018 anti-water privatization protests.

"Water is always the central point"

The environmental movement is relatively disparate, with organizations and community collectives mobilizing for food sovereignty, anti-extractivism, recycling, and climate justice. Water justice activists see water permeating all these efforts. "Our strategy is that we connect water to all these causes, to mining, to agriculture, even to immigration. Water is always the central point," José, a water activist, told me.[22] The primary organizations that encompass the water justice movement are the *Foro del Agua* and *Alianza Nacional en Contra la Privatization del Agua*. Colloquially known as *los radicales* (the radicals), activists in these organizations see it as their role to "make water political." Through nuanced critiques of the water crisis, the *Foro* and *Alianza* activists use populist rhetoric that elucidates the culpability of the Salvadoran oligarchy in perpetuating water injustice. However, in making water political, *los radicales* chose

[22] *Alianza*, June 26, 2019; author interview.

to pursue a strategy that leaned heavily on the legislative system to win demands, which presents a problem because of the state's compromised favorability towards capital (Chibber, 2022a).

Los radicales used an activist strategy reliant on morally driven calls for reforms that legislated water justice, tactics which were not antagonistic to the political structures the movement critiques. Their narratives were discursively radical, with analyses that addressed the root causes of the water crisis exacerbated by powerful Salvadoran interests, but the movement's mechanisms for pressure did not produce enough urgency for policymakers to enact a water law, resulting in a protracted legal battle. Seemingly, water activists were concerned with *where* justice was achieved (i.e., legislative assemblies or judiciaries), overlaying a larger, potentially transformative political project of socio-environmental justice. I noted these limitations in the opening vignette, where water justice advocates appealed to the moral character of the state, using evidence from an outside board of experts on non-binding agreements that the Salvadoran government had previously rejected.

I recognize that this cautious legislative approach is likely influenced by El Salvador's specific historical context, considering that the country had only recently emerged into a "peaceful" post-war period (Moodie, 2010). The violence of the twelve-year civil war still resonated in the Salvadoran imaginary, and the impulse to pursue justice through official charters like the legislature, rather than in combat, warrants no justification. Extrapolating to broader economic contexts, Salvadoran neoliberalism was at its peak in the early 2000s, and universal structural changes seemed largely foreclosed on (Towers and Borzutsky, 2004; Harvey, 2005). *Los radicales* made several calculations when weighing short versus long term gains in water governance, pursuing a law to address immediate water injustices felt by Salvadorans in the short

term, with the hope of eventually dismantling uneven structures of power and accumulation in the long-term.

In the next section, I will describe the trajectory of the water justice movement and their pursuit of legislative reforms. I draw on semi-structured interviews and participant observation data collected between 2019 and 2023.

El Foro del Agua and the General Water Law

Since the end of the civil war and the disarmament of the FMLN guerrillas, social movements began orienting towards specific sectoral and regional demands. José told me he became involved in the war at the age of eight, delivering messages between his community and the guerrillas in mountainous San Vincente province, one hour outside of San Salvador:

> "During the war, people weren't focused on water. It was war [time], so if there was no water, well, there was no water. In those moments, we wanted to save ourselves from bullets. But after the [Peace] Accords, when people returned to their territories, we noticed the water crisis, and we said it was time to start making demands to the government to respect our rights and take care of this water issue."

El Salvador's hydro-social crisis is complicated by its dependency on the Lempa River, which, at around 262 miles in length, is one of the largest rivers in Central America. The Lempa River, and the Lempa watershed are transboundary water bodies shared with Guatemala and Honduras and cover around 62 percent of Salvadoran territory (Figure 1). The Lempa River, Lempa watershed, and its tributaries are the primary sources for agriculture, industrial activity, electricity generation, and domestic consumption, but over exploitation from commercial real

estate, agribusiness, and bottling companies have left surrounding rural, urban, and peri-urban communities unable to meet their freshwater demand, rendering them water-stressed (Montoya, 2021). In 2010, the United Nation's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) labeled El Salvador as the Central American country with the lowest rates of available water per capita, with 1,750 m^3 per person, compared to a regional average of 33,000 m^3 (CEPAL, 2010, 39). This is seemingly paradoxical in a country with abundant freshwater resources and annual precipitation levels well above the world average (Patterson and López, 2013). Víctor, an activist and environmental lawyer who helped establish the *Foro,* used comparative figures when we spoke in 2019:

> "If you look at Belize for instance, you see they have an average of 74,000 m^3 of water per capita. Now compared to us, that defines us as water stressed. But it's not our lack of water, it's because water is badly managed and distributed, and this is a *political* problem. So, who gets to decide who does and doesn't get water? That's why this country *needs* a water law."[23]

[23] UNES, July 11, 2019; author interview; original emphasis.

Figure 1 The Lempa River and the Lempa watershed. (Source: Trinational Network to Rescue the Lempa River)

In 2006, a coalition of community organizations, environmental groups, and agricultural cooperatives came together to form the *Foro del Agua*. Building on two years of popular awareness education campaigns and public consultation, the *Foro* presented the *Ley General de Aguas* (General Water Law, hereafter LGA) to the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly. "We were inspired by the Cochabamba water defenders, and we got help from allies in Spain, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, to come up with our *propuesta disonente* (dissenting proposal). It was the first time any policy like this was presented in El Salvador, one that came from the people," Ramón expressed proudly. The *Foro* sought to fight water injustices by seeking substantive policy changes that would regulate water resource distribution and prevent water privatization. The right-wing National Republican Alliance (ARENA) party had already privatized telecommunications, the electric grid, the pension system, and attempted (but failed) to privatize healthcare (Almeida, 2008). Now, the public water system was in their crosshairs.

The operation of public services often served as a terrain of struggle for Salvadoran social movements, and environmentalists highlight the perpetuation of injustice in the uneven distribution of water resources. Industries that use the most water – sugarcane agribusiness and commercial real estate development – are owned and operated by the "water oligarchy," a term *los radicales* used for the small cadre of home-grown elites with immense political influence. These powerful entities were also the most fervent opponents of any water regulation. When the *Foro* presented the LGA, they included "five necessary, non-negotiable measures" to cover all aspects of management, distribution, and regulation, bringing a patchwork of disparate laws, norms, and codes across municipal and national scales under one umbrella.[24] These measures were:

1) Water as a public good
2) Participatory governance in water management
3) Recognize the human right to water
4) Sustainable aquifer management
5) Economic justice

The *Foro* also proposed a governing body with representatives from the following sectors: Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources; Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Economy; Ministry of Foreign Relations; the national water utility ANDA; and three mayors elected by the Corporation of Municipalities, or COMURES (MARN, 2017, 43; Díaz, 2020). *Foro's* LGA proposal coincided with the 2006 Legislative Assembly elections where the FMLN gained legislative seats, though not enough to

[24] UNES, July 11, 2019; UNES, July 29, 2021; author interviews.

overcome the right-wing bloc friendly with business interests like commercial real estate and agribusiness. To complicate matters further, most print, radio, and television broadcast media are owned by the Altamirano and Dutriz families, who also operate extensive sugarcane plantations and dozens of commercial real estate properties (Freedman, 2012). News media plays an important role in setting public agendas and outlining policy debates in El Salvador (Wolf, 2017), and media outlets pursued a smear campaign against the *Foro,* according to the water activists. These converging factors meant the LGA sat in legislative limbo for another three years.

On one particularly hot, humid, and mosquito-filled afternoon in 2019, I sat with Denise, a *Foro* activist, in her backyard, talking about the early years of the movement. "Considering the *mapa de poder* (power map) in the country at the time, we never expected to get any serious consideration of our proposal, because of that *triada* (triad).[25] We weren't afraid of repression like before, but we saw how they wanted to delegitimize and make our campaign invisible by using oligarchic media outlets."[26] She paused a moment before continuing, a smile spreading across her face. "But in 2009, we had a glimmer of hope. The FMLN won, and we thought, yes, now is the time. We were so hopeful that a space would finally open to pass the LGA. There was a government in place that would finally pay attention to the water problems in the country."

---

[25] *Triada* is the name activists gave to the trio of right-wing forces in all branches of government. *Foro*, June 30, 2019; author interview.

[26] Here, I should briefly mention a time where there *was* violent repression against water activists. In 2007, demonstrations against plans to "decentralize" water systems in Suchitoto, a city an hour outside of San Salvador, led to a bloody clash between protestors and anti-riot police, where the latter fired tear gas and rubber bullets at demonstrators and arrested 14 people. This event was rarely mentioned during my interviews. See De Burgos, 2013 for a full account of the conflict in Suchitoto.

Los radicales and the FMLN

March 15, 2009 was a momentous day for many Salvadorans. For the first time in the country's history, the FMLN won the presidency, ending twenty years of dominance by ARENA. Mauricio Funes, a former television journalist, assumed the presidency in June 2009, marking the first peaceful transfer of power to a left political party in El Salvador's history (Almeida, 2009). During my long interview in 2019 with members of the *Foro del Agua,* I asked what hopes they had about the LGA when the FMLN was in power. "We felt really strong during this moment," Alex, another member, told me. "In the year leading up to the election, Sánchez-Cerén [the head of legislative faction for the FMLN] invited us to the Assembly when they discussed prohibiting water privatization. He told us, the activists, that we needed to be ready to mobilize to defend our water."[27]

Unfortunately, the road to a General Water Law under the FMLN also presented challenges. Even with the leftist party in the executive office, it still took another three years for policymakers to begin discussing water legislation. The *Foro* explained that despite campaign promises to finally pass a water law once they were elected, the FMLN backtracked, stating instead that what was most important was strengthening the regulatory frameworks already in place. Party leaders were hesitant to regulate large commercial water users, hoping instead to work jointly on regulatory and pricing mechanisms. But after two years, the FMLN couldn't make businesses voluntarily comply with regulatory norms. "It took the FMLN two years to figure out what we already knew, which is that businesses wouldn't let the state charge them," Ramón told me. "So, we kept pressuring the state during this time."

---

[27] *Foro;* June 29, 2019; author interview. Salvador Sánchez-Cerén went on to be Funes's vice president, and in the 2014 national elections, was elected president under the FMLN ticket.

The *Foro's* strategies for pressure broadly manifested in two ways. The first was through public forums to discuss the merits of a national water law. In 2010, the *Foro* hosted an event at the Holiday-Inn San Salvador called the "General Water Law: An Urgent Debate for the Sustainability of El Salvador." They invited politicians and development NGOs to discuss the importance of codifying the human right to water (El Foro del Agua, 2010). Two years later, in the run-up to the 2012 Legislative Assembly elections, the *Foro* moderated a forum titled "For Sustainable Water Management in El Salvador," at the InterContinental Hotel and Resorts in San Salvador (Figure 2). This debate featured politicians from left and right political parties establishing their position on the General Water Law and pledging to speed up its approval process (CDC, 2012). The event concluded with all participating candidates signing a letter reassuring their commitment to approve a General Water Law if elected. In addition to public forums, the *Foro* routinely led marches to the Legislative Assembly on important environmental observance days like International Water Day and World Environment Day, where activists demanded politicians deliberate the LGA and codify the human right to water (Figure 3).

Figure 2 Politicians debate the LGA (Source: CDC 2012)

Figure 3 Ecological walk to Legislative Assembly (Source: CDC 2011)

The 2012 elections proved fruitful for the FMLN, who gained more seats in the legislature, and the *Foro* was invited to present their LGA to the newly formed Environment and Climate Change commission. This subcommittee was created to consider proposals for a water law, with representatives from the FMLN, ARENA, and other ancillary right-wing parties like the Grand Alliance for National Unity and the Christian Democrats. It was during this legislative period when *los radicales* were most successful in pushing politicians on the commission to deliberate the LGA. Between 2012 and 2013, the subcommittee approved 92 out of 160 total articles, agreeing that domestic consumption should be prioritized, and ecosystems protected (Diario CoLatino, 2014). However, policymakers couldn't reach a consensus on the composition of the regulatory committee, and negotiations reached an impasse after 2013. The LGA proposal was shelved for the time being. Given that substantive debate on water legislation was not picked

up for another four years, the *Foro* grudgingly admitted that their first attempt to try and pass a water law, after eight years of struggle, failed.

Interestingly, this low point for national water legislation was a high point for another historic environmental struggle where water played a central role: the threat of metal mining in El Salvador. An anti-metal mining umbrella organization called *La Mesa Frente a la Minería Metálica de El Salvador* (The Roundtable Against Metallic Mining in El Salvador) led a campaign against the transnational Canadian mining company Pacific Rim to halt gold mining production in the northern rural province of Cabañas (Bebbington, 2015; Broad and Cavanaugh, 2021). *La Mesa* successfully pressured the state into passing a metal mining ban in 2017, becoming the first country in the world to do so. Evoking a "water over gold" narrative, this environmental coalition emphasized the vulnerability of Salvadoran water systems, and how mining would surely exacerbate the ongoing water crisis (Artiga-Purcell, 2022). Many of the members from the *Foro* were also a part of the anti-mining campaign and see the ban as a crowning achievement for the environmental movement. But while they rightly celebrated this success, domestic drinking water issues worsened, and looming privatization threats were surfacing once again.

"*Agua no se vende, se cuida y se defiende*" (Water is not for sale, its protected and cared for)

Collective action for a national water law was relatively subdued in the mid-2010s, in part because much of the Left social movement energy was behind the anti-mining ban. But the political-electoral left also found themselves on the back foot, facing mounting opposition in the Legislative Assembly that put them in a defensive posture, limiting how far they could push the kind of water regulation that environmentalists demanded. After the metal mining ban passed with unprecedented bipartisan support, the topic of a water law emerged once again, this time

squarely in the context of privatization. The business lobby ANEP presented a bill in 2017 called the *Ley Integral del Agua* (Comprehensive Water Law), which proposed a regulatory framework that favored the private over the public sector. “This is where discussions about privatization were really at their peak,” Ramón said. “And it seemed like all the media outlets were enthusiastic about the bill. So, it was necessary to mobilize people.” Alex chimed in to emphasize how people are especially motivated by the prospect of privatization. “Water privatization is the last line of fire. This threat really animates people.”

And indeed, this animation was channeled into the formation of another organization called the *Alianza Nacional en Contra la privatización del Agua*, a heterogenous coalition of over eighty organizations, including environmentalists, labor unions, feminist collectives, Catholic and Evangelical churches, Indigenous movements, and youth groups. “We are a really interesting group, because we don’t all agree politically or ideologically, but we all agree that privatizing water is bad for poor Salvadorans,” Víctor told me in 2019. With the Legislative Assembly poised to ratify ANEP’s Comprehensive Water Law, *Alianza,* with help from the *Foro,* were able to scale up mobilization and launch the largest mass protests for water justice in Salvadoran history. Thousands of Salvadorans carrying signs that said “*Agua no se vende, se cuide y se defiende*” marched to the Assembly on July 14, 2018, demanding the legislature reject privatization (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Teachers union marching against water privatization (Source: La Prensa Gráfica 2018)

A few years later, I interviewed an FMLN politician who was on the environmental commission when ANEP presented their law. She told me that after minor modifications, the commission was ready to vote in favor of the bill, but after seeing the amount of people mobilized against it, members of the committee changed their minds. "They had all the votes they needed to approve it," she said, "but that effort by *Alianza*, where they mobilized these marches, came to the Assembly, and even almost caused a riot…. I have to say that it was this social effort that made them reverse their decision."[28] This sentiment was echoed by universities as well. One academic told me bluntly: "It's because of the *Alianza* that water hasn't been privatized in this country."[29]

While there is certainly an overlap between the *Foro* and *Alianza* coalitions, the latter had a strategic universalism that the former was not able to emulate. The *Foro* positions itself as an ideological leftist environmental movement whose pursuits for a water law rely on awareness

[28] FMLN politician, April 19, 2023; author interview.
[29] UCA, July 10, 2019; author interview.

campaigns, discussion, debate, and public demonstrations that are meant to compel policymakers into passing legislation that honors the human right to water. The problem is that, despite *los radicales* and the FMLN often agreeing on many of these elements, official decisions on policies themselves were largely determined by agreements reached between politicians in the legislature. And considering the longevity of this struggle, it's hard to identify a sense of urgency potent enough to spur political action on the side of lawmakers.

In many ways, *los radicales* embody a version of what Huber (2022) calls "anti-system radicals," professional-class activists who understand environmental crises as rooted in capitalism itself. Environmentalists ground their analysis of the water crisis in critiques of neoliberalism's production of uneven structures of accumulation, but they are much more inclined to discuss these adversarial relationships in populist narratives, positioning the Salvadoran water oligarchy and the right-wing as barriers to progressive water policy. In 2017, members of the *Foro* were interviewed in the journal *NACLA*, and they presented the water struggle exactly in this way: "The fight to guarantee equal access to the human right to water is an issue between the FMLN and ARENA. Which is to say, between *Foro* and ANEP" (Goodfriend, 2017b). To be clear, I agree that ARENA and ANEP are formidable adversaries who continuously delayed ratifying a water law. But this narrative simplifies the struggle itself and relegates it to legislative settings where debate happens only between these stakeholders, therefore isolating water issues, and subsequent solutions, from public input.

This narrative also obscures decisions made on behalf of the FMLN that went against social movement demands. One major example of this is the bilateral development agreement drafted between the Obama and Funes administrations called the *Asocio Publico-Privado,* or Public-Private Partnership Law, which was later passed by Salvador Sánchez-Céren in 2017. *Los*

radicales still condemn this decision. “We went to meet with the president to try and convince him not to sign it because it would increase the risk for water privatization. That same day we met with him was when they signed and approved the law,” Alex said bitterly. Salvadoran environmentalists were joined in their anger by other social movements, including labor. “We already know what they mean when they say *asocio publico-privado*,” Roberto, a transportation union worker told me in 2023. “They just mean privatize, and that means we pay more.”[30]

The *Alianza* formed directly in response to water privatization threats and the diverse membership of this coalition agreed that privatizing water would hurt their separate organizations. During my interviews with the Salvadoran labor movement (which I will expound on in later chapters), many unions told me they joined the *Alianza* in 2018, and rallied rank-and-file members to participate in the anti-water privatization marches. Universal, rather than activist-oriented, rhetoric that highlighted the threat of higher water bills and potentially worse service, was what brought together disparate factions of Salvadoran civil society. By their own account, *los radicales* identified what catalyzes marches at a national scale. After referring to privatization as the “last line of fire,” Alex admitted that people were “less motivated when it comes to legislation.” Unfortunately, even though *los radicales* managed to halt water privatization in 2018, they couldn’t pressure the legislature to renew discussions over a General Water Law. And the political landscape in El Salvador was about to experience a major shakeup.

The muted struggle for water justice under Nayib Bukele

Running on an anti-establishment platform, Nayib Bukele was elected president in 2019, and quickly moved to consolidate power in all branches of government. When I spoke to

[30] SITTEAIES, February 20, 2023; author interview.

environmentalists in the summer of 2019, several months after Bukele's inauguration, they were unsure – and pessimistic - about his stance on the General Water Law, describing his ambiguous anti-privatization rhetoric but also his aggressive courtship of business leaders to cabinet positions. The *Foro* and *Alianza* once again tried to lobby the Legislative Assembly into bringing the LGA to a vote, but by this point, the FMLN had suffered its worst electoral defeat in the party's history and had no political leverage in the Assembly. The prospects for codifying water policy remained bleak and were only further eroded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the early months of the pandemic, Bukele implemented a strict lockdown ordinance that prevented social movements from engaging in public collective action to demand water legislation. But after lockdown restrictions eased, the *Foro* and *Alianza* led demonstrations and marches to the Legislative Assembly and the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (MARN), demanding water stay in public hands, and that the human right to water be officially enshrined in the constitution (Figure 5). Environmentalists now also demanded that Bukele sign the Escazú Agreement, an international treaty drawn up at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, that sets out requirements for states to protect environmental defenders (Menton and Le Billon, 2021; Figure 6).

Figure 5 Alianza marching on World Water Day (Source: Diario CoLatino 2021)

Figure 6 Demonstrator holding a sign that reads "the president doesn't care for the environment" and demanding Bukele sign the Escazú Agreement (Source: Amaya 2020)

"This pandemic showed us how vulnerable we are, and how decisions on policies and structures over water and climate change are too slow," Víctor told me in 2021. "We needed to pressure the administration in moving along public policy to regulate water."[31] He elaborated on the hypocrisy of the new administration, pointing to Bukele's lip service on the importance of the human right to water, while still granting environmental permits to development companies who worsen water quality and access. "Do you know that just this last year, MARN authorized 1,559 environmental permits, and they have 1,550 more solicitations waiting for approval?" Víctor said in the same interview. "That's what we were highlighting in our activism, that this doesn't make sense in a water-stressed country like ours."

But *los radicales* were unable to pressure the administration to pursue the LGA, and Bukele's political party *Nuevas Ideas* (New Ideas, hereafter NI) swept the legislative elections in 2021, gaining a super majority in the Assembly. The FMLN representation was reduced to a mere 4 out of 84 seats. The new Assembly was inaugurated in May 2021, and one month later,

[31] *Alianza*, July 29, 2021; author interview

Bukele presented the Law of Water Resources (LRH), a supposed composite of all previous water policy proposals. After announcing a 90-day deliberation period where the environmental commission invited members of civil society organizations to comment on the draft proposal, Bukele declared that the Assembly would debate the LRH and nothing else. I arrived in San Salvador shortly after the LRH announcement and met with the *Foro* and *Alianza* activists, eager to know what they thought of this whole process. Ramón explained that while the LRH "appeared to be public and for the people," it also included language that left open the possibility for business and industry prioritization over domestic consumption.[32] Víctor agreed with Ramón, and accepted the commission's invitation on behalf of *Alianza* to advocate for environmentalists' demands: "We accepted the invitation so that we could go to the commission and point out, article by article, the contradictions and omissions in the LRH, especially on the human right to water and civil participation, which don't appear."[33]

The LRH was introduced alongside a bout of other policies, including the unpopular Bitcoin Law, which establishes the cryptocurrency as legal tender (Taylor, 2022). Bukele was also growing increasingly authoritarian, and ratcheting back hard-fought democratic gains now that NI controlled all branches of government (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021). Bubbling unrest manifested in mass marches on the country's bicentennial anniversary in September 2021, when thousands of people from social movements and civil society organizations took to the streets with a number of demands, a general water law amongst them (Rubio, 2021). The environmental commission concluded the 90-day deliberation period in November, and on December 21, 2021,

[32] *Foro*, July 28, 2021; author interview
[33] *Alianza,* July 29, 2021; author interview

the Legislative Assembly signed the LRH into law, essentially putting a nail into the coffin of the struggle for water legislation that *los radicales* pursued since 2006.

Post-water struggles?

My long-term fieldwork began during the LRH's inaugural year, and so my interviews and participant observation with the *Foro* and the *Alianza* also observed how they adapted to this "post water struggle" period. After Bukele's law was codified, *los radicales* reevaluated their roles and agreed to focus their activism on bringing attention to the deficiencies in the law and its implementation. They lament the results of this protracted struggle but say that their job is now to pressure and hold the state accountable for enforcing the LRH and fulfill its promise to regulate industrial water users.[34] During the press conference on October 31 that opened this chapter, the *Foro* elaborated the water injustices perpetrated by the Bukele government:

> "The Salvadoran state is abandoning its obligation to protect and guarantee the right to water. They are not guaranteeing water for the people… the water they are granting to the Dueñas and *Urbánica* could service needy families in poor neighborhoods in San Salvador…… Despite the water crisis, despite water scarcity, and lack of supply in poor communities, they still give water permits to businesses."

The *Foro* and the *Alianza* held several press conferences in 2022 and 2023, sometimes coupling the conference with a demonstration in front of the public water utility ANDA, the Legislative Assembly, or the offices of the Salvadoran Water Authority (ASA), a regulatory board that was created under the LRH. As part of their campaign against the construction of *Valle El Ángel*, the *Foro* and *Alianza* representatives gathered in front of these buildings with signs

[34] *Foro del Agua*, April 27, 2023; author interview

that read ¡*Fuera Dueñas!* (Out, Dueñas!) in reference to the dynastic family whose construction company is contracting the development project (Figure 7).

Figure 7 A faded ¡Fuera Dueñas! sign on a lamppost in San Salvador (Source: author 2023)

In this post-water struggle period, I noticed that *los radicales* were also turning their attention to other environmental efforts. The *Foro* leaders are mentoring an emerging youth climate justice movement called Rebel Greens El Salvador (REVERDES), whose members say their main goal is to "politicize ecologies" through awareness campaigns that would eventually serve as a pathway towards an electoral run for the legislature.[35] They evoke similar populist

[35] REVERDES, April 27, 2023; author interview.

language, insisting that, for REVERDES, the "true political enemy is always the oligarchy, no matter who is at the head of the state."

My interviews and participation observation with *los radicales* in 2022 and 2023 were markedly gloomier than the energetic tone of our conversations in 2019 and 2021. But as became clear during my time in El Salvador, despite the LRH going into effect, chronic water issues were far from over, and industrial water users continued to skirt regulatory norms because of the law's muddy language on enforcement. In one especially fiery press conference, *Alianza* activists angrily described a recent visit to peri-urban San Salvador neighborhoods where water problems were "getting worse every day and the state continues to do nothing."[36] They were especially angry with Bukele's recent announcement that agribusiness would be exempt from paying fees for water use because of the war in Ukraine and inflation (Alas, 2023b). Rosa, from the *Alianza*, condemned this decision, calling Bukele's LRH "legalized water injustice":

> "The *juntas de agua* have to make do with terribly contaminated surface water, while agribusiness extracts groundwater, drying out surrounding community wells. And they are responsible for contaminating the surface water people are forced to drink. And now the state is rewarding them by letting them not pay for water."

Ramón echoed Rosa's claims, telling me that Bukele's entire governance approach upended traditional institutional norms, because Bukele "understood the *real politik* of water and created a legal mechanism for the oligarchs to continue stealing our water."[37]

---

[36] *Alianza* press conference, February 28, 2023.
[37] *Foro del Agua,* April 27, 2023; author interview

I can understand these frustrations, especially considering that Bukele's sky-high approval ratings obscure worsening social services and public infrastructure so many working-class Salvadorans depend upon. *Los radicales* successfully generated enough pressure in 2018 to prevent the conservatives from approving ANEP's Comprehensive Water Law by emphasizing how privatization would simultaneously worsen and make water service more expensive. Indeed, my conversations with labor unions reflected the utility of this strategy, as several of them told me they felt compelled to join the marches to prevent the privatization of water, even though they were not officially a part of the environmental movement. By seizing the waves of discontent resulting from years of expensive and dilapidated water services, *los radicales* were able to harness their legislative water struggle to an economic and material struggle that resonated with the public, generating a unifying message across sectors who momentarily came together against water privatization. However, after the mass demonstrations, *los radicales* were incapable of channeling that energy into codifying their own water law, resorting back to legislating water justice amongst policymakers alone.

In their current iterations, the *Foro* and *Alianza* continue using morally driven language meant to compel the state to enforce the LRH's provisions, which at present, vaguely gestures to the human right to water and civil participation. Given Bukele's hostility towards any social group with previous affiliation to establishment parties, the prospects of *los radicales* convincing him and the NI-dominated Assembly to voluntarily fulfil these obligations, doesn't bode well. But even in friendlier political climates where water activists routinely engaged in dialogue with policymakers about their water law, the struggle to legislate water justice remained in a constant state of limbo. Advocating to the moral character of the state, even with nuanced critiques of the severity of the water crisis, assumes the state itself is neutral and willingly convinced by the

social group with the most sophisticated argument at hand. Under capitalism, this is not the case because states are strongly biased in favor of capital (Das, 2006). These strategies were simply not combative enough to pressure politicians across the ideological spectrum in voting for a General Water Law, despite the urgent need to address chronic service interruptions and expensive water bills.

Finally, the groups that encompass the water justice movement are relatively small, and their collective action events drew a narrow social base to engage with policymakers. Cartagena Cruz (2015: 241) addresses the disparate nature of environmentalism in El Salvador, revealing how environmental organizations "lack an articulated nationwide social base, or a large number of activists and sympathizers to mobilize in solidarity with local struggles." This applies to *los radicales*, who were relatively unknown initially, but whose prominence grew after the FMLN was elected to office, and especially during the Sánchez-Céren administration. However, it's important to note that prospects for water privatization also intensified during this period, and it was these threats which produced the *Alianza* movement. They launched the largest mass movements for water justice in Salvadoran history because they successfully attracted poor and working-class Salvadorans outside of professional milieus to support their cause.

Conclusion

In the case of *los radicales*, we see two strategies and their social impacts at work, both with varying degrees of success. The first strategy was most often pursued by water justice advocates, and it required deploying activist-oriented language that fused appeals to morality with structural critiques of water injustice in El Salvador. This way of "politicizing water" allowed *los radicales* to pressure politicians enough to begin debating a water law and advance a significant number of articles towards establishing comprehensive policy. Yet, as I have

explained, this protracted process repeatedly came up against questions on regulation and control of water resources, and *los radicales* were unable to break this impasse. Bukele's Law of Water Resources came to fruition only after one party had enough legislative seats where deliberation and compromise were unnecessary.

The second strategy, which unfolded in a much shorter time frame, de-emphasized moral calls for water justice and centered the threat to material livelihoods, something that Salvadorans are well familiar with regarding privatization of public services. Rather than focusing on obligations to a polity or fine-grained analysis of policy contradictions and hypocrisies, water justice advocates seized on public unrest related to growing economic precarity, chronic water shortages, and skyrocketing bills, and centered these issues first and foremost. As I see it, framing the Salvadoran water crisis as a material struggle for access and control of water resources is what resonated with the public. Unfortunately, *los radicales* failed to transform public discontent into demands for a broader, social democratic project that promised to deliver reliable, affordable, clean water, but environmentalists momentarily fomented enough pressure to stop the state from imposing further austerity through privatization. I've critiqued the morally driven language that environmentalists used to legislate water justice, but I wholeheartedly agree with their insistence to "politicize water." In fact, I would argue that their second strategy, which paired the moral struggle for water justice with a material struggle, is in fact much more political than an approach that relies heavily on debates and discussion.

Yet despite confronting the politics of water head on, *los radicales* were not able to influence the state on progressive water policy. This was a serious limitation for this social group, and they were not the only ones lobbying the Salvadoran state regarding water governance. *Los radicales* often confronted another group concerned with the growing water

crisis: a coalition of academics, representatives from sustainable development and advocacy NGOs, and think tank researchers who juxtaposed themselves against the activists, claiming to approach water governance in a more pragmatic, and notably, *less* political way than the environmental movement. This intellectual group, with whom the FMLN had a much more agreeable relationship, insisted on eschewing politics altogether in order to achieve 'good water governance.' I turn to this group in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 - *Los Intelectuales*: NGOs, universities, and the pursuit of 'good water governance'

Nejapa is a small town nestled 10 miles outside of San Salvador, with a population of about 36,000 people. This quiet town rests on top of one of the country's largest aquifers, and recently, Nejapa found itself facing off with Coca-Cola over access to that water. During my first summer of preliminary fieldwork, interviewees often mentioned Nejapa, referring to "*el caso de Coca-Cola*" or, the Coca-Cola case. When I arrived in San Salvador in early June 2019, I contacted the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), a DC-based activist organization that works closely with the leftist Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN) party and social movements in San Salvador. CISPES was involved in several local campaigns, including the water struggle in Nejapa. They suggested I speak to Nejapa's FMLN mayor, Adolfo Barrios, who, as an entomologist and agronomist, was quite knowledgeable on the technical and political dimensions of the Salvadoran water struggle.

I met Adolfo on July 4 in his home in Nejapa. He began by telling me that one of his first acts as mayor was to petition the central government for funds to build water infrastructure projects in his municipality. "I've spent a lot of time outside the country working and studying, and I've learned how to use technical language because that's how you get legislation passed here," he said. "Water is political of course, but we can't go all the way political, that won't get us far. We have to use technical language, less political language, because numbers have power."[38] He went on to describe his recent conversation with a colleague in the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (MARN), where they'd discussed how to approach politics

[38] FMLN; July 4, 2019; author interview. I use the real names of well-known politicians in this dissertation.

and governance this day in age. “Fighting doesn’t suit us anymore. It would be the last straw if we led with the political. *El tiempo del político común ya ha pasado.*”

The literal translation of this phrase is: “The time of the common politician is over.” Yet based on the tenor of our conversation, I interpret Adolfo’s declaration within a broader description of mass politics. *Común*, or “common,” refers to ordinary, mass-based movements and their influence on institutions, political parties, and organizations (Wainwright and Mann, 2013; Mann, 2016). Referring to a *político común* as an individual politician gestures to a governing style of the past, to describe an “old school politician,” who may have had a more symbiotic relationship with mass movements. Therefore, to describe the *end* of common politics suggests a withdrawal of ordinary peoples’ ability to influence politicians or policies. This analysis fits comfortably with an ‘end of history’ logic after the fall of the Berlin Wall, where Western capitalism, now in its neoliberal formulation, was declared triumphant over communism (Fukuyama, 1989; Harvey, 2005). In any case, Adolfo’s use of *politico común,* regardless of specific interpretations, infers that politicians and politics must adapt to the current historical-political moment in El Salvador. For environmental policy, this meant deploying technical language to resolve water issues. He concluded by saying that the best way to find solutions for the water crisis was by “strengthening our technical knowledge, informing ourselves, and becoming experts.”

One week after my meeting with Adolfo, I sat down with Andrés, a researcher at the Jesuit Central American University José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in San Salvador. Andrés is a vocal opponent of extractivism, and, alongside the environmentalists I described in the previous chapter, was a part of the coalition that spearheaded the ban against metal mining in El Salvador. Andrés is a well-known expert on water issues and was also involved in the struggle to establish

water legislation. Rather than draft an entire law like *los radicales*, the UCA, working alongside MARN, focused on the regulatory committee, and constructed a framework to shore up the institutional architecture that would ensure "good water governance." Andrés, like the environmentalists, supports a public governance structure, and has a more critical take on Salvadoran water politics:

> "Water is political, there is no doubt. It's a political battle more than a technical battle. We drafted an institutionalization proposal so that we can talk about the power that goes behind making decisions about water."[39]

While Andrés is more forthright about the political nature of water, he is similarly pessimistic about the implications of politics on water policy, agreeing with Adolfo that "the main point that hasn't allowed us to advance with a water law is purely political." He drew comparisons between the struggle for a mining ban and the struggle for a water law, explaining how the cause for water justice should be advanced:

> "We had a coalition of experts working on these [mining policies and water policies]. The water experts are in the ministries, MARN, the Ministries of Agriculture, Health, and Public Works. And they are in academia. That's why these are the people that need to be on the regulatory committee making decisions about water for the country."

Highlighting these parts of Andrés's interview is not meant to disregard the importance of technical expertise for water policy, water infrastructure, and water management, but rather to draw out and demonstrate how expertise was specifically elevated. The water crisis in El Salvador is not simply a technical or infrastructural problem, but a fundamentally political one

[39] UCA; July 10, 2019; author interview.

about inequality, power, and justice. Andrés recognizes these traits and doesn't reject the political aspects of this crisis, but by framing the solution as one that necessitates technical expertise, the conflict is engineered into a calculable issue that need only be resolved with specialized knowledge.

I open this chapter with these conversations to frame the perspectives of another social group involved in the struggle for a water law. This group included representatives from the University of El Salvador (UES), the UCA, government ministries, and sustainable development NGOs. My interviews with *los radicales* led me to think about this coalition as a separate and distinct group, especially because *los radicales* described them as both collaborative and divisive. "We had powerful resistance as a movement, but we have to admit there was fragmentation too," Alex from the *Foro del Agua* lamented.[40] "At one point, we noticed that the UCA was working with conservative think tanks and agribusiness to come up with a proposal."

I was surprised to hear this. "Why did the UCA go work with them?" Alex sighed. "They said that they wanted to create another space to debate a regulatory framework, one that was a 'thinking' group, the 'intellectuals ones,' they called it. They said that all we did was go out to the street to protest, but never tried to actually negotiate policy."

In this chapter, I will discuss *los intelectuales* (the intellectuals), a group that can be broadly categorized as 'technocratic,' at least in comparison to the radical activists of the previous chapter. A technocrat is a somewhat nebulous category but can be generally ascribed to someone who believes solutions to environmental problems come from technical, pragmatic, and apolitical policies (Hochuli et al., 2021). In this liminal neoliberal period, one that breaks from

[40]*Foro del Agua*; June 29, 2019; author interview.

traditional neoliberal prescriptions but is not quite 'post-neoliberal,' it may be more precise to describe this group as *progressive* technocrats, who still revere technological solutions as the most appropriate response to political problems but frame them within socially liberal discourse. Academics from this group often proposed techno-fixes like water metering as resolutions to the crisis, because of the meter's ability to "accurately account for correct water usage."[41] But they quickly followed this suggestion up by describing the injustice of unevenly distributed water, offering water meters as proper ways to remedy these inequities. Technocrats also typically come from the professional class and leverage their expertise to valorize their qualifications for drafting environmental policy (Huber, 2022). This dynamic is emblematic in the opening vignettes with Andrés and Adolfo. Even the leadership of the public water utility ANDA, and the Salvadoran Water Authority ASA are impressively credentialed, with degrees from universities in Argentina, Costa Rica, Germany, and the United States, and experience working for international institutions like the Interamerican Development Bank and USAID.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate examples of technocratic solutions for water justice, and argue that by elevating the importance of bipartisanship, water metering, and prioritizing expertise, *los intelectuales* thought politics was at best a delay and at worst a distraction from achieving 'good water governance.' Yet eschewing what is fundamentally a political issue will only further exacerbate water *in*justice.

My conceptual framework situates these technocratic approaches within literatures on water governance and water justice that critique policy coming from elite centered perspectives. I will then explain my case study within the context of Left political administrations in Latin

[41] UES; July 9, 2019; author interview.

America, drawing out the history of the FMLN political party and their relationship with this intellectual group. During their ten years in the presidency, the leftist party appointed academics and professionals from sustainable development and advocacy NGOs to cabinet positions to execute environmental governance. In my case study, I will discuss how *los intelectuales* understand the water crisis, and explain their proposed solutions for it, which include bipartisan political and economic relationships, water metering as a tool for just pricing, and the promotion of credentialed experts in drafting water policy. I will conclude with an analysis of how these technocratic policies resonated with the broader Salvadoran population.

Water governance, technocracy, and elite-centered justice

As a political project, technocracy is not new, especially in relation to water resource management, where it has roots in the nineteenth century during the Progressive Era (Gandy, 2002). State-led provisioning of water services and infrastructure were supported by social welfare models that understood these public goods to be in society's best economic and social interests (Bakker, 2003). Recent scholarship on technocrats in Latin America demonstrates that expert environmental policies played a fundamental role during the Cold War, and the results of their development projects on rational management of nature are still visible today (Buckley, 2017; Chastain and Lorek, 2020). While technocracy and expertise are not unique features of neoliberalism, they are certainly important components of neoliberal thought, and forward the idea that policy should be directed with technical expertise rather than political partisanship (Budds, 2009).

Los intelectuales inferred that directing this expertise towards water policy leads to 'good water governance.' These are normative claims, but it's important to understand what kinds of reforms produce so-called 'good' governance, and at which scales (Furlong, 2012). Often, highly

influential global financial actors are a part of expert networks for environmental policy decisions (Goldman, 2007), like international investment agencies or NGOs that equate democracy, human rights, and participatory civil society with ‘good governance’ (Murray and Overton, 2011). ‘Good governance’ can also infer the need for technical expertise that sidesteps politics, and the role of ‘experts’ in water governance, maintenance, and infrastructure is well-trodden intellectual ground (Björkman, 2018, Ramakrishnan et al., 2021). Even when portrayed as removed from politics however, technical expertise is never neutral, directly and indirectly shaping political agendas (Mitchell, 2002). Technocratic environmental policy decisions actively work to produce objects and subjects within hydro-social territories (Mills-Novoa et al., 2020), and further neoliberalize natures by reconfiguring waterscapes to produce unequal patterns of resource use (Budds, 2013).

Depoliticized solutions to highly political environmental crises are symptoms of what Erik Swyngedouw (2018) terms our ‘post-political’ moment. Post-politicization is not a full evacuation of politics, but rather a retreat from the political, replacing it with techno-managerial governance. The policy solutions favored by *los intelectuales* are also important to consider in a Latin American context where the state-market-society nexus is reimagined, and new mechanisms for social inclusion, welfare, and collective responsibility are embedded through renewed governance approaches (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2012). Some use ‘post-neoliberalism’ to refer to ongoing practices of political economic restructuring and regulation (Yates and Bakker, 2014) while others prefer ‘the end of the end of history’ to explain revolts against neoliberal political establishments (Hochuli et al., 2021). Regardless of nomenclature, neoliberal continuities exist, and the state upholds conditions for capital accumulation by facilitating the international flow of capital, investments that are becoming increasingly financialized (Arboleda,

2020). Yet there are undeniable departures from previous forms of governance that privileged laissez-faire policies. One major example is global remunicipalization trends in response to neoliberal water governance failures (Bakker, 2010; Cumbers and Paul, 2022), while the increase in social spending to combat poverty is another expression of these recent changes (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2018). Globally, we see this fluctuation in electoral politics, with a successful political left in Latin America. Yet the authoritarian right wing still maintains a strong hold in global politics (McCarthy, 2019; Arsel et al., 2021). The current Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele is a definite product of this trend.

Another neoliberal continuity is a reliance on water meters as tools to allocate water rationally through pricing mechanisms meant to recover the "full cost of water" (Bakker, 2003: 5). Others have argued that water metering creates a new locus of governance, whereby material objects like water meters are used to exert state power, logics of responsibility, and economic solvency (Loftus, 2006; Anand, 2020). South Africa is an often-used example of the failure of water meters to encourage service payment, and to remedy the "culture of non-payment," as von Schnitzler (2008) demonstrated in her study on Johannesburg's water utility. She explained that pre-paid meters were not only depoliticizing devices intended to drive cost recovery but were also disciplinary mechanisms that disconnected when households were late with payments. In El Salvador, progressive technocrats described a kind of culture of non-payment, essentially implying that water meters would both rectify uneven payment systems amongst big and small water users, but also ensure that *all* people paid for individual water usage. This kind of data-driven governance itself serves to depoliticize and render water issues as technical (Li, 2007). Ironically, a precondition to depoliticization is problematizing, though what follows is a process of diagnosing solutions narrowly accessible to experts, limiting the ability of ordinary people to

participate and demand justice (Perreault, 2015). Li draws on James Ferguson's (1994) 'anti-politics machine,' to reference how states treat power-laden issues as technical problems that necessitate technical solutions. These developmental interventions are used to depoliticize inherently political questions on land, resource allocation, and poverty, reducing them to prescriptive technical strategies that simultaneously expand state power.

In El Salvador, depoliticization is less an FMLN led top-down initiative to render water technical, and more a process of individual political actors, and those working alongside them, like NGO workers and academics, modulating themselves. This could be a self-serving project to maintain access to powerful state actors, or an ideological commitment to professional class politics, but ultimately, rendering political problems technical reinforces the role of experts as the singular force to address specific socio-environmental problems. Perreault (2016) observed similar dynamics in Bolivia, where a grassroots environmental justice network in Oruro lobbied the government to enact policy for environmental redress by couching their demands in legal, technical language as a way to avoid appearing too radical. He explains how they rendered their own discourse as technical, despite the fact that their demands for environmental protection against mining waste is an inherently political issue.

Depoliticized prescriptions like water metering also risk becoming the first step in dismantling public subsidies, which can exacerbate water poverty (Deitz and Meehan, 2019). Similarly, metering can be a prelude to public-private partnerships where water bills are bound to rise (Zetland, 2016), a phenomenon that Salvadorans are well familiar with, considering the country has signed agreements like these for electricity generation, transport, pensions, and telecommunications, all previously state-owned entities that are now privatized. The problem with water metering as a strategy for water justice is that it assumes all water users are the same,

focusing solely on the financial details of 'good water governance.' Normative categories like efficiency, sustainability, access, and affordability are implemented as technical fixes without consideration for historical or socio-economic specificities (Clark, 2020). More insidiously, water metering is a disciplinary mechanism used to reinforce free-market principles on the economic value of water, inculcating a consumer mindset that supplants citizen status where subjects can demand rights to water (Furlong, 2013; Anand, 2017). Further, it is not uncommon for poor and working-class people to be labeled "lazy," or "violent" if they protest unfair prices and are assumed to not "want to pay for anything," Muehlebach (2023: 90). As I will elaborate in my case study, Salvadorans who contested expensive water bills are assumed to not know what the true value of water was because they didn't have the technical knowledge of water resource management (Diálogo con Ernesto López, 2022).

This kind of progressive, technocratic governance was visible throughout the twenty-first century in El Salvador, and especially so when the FMLN took power between 2009 and 2019. While their election was historic, it also presented the features of a post-political government committed to technical solutions for environmental problems that in their essence, are political. In what follows, I will trace a brief history of the leftist party, their relationship to *los intelectuales*, and their approaches to the Salvadoran water crisis.

Los intelectuales **and the FMLN**

The 1992 Peace Accords marked the end of the armed conflict in El Salvador and the transition to civilian democracy. The country's reconstruction was now at the top of the agenda. Aims for socio-economic development introduced under ARENA's President Adolfo Cristiani included a major role for non-government organizations, or NGOs (Alvarez Solís and Martin, 1993). Around $50 million in reconstruction aid was made available to NGOs, who boomed

throughout the 1990s in the wake of the Accords (Robinson, 2003). One condition of this funding, especially from USAID, was that NGOs focused on technical questions and productive, rather than political, projects (Flint, 1998). The flood of foreign aid and the NGO-ization of the democratic transition sought to institutionalize less polarization, but also worked to weaken radical organizing (Goodfriend, 2017a). Social movement activity at the time was largely dominated by labor unions, who, despite state repression during the Civil War, led major strike actions and work stoppages that halted economic activity in the public and private sector (Almeida, 2008).

The NGO network in El Salvador worked on a variety of issues formerly taken on by public institutions, like health care, crime prevention, and education (Smith-Nonini, 1998). The central aim of the post-war period was development, and sustainable development NGOs were particularly concerned with environmental degradation. El Salvador is unfortunately burdened with the Malthusian reputation of being an environmental wasteland because of the rapid increase in its urban population in the mid to late twentieth century, though this narrative has been critiqued by geographers (Hecht et al., 2006; Dull, 2008).[42] Regardless, during my fieldwork, people often pointed to urban population growth when we broached the topic of water. Multilateral agencies that funded environmental governance initiatives emphasized the importance of a decentralized framework for new political spaces that promoted what King et al. (2016) call "environmental peacebuilding frameworks," schematics that were considered safe enterprises in comparison to more sensitive economic or political concerns.

[42] El Salvador conducted a census in 2007, its first since the Peace Accords, and the census recorded 5.7 million citizens, significantly lower than the 7 million estimate (Booth et al., 2020).

Post-war reconstruction following the Peace Accords also allowed former insurgent FMLN militants to acquire legal status as a political party, and run in local, parliamentary, and presidential elections. The FMLN competed in the 1994 elections for the first time in the country's history and continued to accrue votes in every election. These victories were not without challenges, and the former guerrillas retained many of the bureaucratic, top-down, and arguably undemocratic structures used on the battlefield. Manning (2007: 265) explains that when the FMLN transitioned to an electoral party, rather than have party members vote for candidates to run in local and national elections, the party's political committee chose candidates "on the basis of historic command positions in the guerrilla organization." Indeed, many guerrilla leaders became FMLN party officials, bringing with them old rivalries between the party's more orthodox and moderate wings that were never settled during the conflict (Sprenkels, 2018).

Nonetheless, the FMLN proved themselves to be the primary opposition party to ARENA, and during the 1990s and early 2000s, the leftist party strengthened their ties to the ascending NGO network. This partly had to do with the fact that, despite the end to the armed conflict, the country was still highly polarized, and ARENA was suspicious about the role of popular organizations, which they perceived as instruments of the FMLN, even in postwar civil society (Wade, 2016). Still, international aid for NGOs was at its peak after the Peace Accords, with much of the funding focused on sustainable development projects like forest recovery and management (Heller, 1997; Valencia et al., 2011).

One of the most successful sustainable development NGOs that emerged after the Peace Accords was *Fundación* PRISMA*,* a well-respected research institute that has collaborated with political ecologists Susanna Hecht and Anthony Bebbington on forest resurgence and mining politics (Hecht et al., 2006; Bebbington, 2015). Though not formally linked to the party,

PRISMA worked closely with the FMLN in the post-war period as advisors for environmental governance. After Mauricio Funes, the FMLN candidate, was elected president in 2009, he appointed PRISMA's director Herman Rosa as Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources. "It wasn't an inevitability that Herman was going to be a part of the environmental team," Alan, a representative from PRISMA, told me in 2019.[43] According to Alan, the *Foro del Agua* was pushing the Funes administration to nominate Ángel Ibarra, venerated director of the environmental activist organization Salvadoran Ecological Unit (UNES).[44] But after Funes was elected, his government worked to establish new economic and social models intended to reduce poverty and inequality, and pay special attention to reducing the country's vulnerability to environmental disasters (DIGESTYC, 2018). El Salvador was hit by a serious hurricane in 1998, and two earthquakes in 2001 that devasted the country. These vulnerabilities were elevated, as geographer Ben Wisner (2001) argued, by the government's adherence to extreme forms of neoliberal, free-market ideology, and the deep fissures and mistrust still rampant following the Civil War.

The FMLN launched a series of government policies and programs intended to revitalize small-scale production and regulate natural resource use to mitigate harmful environmental practices (Bull et al., 2014). At this point, concerns over access to water were widespread and growing. When I asked how PRISMA became involved with the water struggle, Alan told me the organization was motivated by concerns over how economic reactivation and rapid urban population growth were "reflected in the degradation of water." PRISMA was also attentive to ARENA's neoliberal structural reforms, including deregulation, privatization, and market

[43] PRISMA; July 23, 2019; author interview.
[44] Ibarra was later made the vice minister of MARN under the FMLN in 2014.

liberalization, which Alan said worsened water scarcity. The FMLN also worked closely with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, an international research institute funded by the German Green Party. Notably, during the FMLN's first term (2009 - 2014), the position for vice president of MARN went to Lina Pohl, the director for the Central America branch of Heinrich Böll. Pohl was later appointed as MARN's president during the second FMLN term under Salvador Sánchez-Cerén from 2014 to 2019. Towards the end of her term, the investigative journal *GatoEncerrado* did a series of interviews with Pohl's former colleagues, who commented that under her leadership, MARN "systematized a large amount of information, distributed good analysis and reports…. and itself became more technical" (Díaz and Beltrán, 2019). However, they were also disappointed that Pohl hadn't made more progress on the General Water Law.

The decision for the FMLN to appoint cabinet positions to representatives from internationally renowned sustainable development NGOs and think tanks indicates a strategic shift away from their combative history, and toward a more neutral era for the party. Indeed, having Mauricio Funes as the presidential candidate, a popular TV journalist with no former affiliation to the FMLN guerrillas, was indicative of the party's attempt to build broader connections beyond the ideological left. A concrete example of this was the *Amigos de Mauricio* coalition, which included wealthy businessmen who left the ARENA camp. According to political scientist Rose Spalding (2014: 201), this move "provided critical funding, particularly in the final stretch, and helped reassure backers who feared radical change." During the campaign, rather than highlight a transition to socialism like other Pink Tide presidents, or even calling for a full reversal of ARENA's neoliberal agenda, Funes promised "greater inclusiveness" (Montoya, 2018: 201). He committed to maintaining dollarization (implemented in 2001) and upholding the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), despite the unpopularity of these ARENA-

era decisions (Booth et al., 2020). Funes's ethos was captured in his campaign slogan: "This time is different."[45]

The FMLN achieved unprecedented reforms aimed at reducing poverty, reactivating agricultural activity for historically marginalized communities, and expanding government accountability and transparency (Goodfriend, 2020). There was also fruitful collaboration between state institutions and feminist movements that translated to progressive policies addressing violence against women, and community development projects on education and healthcare (Burridge, 2020). I spoke with Doris, a textile worker and union organizer, who benefited from these FMLN-era policies. "I was in the *Programa de Apoyo Temporal al Ingreso* (PATI)," she said, referencing the vocational training program the FMLN instituted in 2009. "I never had the chance to be properly educated because of the war, so I learned to read and write with the PATI."[46] The FMLN could rightfully boast significant gains in healthcare and education, but they consistently failed to implement reforms for water service and infrastructure improvement proposed by social movements. The party did, however, pass water policies they saw as commensurate with bipartisanship and 'good governance.'

The first of these supposedly neutral policies was the *Ley Especial Asocio Publico-Privado,* or the Public-Private Partnership law, first introduced under Funes, and later ratified under Sánchez Cerén (Decreto No. 666, 2014). The second policy was the *Ley Transitoria ANDA,* a bill that passed in 2018 during the wanning months of the Sánchez Cerén administration, allowing for temporary debt restructuring meant to encourage people to pay their

[45] Funes often portrayed himself as the candidate of change and compared himself to another recently elected candidate with the same slogan: Barack Obama. He apparently did this so much that the Obama administration had to request Funes stop using Obama's images during the FMLN campaign (Booth et al., 2020: 184).
[46] SITRAIMES; February 23, 2023; author interview.

water bills (Decreto No. 205, 2019; Quintanilla Gómez, 2022).[47] Far from a water law that enforced regulation, these disparate policies ineffectively addressed the myriad of water issues impacting everyday Salvadorans, and failed to encourage debt repayment, nor did they prevent the encroachment of privatization threats. In 2023, *El Diario de Hoy* reported that ANDA users were denied the option of debt forgiveness in long-term payment plans because of the water authority's own outstanding debt (García, 2023). Salvadorans were especially disappointed with these policies because it was the historic leftist party who didn't follow through with promises to resolve the water crisis.

The FMLN is a movement-based party that preserved the institutional, top-down structures designed to enhance the power and autonomy of party leadership (Anria, 2018), holdovers from the guerrilla insurgency. This rigid bureaucratic structure is a form of governance often associated with technocracy, especially in relation to state development (Ferguson, 1994; Singh, 2014). Binford (2010: 541) explains the ways in which capitalist subjectivities were reformed in the postwar period, highly influenced by international NGOs that shaped development policy "away from collectivist ideologies and towards a market model based on open competition and individual responsibility." According to Binford, the FMLN leadership drew closer ties to NGO bureaucrats during the peace transition, and steadily distanced itself from its base of workers and peasants. Regarding environmental governance, the FMLN favored technocratic expertise while keeping "non-experts" at bay, in this case, mass organizations like unions and other social movements. In what follows, I will trace the methods *los intelectuales*

[47] The full name is *Ley Transitoria para facilitar a los usuarios el cumplimiento voluntario del pago por deudas provenientes del servicio de agua potable y alcantarillado prestado por la ANDA*. This translates to "Transitory Law to facilitate user's compliance with debt payments from bills for potable water and sewage services from ANDA."

proposed as ways to produce 'good water governance,' and conclude with a discussion on why these tactics didn't resonate with the broader Salvadoran population.

The admiration of bipartisanship

One of the strategies that distinguishes *los intelectuales* from the activists in the previous chapter is their insistence on finding shared interests between 'powerful groups,' and leveraging those interests to pass environmental policy, regardless of political ideologies. The UCA was one of the intellectual leaders in the struggle to ban metal mining in El Salvador, citing their concerns that mining would negatively impact the country's already scant water resources. Andrés and I spoke several times over the course of my fieldwork, and he always insisted that the UCA's job was to educate the government about the relationship between protecting water resources and banning metal mining.

"It was obvious to us that in a country already experiencing a water crisis of quantity, quality, and access, we didn't have the capacity to support metal mining. The Sánchez Cerén government, they knew nothing about mining, so we had to educate them, the Ministers of the Environment, the Economy, the president," he told me one afternoon in his office in 2019.[48] Andrés also thought it was important to convince interests groups outside state institutions. "We follow the strategy of *incidencia política*," he said, which imperfectly translates to "political advocacy." According to Alpízar Rodríguez (2014), whose work focuses on the contentious legislative reforms for water governance in Costa Rica, *incidencia política* can be understood as a symbolic, discursive, and communicative strategy that deciphers prevailing power relations to lobby political actors on public policy. For Andrés, *incidencia política* was both "an exercise of

[48] UCA; July 10, 2019; author interview.

power and a game of interests." Like *los radicales*, the intellectuals understood the importance of fixing water at the center of their campaigns. From the perspective of academics like Andrés, conservative politicians and Salvadoran businesses could potentially be convinced to support policy that protected water resources if they saw how these decisions benefitted them.

"Salvadorans could sense that mining was bad for business," Andrés mused. "It's bad for our water and it's bad for sugarcane producers and right-wing politicians who don't want outside industry competing with them for that water." He insisted that the mining ban would not have been possible if not for the unlikely alliance between the FMLN, ARENA, and corporate agribusiness. One of the important bipartisan partnerships that UCA made was with ARENA politician Johnny Wright Sol, whose family has vast holdings in Salvadoran sugarcane production. Wright was the secretary of the Environmental and Climate Change Commission from 2015 to 2018 and understood the risks metal mining imposed on water resources necessary for sugarcane plantations. "We saw the shared interests there, and we started working with him, sharing proposals with him, and convinced him to persuade his party to support a mining ban," Andrés explained. Wright, who graduated from George Washington University, expressed wanting to learn more on these topics from "universities, civil society, and think tanks," and regularly attended forums sponsored by the UCA (Broad and Cavanagh, 2021: 164). *Los intelectuales* also count the Catholic Church as an important ally in the mining struggle. The involvement of Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas was a key turning point for the mining struggle, according to Andrés. "These are the powerful groups we identified; it was part of our strategy to empower ourselves."

It is certainly true that the support for anti-mining policy was unprecedented, but as Artiga-Purcell (2022) argues, rejecting extractive policies does not presuppose accepting water

regulation. As he puts it, a "water over gold" narrative that rejects metal mining extraction is easily adaptable to pro-agrarian extractivist politics. Members of *los intelectuales* matched environmentalists with their calls for publicly run water services, but they also sought to create a subsidiary advisory committee to the main regulatory board. "We raised the issue of creating a *Consejo Nacional de Aguas* for citizen participation, and this is where we imagined the private sector could participate, have their say, and influence decisions," Andrés explained. Yet, despite trying to replicate a bipartisan *incidencia política* strategy for the water struggle, universities, NGOs, and the Catholic Church couldn't convince policymakers from ARENA and current president Nayib Bukele's conservative *Nuevas Ideas* party (NI) into passing a water law. Furthermore, Wright never supported the General Water Law because he was also skeptical about the make-up of the regulatory commission. Wright voted for Bukele's Law of Water Resources in 2021, despite warnings from *los intelectuales* and *los radicales* that the bill risked water privatization. I interviewed Wright in 2023, after he left ARENA to launch his own political party called *Nuestro Tiempo*, or Our Time. A vocal critic of Bukele's security and economic policies, Wright nonetheless joined the NI bloc in the Assembly to approve the water law that social movements fervently opposed. I asked him why he chose to vote this way:

> "Yes, I voted in favor, which is something I was criticized for a lot, people saying to me, you are giving an authoritarian government who doesn't care about sustainability even more tools to do more environmental damage…. Yes, I got a lot of backlash from my own party, and outside voices… but I thought it would be better to at least have a

normative framework that we can continue improving, rather than nothing at all, which is what we had for 15 years."[49]

Wright's response reflects both impatience, and a sense that bipartisan discussion is still possible. Thus far, NI appear unwilling to debate, especially since they hold the majority in the Legislative Assembly and don't necessarily need to engage in cross-party agreements. Still, politicians and NGOs insisted on the importance of bridging ideological divides and finding common interests. I interviewed representatives from the Netherlands-based Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), a nonpartisan NGO whose goals are to "strengthen the democratic culture and support democratic reforms in El Salvador" (NIMD, 2023). Daniel, who works for NIMD in San Salvador, told me one of the ways the organization works to enhance democratic reforms for water governance is by facilitating meetings between businesses, civil society, right-wing politicians in the Legislative Assembly, and FMLN politicians on the Environmental Commission. "We are politically impartial, so we work with political actors from all parties, and civil society groups across the political spectrum to create a space for dialogue," he said.[50] "We always try and create a space for everyone, all political parties, and civil society movements." NIMD receives funding from international aid agencies, foundations who've historically been more likely to fund organizations that aim to democratize through conciliatory rather than combative methods that challenge governance structures. Certainly, the name of the organization indicates their preference to build democratic spaces that enhances neutrality.

My main takeaway from these conversations is that *los intelectuales* insisted on bipartisanship as an effective strategy for the water crisis. For UCA, this tactic proved successful

[49] *Nuestro Tiempo*; April 25, 2023; author interview.
[50] NIMD; July 2, 2019; author interview.

with the mining ban, and the FMLN sought to portray themselves as a party willing to work with their political adversaries. Having nonpartisan, sustainable development NGOs in advisory roles gave the party legitimacy that may have encouraged the road to 'good governance.' But not everyone was happy with this bipartisan approach to politics. In my conversations with labor unions, workers told me they were disappointed with the FMLN's resistance to changing government structures. They hoped that an FMLN in power would be different, and improve people's material (and environmental) circumstances, but were later disillusioned when things "just stayed the same."[51]

Metered justice?

Something I've heard too often is that Salvadorans have a "bad culture of water," and their lack of awareness on the value of water leads them to waste it, pollute it, or not understand how it's priced. The implication of this "bad culture" is that it aggravates the water crisis.[52] More sympathetic observations coupled invocations of a bad water culture with declarations that the lack of access for poor and working-class Salvadorans is unjust. "It's unfair that agribusiness pays the same for water as poor communities," Ernesto, a lawyer and academic at the University of El Salvador (UES) told me when I interviewed him in 2019. Before coming to the university, Ernesto worked for an international NGO that constructed water infrastructure projects in rural Salvadoran neighborhoods, with the objective of creating self-sufficient communities. One of the conditions of these projects, according to Ernesto, was installing water meters that could "account for the exact cost of water." He explained that the objective of the water meters was to

[51] SOICSCES; October 6, 2022; author interview.
[52] NIMD; July 2, 2019; Salvadoran Center of Appropriate Technology Friends of the Earth (CESTA); July 15, 2019; ANDA; July 15, 2019; author interviews.

"create an economic and environmental vision in people's minds that showed them they could manage, own, and protect water resources."[53]

In Ernesto's understanding, water meters were a way to make sure that everyone paid the correct amount based on how much water they used. "Some neighborhoods don't have water meters, so they pay a fixed fee every month. But nearby agribusiness also pays the same fee and use so much more water. This is injustice. But it would be different with water meters," he told me. In this way, Ernesto was suggesting that water meters could be used as a tool of water justice because they accurately charge water usage, essentially balancing all water users through fair pricing mechanisms. In other interviews with *los intelectuales*, they also agreed that water meters were a fair way to enforce payments from industrial water users and rich neighborhoods but thought poor households should be exempt from metering. "Water meters are a way to fairly distribute charges, but poor people shouldn't need meters. But rich people should pay the meter prices," Andrés concluded in 2021.[54] Even environmentalists didn't show a total aversion to water metering, though they agreed that industries like sugarcane and commercial real estate should be more forcefully metered. While this may be a more progressive view of metering, if used as a mechanism for water justice, it could mean that justice becomes subject to a series of complicated calculations that determine deservedness. These policy approaches risk falling into the trappings of means-testing, a method embraced by neoliberals to strip down a welfare-state through technically administered social programs (Ferge, 2002).

Furthermore, proxy means-testing is sometimes associated with rhetoric of self-control or personal responsibility for those who 'benefit' from these policies (Palacio Ludeña, 2021). *Los*

[53] UES; July 9, 2019; author interview.
[54] UCA; July 27, 2021; author interview.

intelectuales cited the injustice of businesses and rich neighborhoods enjoying low water prices, but they also (pejoratively) commented on how ordinary Salvadorans "are used to paying little for water." Others even referred to the Salvadoran "tradition" of paying very little for water, going so far as to say that because of a lack of awareness on the true value of water, people mistakenly confuse higher water bills one month to the next as privatization.[55] These tactics are often used to mischaracterize water protestors as free loading or who just simply don't want to pay for anything. However, during interviews, I never heard people say water should be free, but rather that prices should be fair and reflect actual water usage. Nor did people suggest water meters could be used to address water injustice. Proposing water metering as a strategy for water justice ignores the fact that many Salvadorans are already subject to pre-paid meters, and the common experience with these tools is negative.

The national water utility ANDA is responsible for installing water meters in homes and businesses in the greater San Salvador metro area. After ANDA appointed a new president in 2020, a former environmental specialist for USAID named Rubén Alemán, he conducted a public awareness campaign on water meters, explaining how his workforce would be installing new meters all over the city. Alemán has on numerous occasions acknowledged the severity of the Salvadoran water crisis, insisting that outdated infrastructure and government corruption were to blame, and that updated water metering would resolve these issues (Aguilar, 2022; ANDA, 2022). However, the roll-out of these new meters - notably without consultation from residents responsible for payment - caused serious issues amongst water users, especially with overpriced bills (Alas, 2022; Reyes, 2022). These complaints were so widespread that ANDA had to put out several public statements, asking people to be patient and to report any errors to

[55] UES; July 9, 2019; PRISMA; July 23, 2019; author interviews.

the ANDA offices (López Vides, 2022a). They even sent out an 'easy user's manual' on how to reinstall water meters if they were metering incorrectly (López Vides, 2022b). But a slew of news stories still showed people reporting *cobros excesivos* (excessive charges) on their water bills that didn't align with their water usage (Joma, 2022; Martínez, 2023a).

"A real coalition of experts"

As I've argued, *los intelectuales* don't ignore questions of justice with water access or distribution, but they insist that technical solutions led by experts are the key to securing progressive environmental policy. This was certainly the case for Andrés, who explicitly said that the reason UCA was so successful in convincing policymakers to pass a mining ban was because of its expert coalition. "We had the Department of Legal Sciences, Department of Human Rights, the research institute IUDOP, the Department of Environmental Engineering, a real coalition of experts," he told me in 2019. The FMLN administrations also closely collaborated with sustainable development NGOs like PRISMA, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, and universities like UCA and UES on environmental policies. Another NGO that has influenced Salvadoran water governance is the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (AECID). Together with ANDA and the Ministry of the Environment, they wrote two comprehensive policy documents that lay out analysis, costs, plans of action, and future projections of water availability. These documents were the *Plan nacional de gestión integral de recursos hídrico* (PNGIRH) and the *Plan nacional de agua potable y saneamiento* (PLANAPS).[56] Together, these plans were meant to establish a baseline for efficient and

[56] AECID; July 8, 2019; author interview. Translations: National Plan for Integrated Water Resource Management (PNGIRH) and National Plan for Potable Water and Sanitation (PLANAPS).

equitable water resource management. AECID continues working to this day with ANDA on rural water infrastructure projects (AECID, 2023).

During interviews with *los intelectuales*, we often discussed the Ministry of the Environment as the department best suited to delegate water governance. I interviewed two hydrologists in MARN, who told me their role was to generate information about El Salvador's water quality and hydrogeography. While our conversation largely focused on technical maps they created, they said they were supportive of water regulation that would "sort it all out." Surprisingly, at least to me, the hydrologists felt that the results from their rigorous investigations were not being properly utilized to inform water policy.[57] I detected this kind of frustration from other government workers. About a month into my preliminary fieldwork in 2019, I was talking with my Airbnb host (himself an architect) about my interests in water service interruptions and water infrastructure. Coincidently, he told me his good friend Duarte was an engineer for ANDA and helped set up an interview. We met in Duarte's office in Santa Tecla, a city just outside of San Salvador, in the neighboring province of La Libertad. We mainly discussed the kind of projects he and his field team engaged in for ANDA, but when I broached the topic of water policy, and the different social groups involved in the struggle, he had a lot to say:

> "What is needed in this country is the will and understanding on how to administer water resources. We have solutions. But all they [politicians] do here is drag their feet, go back and forth, like they want us to be in crisis. Everything is crisis, crisis. Yes, a law would help because we have a lot of gaps to fill. But I think that they like being in permanent crisis because if a law were approved, then that political leverage is gone, it wouldn't be a

[57] MARN; July 18, 2019; author interview.

> political topic anymore. Every year those opposed to the law changes…. Last year [2018] MARN accepted the proposal, businesses too, it was basically identical to the other [General Water Law]. This was going to be a big advance. But it was an election year, so they didn't pass it. And it disappeared off the table for discussion. You'll see, this issue is going to come up again in the 2021 election. It's convenient for them."[58]

And indeed, water legislation was a prominent topic in the 2021 elections. NI swept the elections, gaining a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly, and promising to "finally guarantee the human right to water for Salvadoran citizens" (Legislative Assembly Press, 2021b). Of course, the reality on the ground proves otherwise, and Salvadorans continue to experience precarious access to water.

The Salvadoran business community (Chapter 6) also often touts the importance of expertise, with many business leaders themselves engineers by trade. During an interview with the agribusiness lobby CAMAGRO, I was reassured that private businesses are the best in "managing and maintaining water resources efficiently" because the private sector "attracts *los mejores técnicos* (the best technical people)."[59] While *técnicos* literally translates to "technicians," the term can be expanded in the Latin American context to describe a person with specialized, technical, often quantitative, skills acquired in higher education institutions (O'Hare, 2018). Representatives from ANEP, also told me about their impressively credentialed team of chemists, lawyers, biologists, engineers, and economists who drafted their water bill.[60]

---

[58] ANDA; July 15, 2019; author interview.
[59] CAMAGRO; May 2, 2023; author interview.
[60] ANEP; April 18, 2023; author interview.

Expertise is lauded by *los intelectuales*, but the highly technical policy language they used was not always appealing to those outside this social group. On more than one occasion, I heard people refer disparagingly to this social group as *bien técnico*, or really technical.[61] In many ways, mass participation in the water justice struggle was tempered, and it became a fight amongst experts in academia, NGOs, think tanks, and government ministries. It is not surprising then that, according to public opinion polls, many Salvadorans were unaware of the details of the water struggle, nor the status of any water policy. *El Diario de Hoy's* Abigail Parada (2023b) reported on the results from a poll conducted by UCA in March 2023, concluding that "around 62% of the population has no idea there is an established water law, and even worse, people think that even if there is a law, access to water has worsened." Technocrats are also not averse to private companies providing water for municipalities, a surprising fact considering privatization is so roundly unpopular. But according to my interlocutors, so long as there are 'experts' in charge of water distribution, municipalities can trust that these are the correct approaches to water management.[62] Moreover, *los intelectuales* sometimes suggested that the particular ideological leanings of the government were less important than the level of expertise for technical water managers. This means that their strategies for water justice could potentially be compatible with industries who've exacerbated the water crisis – so long as there was technical, and preferably, bipartisan expertise at the forefront.

[61] CATS; September 28, 2022; SIES; October 5, 2022; author interviews.
[62] UCA; July 10, 2019; author interview.

Discussion

Technocracy, or technical, expert skills, and tools for measurement like water meters are not in and of themselves negative. The critique I advance is that *los intelectuales* don't pair these strategies with an analysis of how they are deployed under capitalism, where certain groups in El Salvador - like homegrown elites with immense political and economic influence - can dictate how these tactics or policies are implemented. The root causes of uneven access and distribution of natural resources, problems that have plagued El Salvador for over a century, are fundamentally political problems that are still present. Yet the FMLN and *los intelectuales* seemed unwilling to be antagonistic and sought to find solutions that appeased everyone. In part, this had to do with exogenous economic factors that impacted the Salvadoran economy, which made the government dependent upon elites for investment. But this dependency meant that development plans, and especially those centered on environmental permits, policy, planning, and regulation, were severely limited, and increasingly became more aligned with business and less accountable to groups proposing alternative governance strategies (Bull et al., 2014; Bull and Aguilar-Støen, 2016).

Insisting on bipartisanship and expertise has meant that *los intelectuales* interpret water meters as apolitical tools that will simply rectify unjust water pricing. Of course, the meters themselves as tools are not the issue alone. Water meters are complex apparatuses that measure a whole host of charges beyond volumetric water usage, including the building and maintenance of a shared water infrastructure network. As I've mentioned, El Salvador's water infrastructure is in desperate need of replacement, or at the very least, repair. One shocking statistic that I heard repeated again and again was that over half of the water sent from ANDA to households is lost along the way because of leaky pipes (Martínez et al., 2022). Yet discussions over water

metering hardly mentioned replacing these old, leaky pipes, and failing to address water infrastructural repairs elides the fact that not everyone experiences the water network in the same way. Poor, peri-urban San Salvador areas like Soyapango and San Marcos are prone to water leakages and shortages. They are also the neighborhoods that receive higher than normal water bills. These are typically older neighborhoods in El Salvador, where housing and surrounding infrastructure have not been updated for decades.

The same can't always be said for richer neighborhoods in San Salvador like San Benito or Colonia Escalón, where real estate development is booming, and newer condos, townhouses, and stand-alone homes crop up every year. This development includes the installation of new water pipes that don't constantly leak. Therefore, it makes sense that these affluent areas receive lower water bills, and experience fewer shortages. But when *los intelectuales* – and government officials for that matter - discuss the need for better water meters, they don't couple this suggestion with an improvement to the water grid overall. In this way, *los intelectuales* defer to water meters as a means of deciding who does and doesn't bear the cost of the shared water network. This social group depended on meters to determine *individual* rather than *shared* water use, but water meters count water leakage from older housing stock that reflects decrepit infrastructure, and as a result, poor and working-class Salvadorans bear the cost of social infrastructure improvement individually.

Salvadorans also wanted more structural, even radical changes to occur under the FMLN administration, and believed that the former insurgents who brought the country from conflict into peace would do more to address socio-economic, political, and environmental issues. People critiqued the fact that the FMLN "didn't try to change the political and economic structures of

the country,"[63] and they were disappointed with the fact that this "*gobierno revolucionario* (revolutionary government) didn't do more in their 10 years."[64] One of my most memorable interviews was with the electric utility workers union (SIES), an almost 70-year-old institution. They were also one of the most militant groups during the Civil War, imposing power outages in San Salvador to pressure the state to come to the negotiating table during collective bargaining. Carlos, the general secretary, told me he'd been involved with the union since the late 1980s. He was generally favorable towards the FMLN, but shared his own thoughts on them both as a guerrilla movement and as a political party:

> "For me, the FMLN, their structure was creative, and in some ways successful. But they had big limitations. When you get to power, you have to change, you can't keep going the same way, can't have the same mentality you did in the mountains (*tener el mismo pensamiento que tenía en la montaña*). It's different to have a guerrilla structure and a government structure. And to be a bureaucrat. They had to negotiate with the right to enforce certain policies… definitely not socialist. They had some interesting changes, but nothing structural."[65]

Like the environmentalists, members of the labor movement also had high expectations for the leftist party when they took power. Rather than advance a radical, reconstructive program that would help alleviate acute poverty and inequality that the neoliberal period left in its wake, the FMLN pursued was a vision of progressive technocracy: one where they sought technical, practical policy solutions to address water injustice. But what was equally important for the

[63] SOICSCES; October 6, 2022; author interview.
[64] SITRAMHA; January 27, 2023; author interview.
[65] SIES; October 5, 2022; author interview.

FMLN, and for the *intelectuales* that served in advisory positions, was building coalitions to avoid the need for political struggle and confrontation.

These coalitions unfortunately didn't include mass-based social organizations like unions. Throughout my interviews with workers, it was evident that the FMLN kept some distance from the labor movement, despite its historic ties to labor. I spoke with Iván, who is a unionized public-school teacher, and he commented on the fact that the FMLN implemented policies with little to no input from unions. We spoke about issues tied to curriculum, but also on the maintenance of water infrastructure in schools, which Iván said were largely neglected:

> "Their leadership, they weren't humble people, not poor people. They distanced themselves from us. We had to go out onto the street anytime we wanted wage increases. Public schools were totally abandoned. We often have *no* water services because our infrastructure has totally collapsed. But they didn't want to work with us, they made us seem like we were the enemies."[66]

Conclusion

My understanding of the water crisis is a political one, that translates to a struggle for power, and subsequently, a question of justice. Because *los intelectuales* sought to avoid confrontation, and preferred to pursue compromise, they resorted to holding all stakeholders (i.e., water users) on a level playing field. But doing this meant that they couldn't address the root causes of the imbalance between certain neighborhoods and groups of people receiving abundant water resources, while others live with chronic water insecurity. *Los intelectuales* constantly touted the importance of 'good water governance' as the only way to address the water crisis, but

[66] SIMEDUCO; February 22, 2023; author interview.

their conception of what this process looked like included a narrow slice of society that would be able to influence water policy. While they discursively addressed water injustice, and never denied that the most marginalized in Salvadoran society were those who experienced water issues most acutely, their approach for redress was not the most beneficial for marginalized Salvadorans.

Those who make up the group I call *los intelectuales* come from universities, sustainable development and advocacy NGOs, and think tanks who've insisted on pragmatic policy fixes with incentives for powerful actors who've worsened the water crisis in the first place. Refusing to address broader systems that produce environmental degradation, and instead settling for rational correctives contributes to the making of apolitical environments (Robbins, 2012). But these technocratic, bipartisan, and nonconfrontational approaches to water justice have failed to gain any mass appeal because they don't have clear material benefits for poor and working-class people who've continue to articulate how their socio-economic anxieties are exacerbated by the water crisis.

Solutions to water supply, regulation, and management challenges must be grounded by input from those who experience injustices most frequently, and importantly, those who have the ability to enable conditions for socio-environmental change. Thus far, I have discussed two social groups who have been actively involved in the water struggle, but whose own strategic leverage towards the state is limited in different ways. In my fieldwork, I wanted to get a sense of how poor and working-class people understood this water battle, from a state-legislative perspective, but also from their own approaches on how the water crisis impacts their everyday lives. Because I am interested in the dynamics of social movements, I wanted to focus on how the labor movement could potentially be a fulcrum of water justice. What I've learned is that

water is enrolled in a myriad of ways that can be understood as ‘good water governance,’ even if those interpretations may not be immediately recognizable to *los intelectuales* as such. Labor unions have their own approaches to water legislation that could benefit workers, and what a working-class water justice can look like. Their articulation is unquestionably political and requires confrontation with powerful economic classes in the country. This analysis will be the focus of my next chapter.

Chapter 4 – Working-class water justice: *Los Sindicalistas* and the fight for a 'just and dignified life'

The energy at the march was infectious. I walked through the streets with a crowd of several hundred people wearing their union letters. It's May 1, 2023, and an unusually cloudy day in El Salvador. Nonetheless, people are animated, laughing, cheering, and chanting together as we slowly make our way through the streets of San Salvador. We reached a major road and were joined by other streams of labor and non-labor movements, including veterans, student movements, environmentalists, and supporters of the FMLN party. As we formed one mass, unified group, I heard drums, trumpets, and fireworks, which made the march noisy and fun, even bordering on a little nerve-wrecking. Cars driving by honked in support of the marchers, who were commemorating International Workers Day, or May Day, an annual event that brings tens of thousands of Salvadorans to the streets.

"We are here today celebrating as the working-class, defending our labor rights, and demanding respect for *sindicalistas* (trade unionists)!" a labor leader chanted as we made our way to the *centro histórico.* "Our most basic goods are being privatized, and nobody asked us about privatizing our water, our services. But us, the working class, we are the ones that produce wealth. And labor organizations, unions, we are the *instrumento de lucha* (instrument for struggle) for the dignity of the working-class. We demand a just and dignified life!"

I heard many more chants like this during the march, and at the rallies that congregated in the historic center of the city. In the words and imagery of the marchers, it was clear that people were discontented with the current Nayib Bukele administration for many reasons, including the

cost-of-living crisis, the ongoing repression of oppositional voices, and his unconstitutional bid for the presidency in 2024. But the May Day marches are also symbolic because they speak to issues of dignity and justice that are not isolated to the current moment but are at the heart of working-class struggles. I didn't expect to hear much about the water crisis today, but as it turns out, water issues in El Salvador are as important to labor unions as workplace and economic concerns.

This chapter explores the role of the labor movement in the ongoing water struggle. Unlike the previous two social groups, *los radicales* and *los intelectules*, labor was not directly involved in the battle over a water law. However, the labor movement cares deeply about water justice because they see it as fundamental to social and economic justice. Salvadoran labor unions have also historically played a major role in campaigns against austerity and privatization, and, as I learned through interviews and participant observation, unions have folded water-related concerns into broader workplace demands. The strategies that *los sindicalistas* use to secure water demands – tactics like work stoppages, threats of strikes, marches, and collective bargaining – are about reclaiming control over how their life is spent. Therefore, I argue that *los sindicalistas* engage a working-class water justice that demands investment in public infrastructure, and seeks power over their working conditions, social reproduction, and free time. These strategies all serve to ensure what they call a 'just and dignified life.'

A working-class water justice is one led by labor unions and other formal and informal labor organizations that identify as working-class. I rely on Raju Das (2022: 1080) for a definition of "working-class":

> "a group consisting of people who lack control of production, depend on the sale of their labor power to obtain access to their means of subsistence to survive, have to surrender a

> large part of what they produce to those who control the means of production in the workplace (i.e., capitalists), and have little control over production, exchange, and state power."

Based on my own fieldwork, especially in the Latin American context (although not exclusive to it), I would add that the working-class is often paid low wages and subject to precarious and dangerous working conditions. This is especially the case for informal workers, who make up half of the global workforce (Davis, 2006; Hummel, 2021). In El Salvador, these circumstances figure into what a working-class water justice would look like, because it would address rising costs of water services and dilapidated water infrastructure that impacts workers both at home and at work.

In what follows, I will situate my study within literature on social movements and water justice that address infrastructure, privatization, and temporal justice. I'll briefly describe the role of labor unions in Salvadoran historiography, to explain their struggles for justice during the Civil War and in the postwar period. I will then turn to my case study, describing the concerns workers have with the water crisis, which were largely focused on infrastructure, cost, and health. I'll then explain the various strategies unions have used to secure water-related demands. Finally, I'll discuss the ways in which water weaves through the geographies of working-class life and the implications of a working-class water justice.

Workers and water

Environmentalism is often misconstrued narrowly as a middle-class issue, but working-class labor movements have long recognized the inseparable nature-labor relation (Räthzel et al., 2021). Union struggles for justice have a long history of campaigns concerned with health and

safety for workers, and with environmental determinants of health (Bell, 2020). An early progenitor of worker justice was the former vice president of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers union Tony Mazzochi, who argued for worker employment, social and safety protections, and an expansion of the welfare state (Leopold, 2007; Huber, 2022). This labor-led form of working-class environmentalism differs slightly from Martinez-Alier's (2003) 'environmentalism of the poor,' where marginalized rural communities in the Global South mobilized to protect against environmental degradation that disrupted social and material lives. Environmentalism of the poor has since been revisited to apply to urban justice movements that include unions, who've actively defended against issues ranging from dumping and contamination, to privatization, to real estate speculation and gentrification (Romano, 2012; Anguelovski and Martinez-Alier, 2014; Martinez-Alier et al., 2016).

Water justice bridges concerns of socio-economic inequity with questions of access, distribution, and quality of water resources to understand the specific ways water *in*justice is embedded and situated (Boelens et al., 2018). Subpar water infrastructure conditions are illustrative examples of the uneven geographies of water access (Wilson et al., 2019), and where water does and doesn't flow, mediated by infrastructure, reveals the relational political dynamics in decision making and management (Gandy, 2014; Jepson et al., 2017). For poor people, decrepit and dangerous infrastructure is often the only option, and when alternatives are available, they are an expensive, complex network of pipes, pumps, tankers, or bottled water (Truelove and O'Reilly, 2021; MacFarlane, 2023). In the Global South, women and girls are commonly made responsible for collecting household water, and these risks become daily material and emotional challenges (Sultana, 2011). In El Salvador, water injustice is acutely expressed through infrastructure, and workers not only have to make do with inadequate and

unsafe infrastructure, but they expend significant amounts of their own time and money for upkeep, repairs they argue are the responsibility of the state.

Water justice movements mobilize to fight for more control over access to water, and recent work draws attention to global struggles against neoliberal austerity and privatization (van den Berge et al., 2018; Magdahl and Jordhus-Lier, 2020; Muehlebach, 2023). Much of this research focuses on Europe and the 'Right2Water' movement, which garnered nearly 2 million signatures across the region to develop legislation ensuring the human right to water and sanitation across member states. These examples are admirable, and the authors demonstrate the advantages of environmentalist-labor alliances, particularly in fights to re-municipalize water services (McDonald and Swyngedouw, 2019). My own critique is less about the utility of these partnerships - which I support and would like to see strengthened – and more on what pressure points these social actors can press in the struggle for water justice. Overwhelmingly, labor unions are considered as one part of a multifaceted coalition, where workers hold equal weight as other civil society groups. When considering what McAlevey (2016: 56) calls a "power structure analysis," a mechanism through which to understand one's own power and that of their opponent, she argues that worker power is in fact not equal to that of other stakeholders. Because workers can withhold their labor, this social group can impose serious economic pressure on the employer class and should be strategically leveraged to secure social demands. I agree with water justice scholars that broad-based coalitions are fundamental in fighting inequality, and I use McAlevey's framework to argue for union strategies as primary tactics for water justice, rather than considering labor as one node within the coalition.

Unions, especially those in the public sector, have a long history in fights against privatization of public services, across the US (Lopez, 2001), Latin America (Perreault, 2006;

Etchemendy, 2020), and in Europe (Bakker, 2007; Barca and Leonardi, 2018). Social movement unionism is one useful framework that captures the convergence of labor and community mobilization, combining workplace struggles with demands for policy change and democratization (Barchies, 2007). Geographers have furthered this analysis by emphasizing the need to consider how space and scale complement and complicate social movement unionism, particularly when local environmental movements, and global labor federations come together against neoliberalized urban water services (Magdahl, 2022). Nonetheless, public sector unions are decisive in urban water policy debates because they link workplace issues with broader social demands on water quality, access, and control (Nelson, 2017). Furthermore, unions are a driving force in defining what "public water" means. As Gonzáles Rivas and Schroering (2021) argued, unions conceptualized a public water framework in Pittsburgh that demanded government accountability and transparency, green infrastructure improvements, and ensured good union jobs in the water utility.

A public water framework must also address social reproduction, where access to safe, reliable water is essential. The considerable work on water justice, gender, and social reproduction reveals how questions of inequality are wrapped up with notions of belonging, exclusion, poor health, and constriction of social mobility because of inadequate water governance (Ahlers and Zwarteveen, 2009; Truelove, 2011; Sultana, 2011, 2020). Protecting the ability to socially reproduce oneself has been a central tenet of environmental justice, and scholars have demonstrated how water's commodification and dispossession shape and constrain opportunities for social reproduction (Di Chiro, 2008; Roberts, 2008). According to Fernandez (2018: 145), social reproduction is broadly defined as "the labor and set of social processes and relationships that support production, exchange, and the maintenance of individuals, households,

and communities." Too often, the production/social reproduction dichotomy manifests as a (false) distinction between work and home where households are considered areas of leisure void of work, thereby undervaluing how production and reproduction overlap and merge in the home (Winders and Smith, 2019). Lack of access to water occurs at home and work, and Salvadorans hardly separate how it impacts them, simply stating that "one can't do anything without water."[67]

Water justice as temporal justice

Time is inextricably linked with justice, and working-class politics are a constant struggle to reclaim time away from the capitalist project of extending the working day (Huber, 2022: 60). The impulse to extend the working day is driven by capital's need for surplus value, which, according to Marx (1990: 340), is determined by the labor-time necessary to produce commodities (i.e., value). Workers are made to expend more of their time and energy in the workplace, with little ability for recourse because they don't own or control their own means of production. That time and energy are further squeezed with the added challenge of water issues complicating production and social reproduction, where the space-time of work is "consistently and productively blurred" (Mitchell et al., 2003: 416).

With these social relations in mind, how exactly is time experienced by working-class people? Because of the power imbalances between workers and owners, time for working-class people is very often lived as precarity (Auyero, 2012; Bear, 2016). The water crisis in El Salvador is so severe that it is likely that owners of capital goods also confront water shortages that disrupt their own lives, meaning they also take time and energy out of their days to deal with these issues. Yet the difference for working-class people is that when they must leave work to

[67] SIMUTHRES, September 6, 2022; author interview.

attend to water related issues, like service interruptions at their children's schools, or going to health clinics for gastrointestinal illnesses, this time is uncompensated, and they risk losing wages, and even employment, with nothing to fall back on, unlike the capitalist class.

Similarly, when workers decided to wrest back some control from employers and stop laboring in order to pressure capitalists into conceding greater wages and provisions for social reproduction, they take serious risks in using their time to withhold labor, risks that are always greater for workers than capitalists. Given these constraints, Chibber (2022b: 20) argues that workers will "either resort to individual modes of resistance or submit to the authority of the employer – not because they are duped by ideology but because it is rational to do so." Of course, when workers *do* impose strikes as a group rather than individually, they can inflict substantial economic pressure on the capitalist class in ways other social groups cannot. Undeniably, time is intertwined with power relations. Cohen (2018) links the inequalities of time with power and citizenship by examining how "deadlines" set by nation-states act as barriers towards certain rights for non-citizens, such as temporary visas or work permits that are set to expire at some arbitrary date. As she argues, states exercise their power through these deadlines by "dictating which non-citizens can stay in a country," thereby limiting mobility or imposing hard boundaries on certain opportunities (Cohen, 2018: 6). While deadlines act as disciplinary machinery for non-citizens, sociologist Javier Auyero (2012) suggests ways in which the experience of waiting is a daily exercise in denial of rights for poor and working-class people who are citizens. In his ethnographic work on welfare in Buenos Aires, Auyero reveals how wait time is power-laden, demonstrating the ways the Argentinian state produces a subjugated urban poor through time, particularly when they await government assistance or services. Salvadoran workers are constantly made to wait when they demand the state or employers (sometimes the

same) improve the water network, address exorbitant water charges, or remedy poor water quality.

Social time is also mediated by water infrastructure, and infrastructure in disrepair can generate emotions of frustration, despair, or anger, particularly when workers are made responsible for fixing the infrastructures they or their families depend upon (Ramakrishnan et al., 2021). When water networks are properly functioning, people generally find that "significant opportunities arise when households can get more water and devote less time to collecting water" (Crow, 2018: 96). To reiterate, the ability to manage or decide how to use one's own time is embedded with power relations. Water and social power are co-constitutive, particularly in relation to capital accumulation and control of the resource (Swyngedouw, 2004; Linton and Budds, 2014), and time is used as a tool to increase capital and exacerbate inequality and injustice (Auyero, 2012).

Workers' experience with the water crisis is one that is fundamentally about time – time spent repairing infrastructure, time spent collecting water, time spent contesting expensive bills, time spent at health clinics dealing with gastrointestinal issues. These unexpected and unjust responsibilities pose a series of challenges, including lost wages, using work and leisure time to address water issues, or making it difficult and even impossible to plan for childcare, family, or social commitments. I find it useful to understand water injustice for working people through the prism of time because so much of it is used in both productive labor and in unpaid labor necessary to reproduce oneself and their family. Under capitalism, concrete labor is represented in time and wages, translating into measures of value or in the form of commodities (Elson, 1979). But I also observe time as what Gilmore (2024) calls a non-renewable resource that still creates value. Indeed, for working-class people, if time is value converted into commodities

through labor, and labor is a defining feature of working-class life (both in production and social reproduction), time should be considered *as* life.

Furthermore, while most of what I've described above are ways to account for the monetary value of time for working-class people (i.e., commodification of time), time is also a subjective experience. Considering the stress from confronting the water crisis, be it with fixing infrastructure or worrying about family health, that time is not spent in enjoyment, and enjoyment of time feeds into happiness, health, and wellbeing (Gershuny and Sullivan, 2019). Working-class people are constantly reorganizing and finding time to do more uncompensated labor, and in El Salvador, this uncompensated labor regularly includes dealing with the water crisis. Therefore, because of the severity of the water crisis and its effects on working peoples' lives, time for social reproduction is infringed upon. Water justice and temporal justice go hand in hand, and a working-class water justice framework would include strategies that allow workers to have more free time to, as Marx (1990: 341) says, "satisfy his intellectual and social requirements."

A brief history of militant labor

The labor movement in El Salvador developed over two decades in the 1960s and 1970s and was instrumental in the formation of the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front guerrilla insurgency (Álvarez, 2019). Unions, peasant movements, student activists, and agrarian organizations deployed a range of mobilization tactics, from strikes, to marches, to *tomas*, or plant occupations (Chávez, 2017). People I interviewed told me that unions used to "come to collectively bargain *con fusiles* (with rifles)."[68] During the Civil War, some of the most militant

[68] SOICSCES, October 5, 2022; author interview.

unions were also those who operated key sectors in El Salvador, and workers in the national electrical utility and telecommunications unions would sabotage power substations, shuttering these services temporarily and forcing employers to bargain (Almeida, 2008).[69] These labor actions continued throughout the war, despite intense military repression. One of the most egregious acts was the bombing of the FENASTRAS offices on October 31, 1989, the leftist labor federation that helped coordinate public sector general strikes across the country. The bomb killed ten influential labor leaders, including the radical general secretary Febe Elizabeth Velásquez (Gould, 2019). To this day, Salvadoran labor unions commemorate the date as Salvadoran Unionist Day.

The trend of public sector led labor actions continued briefly in the early post-war period, though intensifying neoliberal reforms by right-wing ARENA administrations weakened the political muscle of unions, and membership declined throughout the 1990s (Fitzsimmons and Anner, 1999). Popular mobilization during this time was against austerity measures and ongoing threats of privatization, particularly in the public health care system. Three consecutive ARENA presidents attempted to privatize health care and were always met with massive public resistance led by two prominent health workers unions, STISSS and SIMETRISSS. Despite the states' proclamations about efficiency and modernization, by the late 1990s, the Salvadoran population had grown skeptical about the upsides of privatization. Electricity and telecommunications had already been privatized, resulting in a dramatic increase of energy and phone prices (Almeida, 2008).

[69] SOICSCES, October 5, 2022; SIES, October 6, 2022; ANDES 21 de junio, October 23, 2022; author interviews.

Even in a relatively muted time for collective action, Wade (2016: 95) explains that "El Salvador's most significant popular protests in the post accord era were in response to the proposed privatization of health care services." Health care unions mobilized to improve wages and working conditions, and to keep the health system public, using marches, protests, and months-long strikes as their chosen strategies.[70] The battle against health care privatization lasted roughly six years (1998-2003), during which the health workers unions received widespread support from the Salvadoran public. Other unions, both in the public and private sector launched solidarity strikes, protests, and road blockades across the country and joined the health workers unions in marches through San Salvador (Almeida, 2008). The largest anti-health care privatization march took place in 2002, with around 200,000 participants joining the massive *marchas blancas* (white coat marches), with signs that read *o paga, o se muere* meaning, "either pay or die" (Amaya Umaña et al., 2006). The slogan captured a reality that Salvadorans understood – privatizing health care would exclude most people from service.

After years of struggle, the labor movement, in conjunction with the newly created FMLN political party, pressured outgoing ARENA President Francisco "Paco" Flores into signing an anti-privatization bill into law (Decreto No. 1024, 2002). While these anti-health care privatization protests and strikes were arguably the largest collective action events in the postwar period, Salvadoran labor unions also mobilized against the ramifications of globalization, trade, and investment policies that continued to weaken worker power (Human Rights Watch, 2003). In her study on how market liberalization reshaped Central America, Spalding (2014: 106) writes that some of the earliest critiques of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) came

[70] The public health care system covers about 20 percent of the economically active population, their families, and retirees (around 2 million people).

from the labor movement, who called it a “job destroyer.” Salvadoran labor leaders fostered alliances with labor networks in the US and Mexico who’d faced similar struggles against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) a decade prior (Almeida, 2008; Anner, 2011). The multi-scalar anti-CAFTA coalition used its momentum to bolster energy around elections for the FMLN, culminating in successive presidential victories in 2009 and 2014 (Almeida and Gonzalez Marquez, 2023).

The election of FMLN president Mauricio Funes in 2009 came at the height of the Pink Tide in Latin America and called into question decades of neoliberal policies. During my interviews, many workers marked these elections as a moment of revitalization for labor unions and newly formed workers’ movements. Under Funes, labor laws were strengthened, public unions were given more protection for organizing, and new unions were formed (Quintanilla Gómez, 2022). Demands for environmental regulation also became more prominent during the FMLN administrations. CAFTA was ratified in 2004 despite social movement resistance, and market reforms facilitated new interest in controversial areas of foreign investment like gold mining (Spalding, 2014). These policies gave way to a national anti-mining network concerned with how gold mining would affect water supply (Broad and Cavanagh, 2021; Artiga-Purcell, 2022). The labor movement did not lead these environmental struggles but did support a metal mining ban. Unions were not convinced by narratives claiming that gold mining would generate job growth, having learned from their neighbors Honduras, which had suspended new mining permits in 2004 (Edenhofer, 2022). Honduran activists told the Salvadoran anti-mining coalition that:

> "Mining brings maybe 100 jobs, but 50 will be only during measurement and construction. In one year, those people will be out of work. Experts from outside will be brought in to fill jobs after the building is done" (Spalding, 2014: 165).

The anti-mining coalition successfully pressured the Salvadoran administration to ban metal mining in 2017, legislation that was the first of its kind in the world (Bebbington et al., 2019).

Threats of water privatization emerged in the twenty-first century and given the impacts of privatization on other public services, labor unions agreed that water must stay in public hands. Like with mining, labor was not prominently featured in the water struggle, but nonetheless supported the General Water Law presented by environmentalists (Calderón, 2018b). Following the announcement that the Legislative Assembly was poised to ratify a water bill that included mechanisms for privatization, the environmental movement launched the largest mass marches for water justice in El Salvador (Brigida, 2018). Key to these protests was the participation of the labor movement, who rallied rank-and-file members to march to the Assembly, demanding the national water system remain in public hands (Laguan, 2018; Figure 8). These mobilizations helped prevent the privatization bill from passing, though no other water legislation was considered until three years later, after the FMLN was out of power and Bukele's *Nuevas Ideas* party dominated the legislature.

Figure 8 ANDA union at the anti-water privatization protests (Source: La Prensa Gráfica 2018)

Today, being a *sindicalista* under the Nayib Bukele administration is largely an experience of repression. Bukele's state of exception – a policy he implemented in 2022 in response to a spike in homicides after secret gang negotiations with the government collapsed – is being used to suspend basic rights. Labor leaders and rank-and-file members have been jailed for supposed gang affiliation when they contested months of back pay or unsafe working conditions (Cuéllar, 2022; Villarroel, 2023). Despite these serious threats, labor unions continue to make incremental gains, securing back pay, bonuses, and improved working conditions. These demands all have direct and indirect links to water justice, and in the following section, I will outline the specific water concerns and strategies that the labor movement uses to secure water justice for the working-class.

"The best way to protect water is to improve public services"

In this next section, I will discuss the ways in which the water crisis affects workers, and the different strategies they've adopted that incorporate water-related concerns into broader economic and workplace demands. I've separated my empirical case study into two sections. The first is titled "Concerns," where workers discussed how the water crisis most impacted them,

primarily through anxieties related to infrastructure, cost, and health. The second section is titled "Strategies," and here, I outline the different tactics workers used to secure water demands, including temporary work stoppages and threats of strikes, mass marches, and collective bargaining.

I will briefly reflect on my preparation for interviews before delving into the case study. It was in research and preparation with this social group where my methods were most sharpened. Previously, my interview questions focused on the legal water struggle, but I learned that I needed to broaden my approach to understand the water crisis. My first attempt at an interview with labor was with SIMETRISSS, the powerful public health workers union that unleashed a series of strikes against proposals to privatize the health care system. When I reached out to the union, I explained that I was interested in environmental issues and anti-water privatization. They replied by saying they weren't an environmental organization, but a union that organized on behalf of workers' rights.[71] In the end, I failed to set up an interview with them, but this interaction forced me to confront my methods and reconceptualize the water crisis at the environmental-economic-workplace nexus.

After this, I began creating profiles for each union I wanted to interview, using Salvadoran newspapers, union social media pages, and YouTube. Occasionally there was academic literature about these unions, but this was rare. I deepened my understanding of what worker struggles are, and by learning about important labor issues, for example, ongoing pension fights, I made the connections to water. Cost is a key issue because water bills continue to

[71] *En nuestro caso no tenemos una lucha ambiental o con problema del agua, somos un sindicato enfocado a derechos laborales de los médicos en el salvador* – "In our case, we don't have an environmental struggle or problems with water, we are a union focused on labor rights for health workers in El Salvador." (email exchange with SIMETRISSS, August 30, 2022).

skyrocket as wages and pensions stagnate or decline. Justice and dignity was also frequently mentioned, often because workers are so familiar with what *injustice* feels like.

Finally, my rigorous preparation meant that during interviews, I felt confident enough to accept free-flowing conversations, without feeling the need to awkwardly wrangle back my interlocutors to topics of water policy, political parties, or privatization. That's not to say these topics never emerged. Like *los radicales*, workers blame powerful, lucrative industries for exacerbating the water crisis in El Salvador. But by allowing workers to talk about how water affects them at work and at home, rather than asking them to talk about the water law, I was able to get a more granular understanding of how water flows through working-class life. Often, this meant *not* starting interviews with questions about water, but rather about the union itself, and what kinds of issues they saw as most important to fight for.

Concerns

Infrastructure

I spoke to unions across economic sectors, and decrepit water infrastructure inevitably emerged as a serious issue, no matter if I was speaking with construction workers, teachers, health care workers, police, or domestic workers. The impact of the water crisis on infrastructure reveals a host of inequalities across the Salvadoran waterscape. One of the most staggering examples is how old water infrastructure impacts schools. I spoke with two public sector teachers' unions, and one union of workers employed at the University of El Salvador, who all recalled how decaying water infrastructure resulted in burst pipes, chronic leaks, or unexplained water service interruptions.

I spoke with Iván, a public school teacher in the union SIMEDUCO, who said that around 60 percent of schools suffered repeated water shortages since most pipes have passed their *vidas útiles* (useful lives). "Our water infrastructure is totally collapsed and in desperate need of repair or replacement," Iván told me.[72] El Salvador's aging water infrastructure is no secret, and unions constantly demand more aggressive state investment (Martínez, 2022b). What is much less reported is the shocking revelation that teachers and parents are spending their own money and time to repair water infrastructure. "Our budget is so meager that when we have a water leak or a pipe break, we have to ask parents and teachers to use their own money to buy new pipes and repair this kind of thing," Iván explained. "It's come to the point where, even though the Constitution establishes a right to free education, we can't call it public school anymore because of the cost this [infrastructure] is incurring on parents."

The relationship between public school teachers' unions and the Ministry of Education is a fraught one, and the water crisis has exacerbated this tension. Under the Bukele administration, the Ministry of Education has both refused to increase the education budget and is punishing schools that suspend classes due to burst water pipes. Iván elaborated on this complicated relationship, explaining that teachers and principals sometimes must make the difficult decision to close schools for one or multiple days, because of a burst pipe that shutters water and sanitation services. When this happens, the Ministry of Education condemns and even fines teachers who do this, stating that educators are obligated to keep schools open for a certain number of days a year. "But they won't do anything about the infrastructure, even when we have *no* water service," Iván said, shaking his head.

[72] SIMEDUCO, February 22, 2023; author interview.

Burst pipes that lead to the suspension of classes are undoubtedly disruptive to students and teachers, but also impact workers outside of the education sector. I interviewed Joél, whose union, SEJES 30 de junio, represents workers who provide legal humanitarian aid in the judiciary. He explained that frequent water service interruptions are "hard for workers who have to send their kids to schools with no water." In his case, he explained that at the judiciary, "they've dismissed us several times because there was no running water. Other times, we have to leave work to pick up our kids from school because there is no running water. Both times, we lose pay."[73] He went on to say that even places as crucial as hospitals suffer from chronic water service interruptions because of aging infrastructure.

Indeed, in February 2023, *La Prensa Gráfica* reported that the Hospital El Salvador, the supposed state-of-the-art health facility built in 2020 and that Bukele promised would be the largest and most advanced hospital in Latin America, had no potable water for four days (Alas, 2023a). I met with Fernando and Gabbi, two health care workers at the hospital who revealed that they'd been dealing with water issues for a long time. "We've had to ration water before, and it's not uncommon for us to have to bring in our own water to drink, wash our hands, even to sanitize our equipment," they told me. "This has really serious implications for diseases related to occupational health and safety."[74]

While most of my conversations with workers focused on infrastructure, we occasionally discussed the "infamous" water law, as some unions referred to it.[75] Workers, and especially those in the public sector, are very critical of Nayib Bukele. One afternoon in March, I spoke with Reynaldo, a representative from the police and security workers union (MTP). Reynaldo

---

[73] SEJES 30 de junio, March 2, 2023; author interview.
[74] ALAMES, April 12, 2023; author interview.
[75] SITMAG, February 28, 2023; author interview. (see Introduction chapter pg. 2-3 for full quote).

used to be an avid supporter of Bukele, but after seeing the way his administration treated workers, he is now a vocal opponent of the president. After talking about working conditions and infrastructure, I asked him about water legislation. He shared that police stations all over El Salvador constantly experience service interruptions, and explained how working conditions, disinvestment to infrastructure, and water politics all are intertwined:

> "Why don't we have a water law that the public deserves? Because the state would have to invest millions of dollars in water infrastructure and treatment, and economic interests don't want to do that. It hurts them to spend money on poor people, they don't see it as an investment. Not even for schools, for children who can't drink from the tap. Here, investment in water, in infrastructure is minimal."[76]

Cost

Workers often disclosed their anxieties about the cost of their water bills. I attended a march in October for Salvadoran Unionist Day, the annual event commemorating the labor federation FENASTRAS. My interactions with rank-and-file workers were more casual during participant observation, and when I described my research interests, people were quick to share what they thought about the water crisis. Miguel, a teacher from SIMEDUCO, said: "Prices never stop going up here. The water stops, but the bills never do."[77]

[76] MTP, March 3, 2023; author interview.
[77] *Dia del sindicalismo salvadoreño* march, October 31, 2022; author field notes.

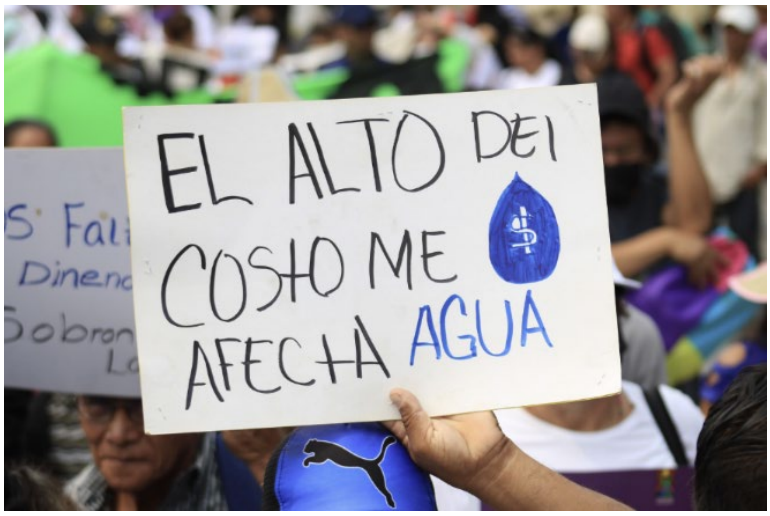

Figure 9 Sign at May Day march "The expensive cost of water affects me" (Source: Coordinadora Salvadoreña de Movimientos Populares)

Almost everyone had an anecdote about the uneven distribution of water costs in El Salvador. As I described in Chapter 2, high costs were why the labor movement so fervently opposed water privatization, who worried that shifting the public water utility into private hands would worsen and make services more expensive. My discussions with unions about expensive water bills also touched on concerns about the high prices of their *canasta básica*, or commodity bundle.[78] As of 2023, the *canasta básica* for urban areas totaled around $257 a month, representing a nearly 70 percent rise in price over a decade (Alfaro, 2023). Meanwhile, the minimum wage has stagnated at around $375 a month, and pensions were even lower, at $314 a month.[79] "The high cost of living, *canasta básica*, services like water, they all keep going up, and it's choking *el pueblo*," Joél told me.

Workers pointed out how affluent neighborhoods in San Salvador often received much lower water bills. I spoke with Nora, the general secretary of workers at the University of El Salvador (SITRAUES), and she commented on the injustice of working-class people in poor

[78] A *canasta basica* is essentially a set of food items meant to cover basic household family needs and is also an important indicator of income and inflation (Quito Bure et al., 2021).
[79] CNTS, January 27, 2023; SEJES 30 de junio, March 2, 2023; author interviews.

neighborhoods like Soyapango receiving water bills for almost $100, while residents in high-income neighborhoods like Colonia Escalón, areas in San Salvador where the most upscale tourist hotels are located, receive water bills that are between $4-$8 a month.[80] When expensive (and often unexplained) costs of water are not paid for, services are shut off to poor households. "It's unjust because people don't make enough money to pay those high bills," Nora continued.

Finally, anxieties about cost and water services were also tied to El Salvador's poor water quality. Low levels of treatment, intensive use of agrichemicals, and weak regulation of industrial and domestic effluent means that El Salvador has some of the lowest water quality in the Americas (Patterson and López, 2013). And consuming this contaminated water makes workers and their families sick, leading to expensive visits to doctors and medical clinics. "The government says the water is potable, so we drink it at work and at home, but then we get sick and have to go to the doctor," Luz, a domestic worker, told me one afternoon in the offices of her union, SIMUTHRES. "Those visits are expensive, so sometimes you buy bottled water, but that's expensive too."[81] The unexpected challenges arising from poor water quality simultaneously impact worker's finances, time, and health. Even more alarming is that rates of deaths from diarrhea doubled in 2022 (Aguilar et al., 2023), which health workers attribute to the underfunded potable water infrastructure network.

Health

The third most common concern was the impact of poor water quality on worker health. Teachers told me that not only was the infrastructure problem a serious barrier to learning, but poor water quality meant that students were constantly being sent home with gastrointestinal

[80] SITRAUES, October 26, 2022; author interview.
[81] SIMUTHRES, September 6, 2022; author interview.

issues. This was already concerning, but the severity of water-related illnesses was even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. I met with ANDES 21 de junio, one of the oldest teachers' unions in the country with a storied history of radicalism and militancy before and during the Civil War. During the pandemic, the Bukele government implemented strict social distancing, masking, and quarantine measures. In schools, students were advised to thoroughly wash their hands, and teachers were instructed to constantly clean and sanitize their classrooms. But, as I was told, "How are we supposed to wash our hands and sanitize the classrooms when there is no water?"[82]

As I've explained, the Bukele administration has neglected important sectors like education, so it may not come as a surprise that students and teachers are suffering from health issues related to water in schools. However, I was surprised to learn that water issues persisted even in areas the government claims to prioritize, like security. Guards and police have complained about poor quality water in their workplaces for years. Reynaldo, from the security and police union, said that decrepit water infrastructure constantly impacts "workers' health and wallet." He blames the government and the National Administration of Aqueducts and Sewers water utility (ANDA). "The water that comes through the pipes is unhealthy. It's too contaminated. To drink that water is very dangerous," he insisted.[83] Other scholars have written about how the lack of resources and limited institutional capacity impacts police in El Salvador. Political scientist Eduardo Moncada (2021: 105) interviewed agents of the Salvadoran National Civil Police (PNC) and discovered that up to twenty stations in the greater San Salvador area were at risk of having their water shut off by ANDA because the PNC couldn't pay the bills.

[82] ANDES 21 de junio, October 23, 2022; author interview.
[83] MTP, March 3, 2023; author interview.

The confluence of crumbling water infrastructure, inability to pay bills, and growing water-related health concerns are familiar stories across El Salvador. An added challenge is the amount of time that workers spend confronting the water crisis, at home and at work. Salvadoran workers must use more of their own time to address unreliable and unhealthy access to water, and that time is almost always uncompensated. Time and health are intimately connected, and workers agree that these water issues have a deleterious effect on their ability to sustain and reproduce themselves. The connection between physical and mental health was made clear to me when I spoke with Jorge from the Autonomous Center for Salvadoran Workers (CATS). "This water crisis results in major physical and mental deterioration for workers. It requires us to wake up earlier before work, and travel further to collect potable water for our households. And pay more," he told me.[84]

Strategies

The labor union strategies I observed can be broadly categorized as official and non-official. They don't neatly follow this binary, and there is plenty of overlap between union-designated tactics like contract bargaining, and non-official strategies like work stoppages, strikes, and mass marches. I see these processes as co-constitutive, and necessarily paired to achieve a working-class social justice, of which one crucial facet is water justice.

Temporary work stoppages and strikes

One of the most common methods that unions used to address water-related concerns were temporary work stoppages. I use this nomenclature instead of "strike" for two reasons. The first has to do with the length of time for the labor action. Most workers mentioned the work

[84] CATS, September 28, 2022; author interview.

stoppage lasting a shift, roughly between 8-10 hours, as opposed to strikes which can last days, weeks, or months. Notably, the threat of strikes was also invoked, which I will elaborate on further. The second reason is because that's how workers themselves defined their labor action. They used *paro de labores* (work stoppage) as opposed to *huelga* (strike).

When unions used temporary work stoppages to make demands about the severity of water issues in the workplace, they were often resorting to this tactic after weeks or even months of complaining to employers. One of the workplaces where water quality and infrastructure are major problems are in *maquiladoras*, factories for regional and international textile industries. Water issues are especially serious in these factories because people are not allowed to bring water from home, nor have water near their workstations, for fear of damaging the equipment. The only option for drinking water is the tap at the factory, which, according to Doris, the general secretary of the textile workers union SITRAIMES, meant that "people were getting sick from drinking the water at the company and were getting stomach and kidney infections."[85] The union was fed up with trying to communicate with the employers, who kept shirking the issue by saying that it was ANDA's responsibility. She told me that workers already knew this and were asking for the company to install a new filtration system. It came to the point where the union decided on a work stoppage to move the company along:

> "We told the company to at least add new water filters [they had installed some already that workers said didn't work]. The companies weren't happy with us for bringing this up. But we stopped working one day and told them to put the filters they promised us…. This is when they finally saw we were serious. They have so much money they can

[85] SITRAIMES, February 23, 2023; author interview.

> at least do something about a thing we can't live without. It was a long battle, but we managed to get them to change filters and bring in *Agua Cristal* [bottled water]."

Doris's example is one of union power in the private sector, and unions also used this strategy in the public sector, where the "boss" is the federal government. It's important to note that striking and work stoppages are technically illegal for the public sector, and the risk of labor actions are especially amplified under the Bukele administration, where workers are being jailed under the current regime of exception.

I sat down with the board of union officers for the Ministry of Agriculture (MAG) in February 2023. The union is called SITMAG, and I was interested in meeting with them after reading about a *paro de labores* they had in December 2022. The agriculture workers were protesting months of back pay and the nonpayment of their annual bonus from MAG. But as I learned, the work stoppage went beyond contract agreements, and more broadly addressed the cost-of-living crisis. "The *canasta básica* is expensive, electricity, water is expensive. We need this money to pay our bills," Héctor, one of the members of the board, told me.[86] "We aren't always confrontational (*no somos de choque*), but when we feel like we have a reason, we have to engage in these actions." And in their case, the labor action paid off. SITMAG secured their backpay and bonuses after the work stoppage. "How have we won the little that we have achieved? Simple. For workers, about 25% is won by negotiating, but 75% is won in the streets," Héctor concluded.

SITMAG's *paro de labores* was not an isolated incident. Public sector workers all over San Salvador struck in 2022 to demand backpay, all addressing their precarious material

[86] SITMAG, February 28, 2023; author interview.

circumstances (Monterrosa, 2022; Rivera, 2022). Some of these disputes are still ongoing, while others have been settled. But 2024 also promises to be a year of labor actions where unions have said they will "suspend work if the government didn't grant them a livable salary" (Martínez, 2023b).

Marches

The labor movement led several marches to commemorate important events in union history. I attended three of these marches, in October 2022 for Salvadoran Unionist Day, January 2023 for the Dignified Pension march, and May 2023 for International Workers Day. I was tuned in to all these marches via union social media pages, which established meeting and end points, ranging from plazas in San Salvador's *centro histórico*, to the Ministry of Labor, or directly to the *casa presidencial* in the upscale San Benito neighborhood to present demands to Nayib Bukele.

These events attracted thousands of workers from the public and private sector who contested how expensive services, including water, had become, and the threats that privatization would impose on their lives. In other cases, union leaders gave speeches in solidarity with workers in water-related industries. "Our fellow workers at *Agua Cristal* [bottling company] are in a work stoppage now because of pay disputes with the company. We need to support our *compañeros*, we all have the same fight!" was what one labor leader declared during the Salvadoran Unionist Day rally (Figure 10).[87] Workers also had explicitly environmental demands, calling for unions to rally for "*la defensa de la tierra y el derecho al agua* (the defense

[87] *Dia del sindicalismo salvadoreño* march, October 31, 2022; author field notes.

of land and the right to water),” on par with demands for a livable wage, decent pension, and an end to forced overtime and labor violations.

Figure 10 Public sector workers march on Salvadoran Unionist Day (Source: author 2022)

The largest social movement march takes place on May 1 in commemoration of International Workers Day. I arrived at a meeting point near the government district that morning around 8:30, where public sector unions, including some I had interviewed, were congregating. Eventually, as everyone arrived, organizers began instructing people to form two lines for the march. We were headed towards the Plaza Gerardo Barrios in the historic center of San Salvador, nearby the national theatre and the metropolitan cathedral. As we started marching, I heard the chants begin: “We celebrate the working-class today, and fight for equality, just wages, and a dignified life!”[88]

[88] International Workers Day march, May 1, 2023; author field notes.

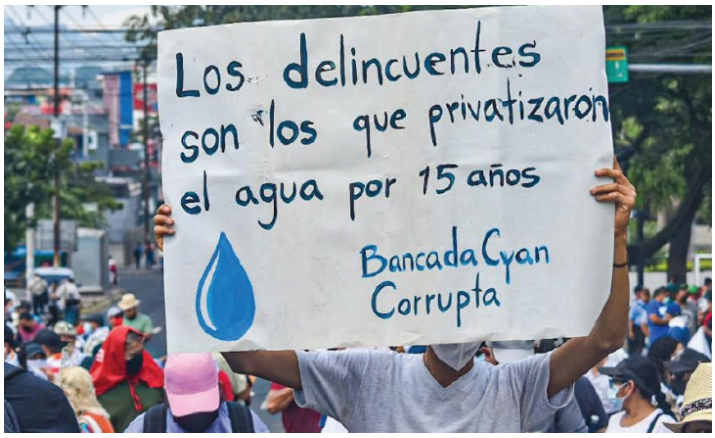

Figure 11 Signs at the May Day march: "the criminals are those privatizing our water" (Source: Funes and González 2023)[89]

As the march continued, the demands became more specific, addressing the lack of state spending on critical infrastructure in hospitals and schools, and rejecting water privatization, as I mentioned in the opening vignette. People brought signs that linked water with ongoing political and economic issues (Figure 11). What was unique about this day was that the labor movement was joined on the street by other social movements, including environmentalists, feminist movements, veterans, youth movements, and politicians from leftist and liberal parties. The *Foro del Agua* was present at the march and described the "importance of issues like the right to water, security, food sovereignty and a healthy environment for workers" (Orellana, 2023a). The International Workers Day march combined diverse agendas from different social movements, but all seemingly found a way to link their specific interests with its impact on working people.

Collective bargaining

Finally, I observed unions utilizing negotiating strategies in order to secure water-related demands. In the following examples, unions used collective bargaining, a process where workers negotiate with employers to determine issues like pay, working conditions, or benefits, and add

[89] The photo above shows a sign with *Bancada Cyan*, which translates to "cyan bench," in reference to the NI party colors (cyan), who refer to anyone being arrested under the state of exception as *delincuentes*.

these measures to their contracts. Two of my most memorable interviews were with the construction workers union SOICSCES, and the electric utility workers union SIES, both of which have a militant history in El Salvador. SOICSCES and SIES have successfully negotiated contracts that secured better pay, benefits, and working conditions for their members. The construction and electric utility workers were strongly supportive of the General Water Law, and rallied rank-and-file members to join the anti-water privatization marches in 2018. SIES even filmed a video with members and their families, where they sang "¡*no privatizar!* ¡*Ha llegado la hora a defender el agua!* (no to privatization! The time has come for us to defend our water!) (Sindicato SIES, 2018).

Many workers in the construction industry constantly face project delays because of water service interruptions (López Vides, 2022c). I sat down with the union's general secretary, Milton, who told me that workers have gotten sick from drinking contaminated water at the worksites. SOICSCES, like the textile workers union I discussed earlier, confronted management about these water issues. However, they decided that the best course of action would be to fold this water-related concern, one that entwined infrastructure, health, working conditions, and power in the workplace, into their contract negotiations. Milton recalled the experience for me:

> "At our construction sites, we've had problems with water. Before, workers would drink water when we were working and they would get sick. Things are getting a little better now, we've been able to get the Ministry of Health to come and do inspections, to check with the Ministry of Labor to make sure that the water was drinkable. We had to do this because the company won't, they don't care about the health of workers, they just want to make sure the work gets done and to make profits. They don't care about workers getting sick from water. We know because it already happened to us. So, we decided to put

> workers health into the contracts, and make employers understand that making water healthy for us to consume benefits the company too. It's better to have healthy workers than sick ones."[90]

The union negotiated to have the Ministry of Health inspect water sources at construction sites before they began those projects, to ensure the workers in SOICSCES wouldn't get sick from the water. Milton explained that now the employers must consult with the Ministries of Health and Labor when they request building permits and comply with occupational health norms mandated by the construction union.

Before being elected as general secretary, Milton was a part of SOICSCES in the late 1990s, when the labor movement rallied their forces to fight health care privatization. He doesn't see union battles related to salaries, labor violations, working conditions, pensions, or working hours as separate from broader socio-political demands for legislation that would better the lives of working people. Milton connects water to all these demands. "We all know what it feels like when water doesn't come at home, or at work. *Estamos desesperados cuando no hay agua* (we are desperate when there is no water)," he said. "That's why water is a topic *para todo el pueblo* (for all the people)."

Water through the geographies of working-class life

The legislative water struggle has somewhat dissipated in El Salvador, but the struggle for water *justice* continues. By this, I mean that the water-related demands that unions make – for improved infrastructure, healthier working conditions, cheaper costs – are fundamentally about water justice. If those demands were adopted, workers would have more time, energy, and

[90] SOICSCES, October 5, 2022; author interview.

control over how their lives are spent, meaning they wouldn't be spending time (leisurely or worktime) contesting water bills, fixing infrastructure, seeking out other water sources, waking up early to fetch water or fill vessels at home, leaving work because of precarious infrastructure, or going to health clinics. That time could be spent instead with family or friends, pursuing creative endeavors, or even continuing to organize in their workplace. Salvadoran unions deploy labor strategies to demand economic, social, and environmental justice that will allow them more control over how their time - and for the working class, labor time is one's life – is spent.

Working-class life is defined by precarity, and the inability to access reliable and safe drinking water is an added challenge to a lived experience of injustice. What is abundantly clear is that powerful Salvadoran economic interests refuse to voluntarily spend money to improve infrastructure, working and health conditions, or alleviate the economic anxieties that come from expensive water bills. Unions have responded to this indifference by pressuring employers to make these changes, through the labor tactics I've disclosed in the examples above. I opened the chapter by sharing that unions see themselves as the "instruments for working-class dignity," and one of the crucial aspects of working-class water justice that I forward is that this is a framework that applies outside of the workplace. The labor movement can use its immense structural leverage to pressure the state into passing legislation that would better the lives of working people in the country.

Water injustice unfortunately continues in El Salvador, and I suggest that a labor-environment coalition, led by unions using their strategies for a working-class water justice, is the most effective approach to alleviate these injustices. A labor-led campaign for water justice may not solely focus on water policy, or the human right to water, or water governance. But Salvadoran unions don't need to be convinced on the merits of progressive environmental policy

like a General Water Law, as they overwhelmingly support anti-privatization agendas. Rather, a working-class water justice campaign would focus on strategies that allow working people to obtain more control in the places they spend the most time, (i.e., the workplace), and more free time *outside* of the workplace. Critiques of justice-centered approaches focus on the lack of a theory of power that prevents movements from reversing specific environmental harms (Huber, 2022). In my own justice-centered approach, I argue that water justice and structural power are entwined when the labor movement is leading a class-rooted fight.

The Salvadoran union movement was at the forefront of the struggle against austerity in the 1990s, and forestalled healthcare privatization, an achievement that is still maintained to this day. This is arguably the most successful social movement action in the postwar period, and it was a labor-led effort that generated public support across El Salvador. This is because health care unions harnessed their workplace demands to broader social demands by emphasizing how working-people would be furthered excluded from public services. I see this effort as a model for a working-class water justice that can similarly unite people across the country. Given these accomplishments, it's curious that the environmental movement did not follow labor's lead more thoroughly, especially when considering political strategies to secure water justice.

Building a working-class water justice movement led by unions is a broader project to protect and expand social goods for the Salvadoran population, but a crucial component includes empowering the working-class. There are important distinctions between *los sindicalistas* and the other social groups I've discussed thus far. *Los radicales* and *los intelectuales* envision causal pathways for change that necessitate knowledge, awareness, or education as preconditions for action. Labor doesn't have that same approach to social change, and instead understands that, for working-class people, social power is learned through organizing or through contentious labor

actions, and these experiences strengthen solidarity. Similarly, the demands put forth by the Salvadoran labor movement resonate with broader concerns related to the water crisis. This overlap makes sense considering that working-class people, who are the vast majority of the population, share the common experience of economic anxiety, precarity, and the endless quest for more time.

Free time is valuable, and the fight to control our time remains an important struggle for labor, but for the working-class more broadly. Today, we find that our time is continually squeezed, with less and less of it available to enjoy the leisurely parts of life away from the constrictions of the workplace. But the pressure on free time is felt at home too, especially in relation to the water crisis, where workers must contend with the precarities that come from unstable and expensive access to water. Because of its value, time is fundamentally political, and can be made into a political demand that social movements fight to protect. Water justice is a rallying cry for Salvadorans because they can recall specific experiences where they've spent too much time confronting the water crisis that had damaging effects on their health and safety. These circumstances are avoidable, and the labor movement uses union strategies for water justice, an approach to demand robust investment in Salvadoran public goods and services that allow for more free time. Because this working-class water justice framework is an effort to defend the public provision of water, I argue that it's also the catalyst to transform, strengthen, and extend funding for public institutions. In this way, the labor movement is an imperative agent of radical democratic reform to address the severity of the Salvadoran water crisis. As my

interviewees put it, “everyone is vulnerable to the water crisis, so the best way to protect water is to improve public services.”[91]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I’ve observed the role of the Salvadoran labor movement in the ongoing fight for water justice. While labor did not play a leading role in the legislative water struggle, they’ve nonetheless engaged battles for water justice as an organized movement. Union workers are unwavering in their positions that secure, safe, and affordable access to water is a key element of a ‘just and dignified life.’ Throughout the chapter, I’ve examined the historical and contemporary roles of the labor movement in fights against austerity and privatization, demonstrating that unions are significant levers of power in protecting public goods and services for Salvadorans. Because water injustices flow through spheres of production and social reproduction, a working-class water justice demands that the state invest in public infrastructure to remedy chronic water shortages, illnesses from contaminated drinking water, and excessive and unjust charges. Unions have folded these demands into the strategies they’ve deployed to pressure employers for provisions at work and home.

Salvadoran labor unions are facing an increasingly authoritarian regime that is using its power to repress any dissenting voices, even when workers demand what is owed to them. The current moment is an incredibly risky one for Salvadoran social movements because any protest, march, or form of demonstration (including strikes or work stoppages), is now subject to suspicion of gang affiliation under President Bukele’s regime of exception. Workers I spoke with told me about direct threats and harassment they receive in their homes as intimidation tactics

[91] ANDES 21 de junio, October 23, 2022; SITRAUES, October 26, 2022; author interviews.

after they spoke out against labor abuse or lack of pay. As I learned, under Bukele, the cost of living has risen, basic goods like food and water are more expensive, funding for public services have been slashed, and workers livelihoods are threatened. Water is one expression of this deterioration, whether through unsafe water-related working conditions, or skyrocketing costs of water. Despite the rhetoric from the current administration about newly improved and streamlined water services, especially following the codification of Bukele's Law of Water Resources, provision and distribution of potable water remains unorganized, inefficient, and chaotic. The Bukele administration, and its approach to water governance, supposedly in response to calls for water justice, is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 5 - "It's never been this confusing": Analyzing water governance under *Bukelismo* in El Salvador

I arrived that afternoon at the Salvadoran Water Authority (ASA). I was about 10 minutes early to my meeting with ASA's president Jorge Castañeda but was grateful to briefly enjoy the air conditioning before the interview. The secretary said Castañeda would be with me shortly, so I took a seat in the lobby underneath two giant portraits of President Nayib Bukele and his wife Gabriela Rodríguez de Bukele.

The ASA was humming with activity. People were flitting back and forth between conference rooms and offices, occasionally stopping to ask questions. I observed several people come in to clarify how to register their *juntas de agua.*[92] Under Bukele's new Law of Water Resources (LHR), water providers are now mandated to register with ASA to receive official permits for water distribution and use. Spokespeople from the water authority assure the public that it's a streamlined process. Three men came in to register their *junta*, saying they were from San Martín, a municipality in the northeastern part of San Salvador. The secretary also directed them to sit in the lobby and wait for an ASA representative. They sat for about five minutes before someone came out to speak with them. I expected they would retreat to an office or meeting room, but their entire discussion took place in the lobby ten feet away from me.

This interaction lasted about twenty minutes, and from my vantage point, appeared completely chaotic. The men from San Martín kept asking questions, saying they'd driven an hour to ASA's offices so they could *inscibir los pozos* (register their wells). One of the men, who

[92] Community water boards: largely self-funded organizations that install and maintain pipes, pumps, and wells, and distribute water.

was carrying a plastic folder that looked to contain paperwork, said they've "had this *junta* for over twenty years, and use it to distribute water in their community."[93] I heard them repeat, "we don't know how to do this," in reference to the registration process. The ASA representative asked the men what kinds of permits they need, to which they replied that they weren't sure, which was why they were visiting the water authority. "You have to go to the website," the ASA employee replied. By this point, about ten minutes had passed, and another ASA employee came over to answer questions. Remarkably, I saw him call *another* person to try and get more information. The call was on speakerphone, so I was able to grasp some of the conversation. The San Salvador offices were calling their representatives in San Martín to set up an inspection of the *junta de agua* in question.

At one point, I counted three different ASA employees talking with the permit seekers from San Martín (not including the person over the phone), but none of them seemed to be able to answer questions about how to register and obtain permits for water delivery. Finally, the permit seekers grudgingly seemed to give up, and as they were leaving the offices, I overheard one of them say, "we've had this *junta* for twenty years and it's never been this confusing."

A little while later, I was taken to Castañeda's office, and treated to a polished PowerPoint presentation that gave all the indications of a well-organized and efficient water authority. However, I couldn't stop thinking about the interaction I had just witnessed in the lobby. Even though, according to Castañeda, ASA had been in operation for over eight months, and had effortlessly registered hundreds of *juntas de agua*, the ASA representatives who dealt

[93] ASA office participant observation; May 2, 2023; author field notes.

with the permit seekers from San Martín appeared as if they were answering questions about registration for the very first time.

I was in El Salvador for long-term fieldwork between 2022 and 2023, which coincided with Bukele's fourth year in office. By this point, the term *Bukelismo* was frequently used to describe his governance style, though most often in reference to Bukele's hardline methods to combat crime and gang violence. These measures include suspending constitutional guarantees to due process, freedom of association, presumptions of innocence, the right to legal representation, and protections against illegal search and seizure. These methods were sharpened in 2022 after Bukele declared a national "state of exception" in response to a wave of gang violence where over 80 people were killed in one weekend, and this *de facto* form of martial law remains in place today.

I've also noticed *Bukelismo* used to refer to the president's "disruptor" policies intended to turn El Salvador into, as he states, the "Silicon Valley of Central America." As far as I can tell, this techno-utopian approach to governance heavily relies on digital tools like payment applications, geolocation, and cryptocurrency, paired with a punitive security and surveillance state. While this new form of governance may appear transgressive, observing how *Bukelismo* is experienced, and especially how it is mediated through something like access to water, tells another story entirely. To date, Bukele's administration passed the only comprehensive water legislation in the country's history, claiming this success as part of El Salvador's transition to a more modern, efficient, and innovative period. But in this chapter, I argue that observing these "improvements" on the ground under *Bukelismo* reveals a landscape of dysfunctional, more expensive water services that lack transparency, and where Salvadorans are increasingly surveilled through digital technologies for water management.

In what follows, I will situate *Bukelismo* within the context of the global far-right to trace its continuities and deviations from other authoritarian leaders. I will then intersect *Bukelismo* with the digital turn of water governance in El Salvador. I will then follow up the conceptual framework with historical context on the evolution of Bukele's governance through his first term (2019-2024), paying particular attention to his environmental and water policies. In the empirical section, I will explain how members of Bukele's administration understand, and importantly, "sell," his new forms of water governance, and compare those narratives with how Salvadorans encounter these new methods for management, control, and payments for water services. Finally, I will discuss these sections together to theorize whether *Bukelismo* is in fact a new, modern form of governance, or is a continued, albeit more sclerotic, form of neoliberalism that offers very little to address the everyday concerns of Salvadorans.

Bukelismo **and the far-right**

To begin, I use "authoritarian" and "authoritarianism" interchangeably to describe *Bukelismo.* I adopt Cas Mudde's (2019: 191) definition of authoritarianism as a "belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements on authority are severely punished." Because of his punitive security policies, I find this framing the most useful to describe Bukele. Authoritarians are sometimes described as "populists" or fitting within "populism" broadly speaking. In their recent piece on populism and the environment, Ofstehage et al. (2022) explain how right-wing authoritarian populists advance militant, protectionist rhetoric against an external enemy that prohibits national prosperity, to justify political-economic projects that necessitate unchecked power and environmental resources. The authors note that right-wing authoritarian populism often arises during periods of acute polarization. For the purposes of this chapter, I am discussing authoritarianism and populism in the context of the far-right. In Latin America, far-

right politicians and parties are far from a new phenomenon, but what is novel about this moment is how mainstream they've become. Partly in reaction to the Pink Tide, Latin America's far right participates in the democratic process – and wins, as recent elections show – but have no serious commitment to democratic norms, often dismantling institutions to further consolidate power (Arias and Burt, 2023).

There are qualitative differences between far-right figures, but they generally share revanchist cultural opinions, tend towards populist rhetoric, and in the Latin American context especially, support *mano dura* (iron-fist) security policies (Kaltwasser, 2022). Latin America's far-right today also draws on international networks to discredit any left opposition, often by portraying them as enemies to progress or prosperity (Herrán-Ávila, 2023). Paradoxically, right-wing parties can sometimes present anti-establishment candidates, yet they also maintain a firm opposition to a clearly defined ideology (Hochuli et al., 2021). While the far-right is not synonymous with authoritarianism, there are overlapping characteristics, and tyrannical leaders who draw on "strongmen" playbooks are perhaps better labeled as authoritarian populists (Ben-Ghiat, 2020). In Latin America, a version of authoritarianism with a long history is *caudillismo*, where charismatic leaders from both the right and the left move from electoral victory to strongman rule, using personality cults to elevate themselves as indispensable to the nation, all the while using increasingly draconian measures against popular movements (Webber, 2017; Thaler, 2017; Tizley, 2019). Bukele is not so much driven by ideology as he is by the ambition to consolidate and maintain power, though notably, through legitimate democratic mechanisms (Nilsson, 2022). Political scientists Stephen Levitsky and Lucan Way (2002) use "competitive authoritarianism" to describe this kind of political figure, one that engages in free and fair

elections, but within the context of dismantled institutions and electoral rules that disadvantage opposition parties.

Some familiar, albeit incoherent, characteristics that marks far-right environmental politics are xenophobia, nativism, and anti-humanist Malthusian conceptions (figures like Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán come to mind). Bukele diverges from this strain of the far-right, tending towards a curious fusion of mainstream, neoliberal green politics that favors environmental deregulation, but also a developmentalist environmental governance that seeks economic growth through large-scale infrastructure projects and debt spending (Arsel et al., 2021). Recent work at the nexus of populism, authoritarianism, and environmental governance shows how leaders invoke imagery of nature and progress to advance their specific political objectives (McCarthy, 2019). One expression of this dynamic is resource nationalism, where national sovereignty is conjoined with natural resources to articulate state power and prosperity (Koch and Perreault, 2019; Perreault, 2020). For the most part, authoritarian leaders don't dismantle or even fundamentally change structures of capital accumulation and continue neoliberal projects that reinforce the power of global capital (Saad-Filho and Morais, 2018). Rather than address social and material issues related to the economy and jobs, authoritarians will instead use developmentalist policies as a show of national strength that will, as Arsel et al. (2021: 262) argue, "solve societal problems."

While it's not a perfect overlap, I find an "authoritarian developmentalism" framework most compelling when trying to understand *Bukelismo's* environmental governance, first because Bukele is widely regarded as an authoritarian, and his policies certainly reflects this. But second, because throughout his tenure, Bukele has consistently pursued large-scale infrastructure projects for modernization. This approach to development parallels the kind of economic projects used in

Latin America during the mid-twentieth century (Peet and Hartwick, 2015). Of course, *Bukelismo* is not about building factories or strengthening trade relations to facilitate economic growth but is instead about mediating a digitalized developmentalism through technological tools like cryptocurrencies, cloud computing, and tourism (Freeman, 2024). In this way, Bukele's developmentalism is more performative than functional, and his push for certain infrastructure are towards the production of what Gutiérrez (2024) calls "city spectacles." Often referred to as a "techno-fix" (Vázquez, 2022), and despite official rhetoric on economic growth, financial freedom, and more community control, the adoption of cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin still relies on free-market fundamentalism and political corruption (Rosales et al., 2023). Furthermore, these developmentalist pursuits have been largely unsuccessful. Bukele's only successful large-scale infrastructure project directly links to his authoritarianism. The Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) is the largest prison in the Americas, with the capacity to hold 40,000 inmates (Wolf, 2023). In this way, *Bukelismo* can perhaps be best described as a kind of developmentalism that is only successful when affixed to infrastructure projects that enhance a punitive, security state. Otherwise, if we are to consider *Bukelismo* and development outside of the context of crime, his projects have mostly been ineffective. However, that's not stopping the president from continuing down a path to digitalize El Salvador.

Intersecting Bukele's authoritarianism with digital water governance

New digital technologies are transforming environmental governance and regulation. From terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial sensors that capture quantitative data, to satellites and monitoring devices that collect and store consumer information, tools for resource management are omnipresent (Bakker and Ritts, 2018). Water is increasingly subject to these digital technologies, though many systems remain under-monitored (Jepson and Vandawalle, 2016).

Interrogating “digital water” surfaces important political, social, and ethical questions (Bakker et al., 2024). Proponents of technologies like drones, digital meters, smartphone-based interfaces, and artificial intelligence say these tools will simultaneously resolve challenges in the water sector, increase knowledge on water supply and demand for consumers, and inform public policy and investment (Walter, 2024). But there is serious skepticism about the future of digital water technologies. As Bakker et al. (2024: 333) argue, those in favor of this technology emphasize its ability to “accelerate sustainability, enhance hazard mitigation, and incorporate citizens in novel ways in decision-making,” while doubtful observers are concerned with “ethical issues of privacy, transparency, and data colonialism.”

Although it can certainly be the case that water data collected through smart phone applications allows for greater citizen control of water management and quality (Jollymore et al., 2017), more data doesn’t presuppose more efficient governance outcomes. Occasionally, those who interface with water monitoring technology are subject to mass surveillance and ever more precise tracking (Hogan, 2015), which can in turn exacerbate what Eubanks (2018) calls “automated inequality.” In terms of small-scale infrastructure, digital technologies can help with more efficient delivery, and even potentially reduce operational costs, especially for communities with no formal connections (Furlong, 2010; Allen et al., 2017; Schmidt, 2020). Indeed, these are the reasons Bukele’s administration uses to justify their forays into technological use for environmental governance. But some scholars warn that these digital tools are not easily accessible in low-income neighborhoods in the Global South (Amankwaa et al., 2022), and if they are, blended ‘financialized water provisions’ can further entrenched water poverty or reinforce colonial subjectivities (Kooy and Bakker, 2008b; Tristl, 2023). This also resonates in El Salvador, where at least half the population has no access to digital tools that would allow for

more efficient, modern, or inclusive forms of governance. Digital tools for water governance also include large-scale infrastructure like desalination plants, though Williams (2018) specifically uses this example to observe the neoliberalization of water through public-private partnerships that essentially constitute a techno-politics of water privatization. The Salvadoran water utility ANDA, and the water authority ASA have both hinted at future desalination projects, though with no specific details.

In the next section, I observe Bukele and the evolution of *Bukelismo* throughout his first term (2019-2024), paying particular attention to its expression in environmental and water governance.

Bukele's rise to power

The 39-year-old Nayib Bukele was elected president of El Salvador in February 2019 with 53 percent of the vote. His closest opponent was the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) party with 32 percent, and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) trailed in a distant third with only 14 percent of the vote (Perelló and Navia, 2022). Though he fashioned himself as the outsider candidate who broke the dominant two-party system, Bukele is fully entrenched in establishment politics. His father Armando Bukele Kattán was a wealthy Palestinian businessman and avid supporter of the FMLN. He facilitated Nayib's foray into politics, which began in 2011 when he was elected as FMLN mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán, a municipality outside of San Salvador with seven thousand residents (Labrador, 2022). Bukele was later elected as the FMLN mayor of San Salvador in 2015, a position that many see as a steppingstone to the presidency.

Bukele's shifting ideological platform has allowed him to appeal to various constituencies, at one point even saying he was "from the radical left," though he pivoted away from this after being expelled from the FMLN in 2017 for violation of internal party rules (Perelló and Navia, 2022). He remained popular, and the following year, created the *Nuevas Ideas* (NI) political party (Rodríguez and Quintanilla, 2022). Bukele couples his mercurial political acumen with expert public relations skills. As Meléndez-Sánchez (2021) explains, Nayib's personal brand is a specific blend of socio-political tactics that include social media, dressing down in jeans, leather jackets, aviator sunglasses, and backwards baseball caps instead of suits, and deploying populist language decrying "the establishment," in ways that construct a hip, youthful image. Later in his presidency, when international media criticized his increasingly authoritarian methods, Bukele began to call himself "the world's coolest dictator."

Bukele's environmental and water policies

Widespread discontent with the FMLN and ARENA administrations played a decisive role in Bukele's ascent to power, as did his promise to end crime and gang violence. Yet his approach to environmental governance is harder to define, though environmentalists say Bukele has a "modernization, development, and tourism mindset."[94] Bukele promised several ambitious projects during his campaign, including a new stadium, library, airport, and tourist destination on the coast called Surf City (Alfaro, 2019; Hompanera, 2022). The environmental movement is most concerned with the rapidity at which building permits are granted without proper environmental impact assessments, highlighting how the Bukele administration rhetorically acknowledged the human right to water, but has no official plans to address the water crisis. The

[94] *Alianza*, July 19, 2019; *Foro del Agua*, July 28, 2021; author interviews.

Salvadoran investigative journal *Gato Encerrado* reported in 2021 that Bukele's ambition to make El Salvador a haven for international investment included cutting "red-tape bureaucracy" and "streamlining environmental permitting for more flexible investment" (Díaz, 2021). The labor organization National Union for the Defense of the Working-Class (UNT) is also concerned with how the new airport will damage delicate mangrove ecosystems and displace families in those areas.[95]

Several of Bukele's development plans have been in response to public demands to address water service interruptions and poor water quality. In January 2020, more than 1.2 million residents in the San Salvador metro area were exposed to foul-smelling, dirt-filled tap water for over two weeks (Tejada et al., 2020). Officials in Bukele's administration, including the president, responded in convoluted, contradictory ways, blaming algae proliferation and saying the drinking water was safe, and even dismissing complaints as "overblown" (Jurado and Oliva, 2020; CISPES, 2020). [96] The union for the water utility ANDA contested official statements, explaining that the water treatment plant *Las Pavas* malfunctioned because of political decisions that "failed to comply with water treatment protocol" (Alas, 2020). According to the union, ANDA management refused to temporarily pause water supply during routine maintenance, even though that specific upkeep would prevent certain pumps, sand flocculation machines, tanks, and cisterns from operating properly. *Las Pavas* went through major renovations the following year, including a name change. The *Planta Potabilizadora Torogoz* (Torogoz Drinking Water

---

[95] *Conversatorio Perspectivas de los Territorios de Vida* (Conversation on the perspectives of the territories of life) participant observation, November 30, 2022; author field notes. El Salvador has only one centrally located airport, and Bukele claims the new airport would make travel more convenient and cheaper for those living in eastern provinces. But pilots and crew told *Gato Encerrado* that flying to the existing airport is already more convenient, and the route to an eastern location would use more fuel, thereby making airfare more expensive for customers (Díaz, 2022).

[96] Bukele later publicly apologized for these comments. Shortly thereafter, several high-level members of his cabinet were fired (Escobar, 2020).

Treatment Plant), named after the country's national bird, was inaugurated in October 2021, and in his inauguration speech, Bukele explained how "changing the name helps people forget the bad experiences of the past, and shows we are making a real change" (Legislative Assembly Press, 2021a).

During his campaign, Bukele gestured to the fifteen-year long battle to establish national water legislation. As I've discussed in Chapter 2, the Salvadoran environmental movement was never optimistic that Bukele would sign on to their General Water Law. The disastrous water contamination event in 2020 forced Bukele into action, and his cabinet drafted a National Water Plan to "solve the water issues in all their facets" (Salazar, 2020). However, that same year, the national budget also included a 65 percent funding cut to ANDA (Estrada, 2020). Water policy discussions under Bukele's administration were relatively subdued in the 2020s, in no small part because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The country was put under strict quarantine lockdown that essentially criminalized any social movement activity, but when restrictions eased, social movements again called on Bukele's government to codify the human right to water and pass the General Water Law.

Then, in June 2021, Bukele presented his Law of Water Resources (LRH), granting the Legislative Assembly 90 days to deliberate and approve it. The ad-hoc committee tasked with discussing the bill was comprised almost entirely of NI politicians. Only one seat of the nine-member committee was held by an opposition party, in this case, by FMLN politician Dina Argueta. The *Foro del Agua* and *Alianza* acknowledged that these formal discussions were a step forward, but still had serious doubts about the LRH. "He [Bukele] uses almost the exact same language as us," Ramón of the *Foro* told me in 2021. "Except he removed any public regulation, which negates civil society participation in decisions on how water is managed, used, and

controlled."[97] The *Foro* and *Alianza* also condemned amendments that allowed for water concessions to private developers for up to 15 years, calling it "de-facto privatization." The Legislative Assembly passed the Law of Water Resources in December 2021.

Bukele proposed another law around the same time as the LRH that received far more international attention: the Bitcoin Law, which establishes the cryptocurrency as legal tender alongside the US dollar. Touting its ability to facilitate "the frictionless flow of migrant remittances, foreign investment, and financial inclusion for the nation's poor," Bukele tried to incentive the population with $30 for every download of the *Chivo* (Spanish word for "cool") Wallet application, and with large discounts in gasoline paid for in Bitcoin (Vázquez, 2022: 600). For the purposes of my work, there is an important connection between Bitcoin and the water crisis. Bitcoin "mining" – a process where no actual geological materials are extracted, but rather involves many computers preforming complex mathematical calculations to create and verify digital currency transactions – is a very energy intensive process (Hong, 2021). Bukele proposed harnessing geothermal energy from Salvadoran volcanoes to power computer networks used to generate Bitcoin, and given the huge water footprint needed for production, some have argued that adopting it as legal tender is another attempt to privatize the nation's water sources (Cuéllar, 2021).

Advancing the cryptocurrency project further, Bukele announced that he wanted to build a "Bitcoin City" at the base of the Conchagua volcano in the eastern La Unión province, stating that million-dollar Bitcoin bonds would fund the project, and the city itself would be entirely powered by geothermal energy (Figures 12 and 13). The new airport would also be strategically

[97] *Foro del Agua*, July 28, 2021; author interview.

located in La Unión to attract tourists to Bitcoin City. Historically, the eastern provinces of Usulután, San Miguel, and La Unión are the poorest in the country, and communities there suffer severe water insecurity. Residents in the municipality of Berlín, Usulután, told the journal *El Faro* they sometimes only get water once a month, and worry that Bitcoin operations will lead to more water stress (Gavarrete, 2021). El Salvador's cryptocurrency experiment has been mostly unsuccessful, though it was instrumental in propelling Bukele's image internationally as a tech-savvy visionary. However, his popularity would soon skyrocket concerning El Salvador's most difficult and long-standing problems: crime and gang violence.

Figure 12 Bukele with a model of Bitcoin City (Source: Tegel 2022)

Figure 13 Bukele announcing plans for Bitcoin City (Source: Linares 2021)

The iron fist of *Bukelismo*

After the Peace Accords, El Salvador was perhaps best known for its notorious gang syndicates *Mara Salvatrucha* 13 (MS-13) and *Barrio* 18, who've long terrorized poor neighborhoods (Wolf, 2017). In 2015, El Salvador had the highest homicide rates in the world, and thousands migrated to North America to escape this violence (Wade, 2022). Amid his many campaign promises, Bukele was most forceful on crime and gang violence. He sought a $100 million loan from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration to fund his expensive security plan, *Plan Control Territorial*, or Territorial Control Plan (Neuman, 2020). However, the multi-party Legislative Assembly refused to affirmatively vote on the funding package. As a response (and possibly the first hints of his authoritarian proclivities), Bukele orchestrated an occupation of the parliament in February 2020, marching heavily armed police and soldiers into the building to force a vote on the loan. Security policy expert Sonja Wolf (2021) argues that the timing of this occupation was key, explaining that Bukele sought to intimidate the legislature into

funding his security policy, but he also wanted to restore the government's image for decisiveness following his disastrous handling of the water crisis mere weeks earlier.

In the early years of Bukele's tenure, crime and gang violence steadily declined, though there is credible evidence that this begun under the previous FMLN administration (Cruz, 2022). This ended on March 27, 2022, when 87 people were killed in one weekend after secret negotiations between the MS-13 and the Bukele administration collapsed (Martínez, 2022a).[98] As a response, Bukele declared open war on the gangs, establishing a "state of exception" that suspended constitutional rights to legal defense and due process, instituted harsh sentencing guidelines for gang-related crimes, lowered the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years old, and introduced a gag rule stipulating that any journalists reporting critically on the policy could be arrested for "spreading gang messages" (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2023). Little evidence is necessary to qualify for arrest. A suspicious tattoo or even "looking nervous" can get one locked up under Bukele's state of exception. Since its implementation, the Salvadoran government has arrested over 70,000 people and built an enormous prison called the Terrorist Confinement Center (CECOT) to hold the incarcerated.

Given the degree to which poor and working-class Salvadorans endured threats, extortion, mobility restriction, and violence, Bukele's state of exception has been tremendously popular. According to a poll conducted in December 2022, 88 percent of Salvadorans said they felt "safe" or "very safe" as compared to 60 percent the year prior (IUDOP, 2022). And of those

[98] Secret negotiations with gangs and criminal organizations are a common practice in El Salvador. Every presidential administration in the postwar period has used truce negotiations with gangs to reduce homicides and violence in exchange for favors and privileges like cell phone use, special treatment in prisons, agreements to not arrest high-ranking gang leaders, and cash payments. In return, political parties can say they've reduced gang violence during their campaigns. See Wolf (2017), Martínez et al. (2020), and Cruz (2022) for more detail. In a bombshell exposé, *El Faro* revealed that the negotiations between the MS-13 and Bukele that collapsed in 2022 were because his administration "betrayed" the gangs by "making arrests they shouldn't have" (Martínez, 2022a).

polled, around 95 percent attribute their safety to the state of exception. The success of his hardline policies allows Bukele to boast approval ratings of up to 90 percent, the highest by far in the Americas (The Economist, 2023). Of course, the systematic dismantling of gangs has come at a huge expense, with widespread human rights violations and democratic backsliding. As many as 40 percent of those arrested have no connection to gangs whatsoever, and investigations show evidence of abuse, starvation, and torture in Salvadoran prisons (Goodfriend, 2023; Barrera, 2024). The same poll from December 2022 also showed that 3 in 10 Salvadorans said they knew someone who had been unfairly arrested under the state of exception.

Still, there is an undeniable feeling of respite in El Salvador, with people expressing that they can freely walk the streets at night and enjoy public spaces with their families without the fear of gang violence. Homicide rates have fallen precipitously, and El Salvador has gone from having one of the highest murder rates in the world to one of the lowest. These results mean Bukele faces few obstacles in his plans to keep "modernizing El Salvador," a project that included his running, and winning, a second presidential term. Notwithstanding the minor complication that consecutive terms are constitutionally prohibited, Bukele was re-elected on February 4, 2024, with 84 percent of the vote (Peñate, 2024).[99] Furthermore, *Bukelismo* is now being replicated across the region by political leaders of all ideological stripes. From the center-right Costa Rican and Ecuadoran administration to Honduras's leftist president Xiomara Castro, people are looking to El Salvador to learn how to tackle crime. Other leaders have also taken to

[99] Bukele's reelection came after months of radical electoral reforms put into place to more easily facilitate his and NI's landslide wins, including redistricting, eliminating 85 percent of municipalities, cutting the number of legislators from 84 to 60 (thereby reapportioning seats that would have benefited smaller opposition parties), withholding public campaign financing from opposition parties, campaign messaging that said the opposition would "free all the gang members and use them to take back power," and blatant electoral fraud on election day. A full scope of these tactics is beyond the purposes of this chapter but see Goodfriend (2024) for a detailed account of these measures.

Bukele's libertarian vision for economic governance, such as Argentina's president Javier Milei, another vocal supporter of cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin.

Bukele's punitive security policies have been incredibly effective, popular, and harsh. However, the same cannot necessarily be said about other aspects of his governance, like the economy, jobs, and social services like water distribution, which remains in disrepair. I turn to these matters next, drawing on my ethnographic data to understand *Bukelismo* through the prism of water governance.

***Bukelismo* and the digital turn in water governance**

This chapter draws on semi-structured interviews with government representatives from ASA, politicians from the FMLN and *Nuestro Tiempo* (Our Time) political parties, and from Salvadoran workers and environmentalists who described on the ground experiences with water governance under *Bukelismo*. I supplement my interview data with media analysis to complicate narratives of efficiency, innovation, and technological progress in water governance repeated by officials within Bukele's administration.

It is exceedingly difficult to interview representatives from the Bukele government, and I was lucky enough to secure one with the president of the Salvadoran Water Authority (ASA) Jorge Castañeda, who was appointed by Bukele to head the institution in July 2022. This meeting came about because I had previously interviewed spokespeople from the Salvadoran agribusiness lobby, who connected me with Castañeda. As I described in the opening vignette, Castañeda was about 30 minutes late for our meeting, but this allowed me to observe how ASA operated. It was a fundamentally chaotic process, though one might think otherwise if they were only subject to Castañeda's interview.

With a slick PowerPoint presentation as his backdrop, Castañeda described the need to "do things differently from the previous governments," something that according to him is achieved by "changing the focus and committing to innovation, research, and the use of technology."[100] It quickly became clear to me that "new directions for water governance in El Salvador" rely on technological tools like geolocation and payment applications, some of which are modeled after Silicon Valley tech companies. Apparently, ASA, the public institution in charge of executing Bukele's Law of Water Resources, borrows its business model from Amazon, Google, and Netflix. When I asked him what El Salvador's biggest challenges with the water crisis were, Castañeda insisted that it was the country's "lack of innovation in the water sector," which he said was common across Latin America.

"Our purpose, mission, and vision at ASA is to contribute to water security, improve the culture of water, improve people's lives, and take care of and manage water efficiently," he told me. "We want to be a benchmark in human development (*distribución referente en desarrollo humano*), not an institution that will just install pipes, but one invested in human development and water resource management."

I've isolated this quote because of the clear insistence that this institution was not created for the purposes of "just installing pipes" but rather as a tool for self-governance so people can efficiently manage water resources in their communities. Indeed, Castañeda echoed narratives I've heard so often about constructing a "new culture of water" where communities can become "self-reliant and resilient to the effects of climate change." The irony here is that the very thing Salvadorans most demand is seemingly what the water institution is set up *not* to deliver, i.e.,

[100] ASA, May 5, 2023; author interview.

new pipes to improve a fractured water network. And as far as I could surmise, efficient and innovative responses to the water crisis translate to the use of digital tools.

During our interview, Castañeda took me through ASA's new, high-tech website, demonstrating the improvements to the public water sector. Bukele's LRH requires all water users to register with ASA to obtain permits for access and distribution of water resources. "We send teams out to each site to observe and take pictures of pumps and wells, and then upload that information to our website," he explained, showing me some recent entries. Using ArcGIS, the data is compiled and stratified between agricultural, industrial, and domestic water users, which includes over 2,500 *juntas de agua* (Figure 14). The registration process for *juntas de agua* has been controversial because it is still somewhat undefined, though these smaller organizations are nonetheless subject to ASA tracking their water use (Figure 15). Figure 15 shows the information for a recently registered *junta de agua* in rural La Libertad, a province southwest of San Salvador, displaying the amount of people serviced by this *junta*, photos of the pumps and meters, and information on how long this system has been in operation. All registered *juntas* display similar information, and at present, ASA has registered 341 of the 2,500 *juntas*, or 14 percent (Magaña, 2023).

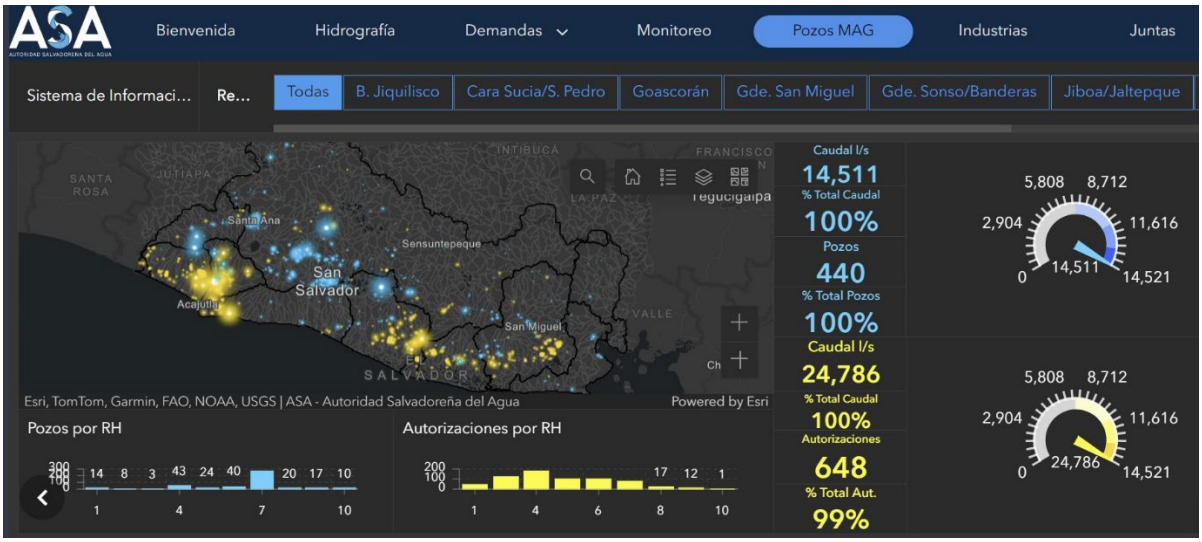

Figure 14 Still of ASA website showing agriculture water users (Source: ASA website 2023)

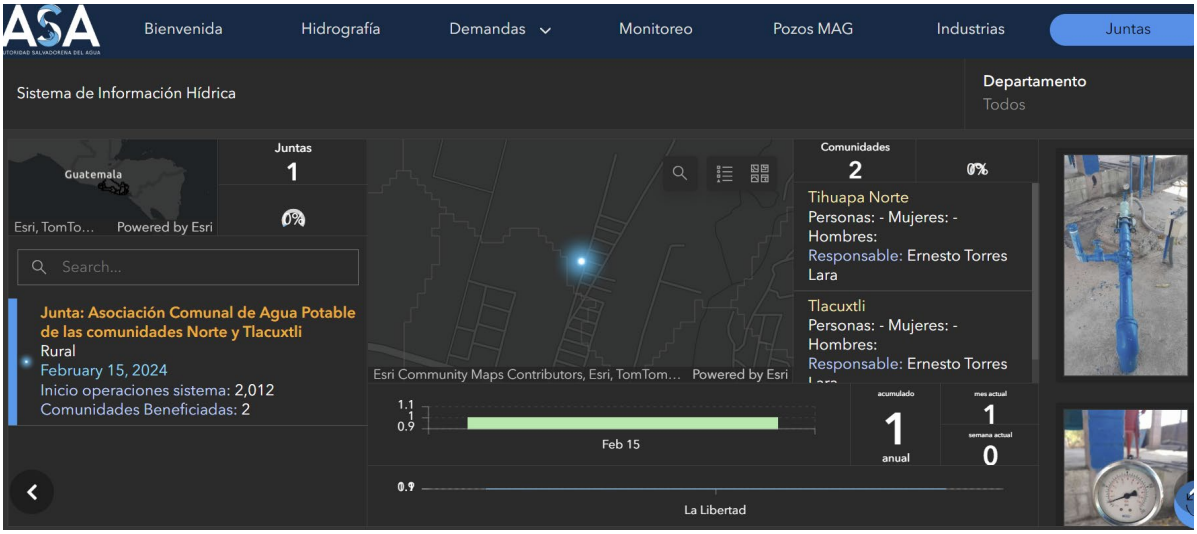

Figure 15 Registration information for a junta de agua in rural La Libertad province (Source: ASA website 2023)

The new website includes digital payment methods to "more easily facilitate online payments for drinking water services for thousands of people."[101] ASA has partnered with the public water utility ANDA and embedded links for people to access their water bills digitally through ANDA's online portal, and through the official ANDA WhatsApp line called *Gotita,* or "little water droplet" (Figure 16). Castañeda told me these payment methods were intended to

[101] ASA, May 5, 2023; author interview.

modernize public water services, which previously relied on paper bills (Figure 17). However, I will note that when I went on the website to simulate bill payment, the embedded link didn't actually work (Figure 18). And given my previous experience with the *Gotita* WhatsApp line (see Introduction), I'm skeptical on the efficiency of this method as a streamlined payment service. By observing these "improvements" holistically, I gathered that when officials described the modern transformation of water governance in El Salvador, they were mainly referring to payment and geolocation digital applications. Furthermore, these digital tools seemingly allow for more surveillance and tracking of water permit registration and use that would ultimately enforce timely payments for water services. Yet these new tools don't always work, which leads to many frustrated customers.

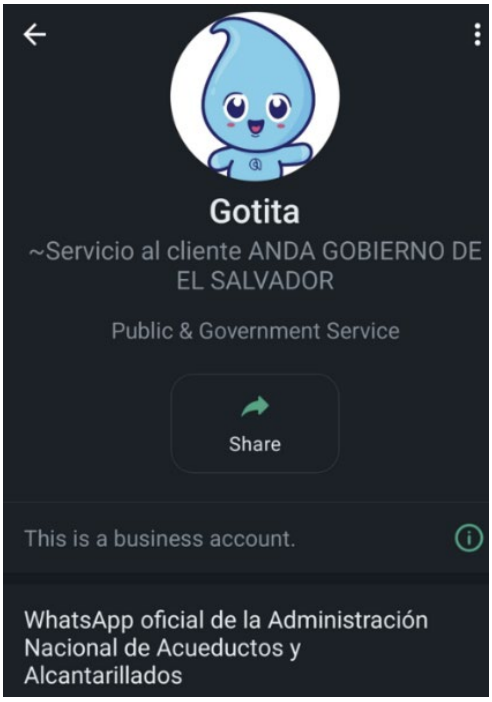

Figure 16 Official government water payment app (Source: author 2023)

Figure 17 ANDA water bill inserted in door (Source: author 2022)

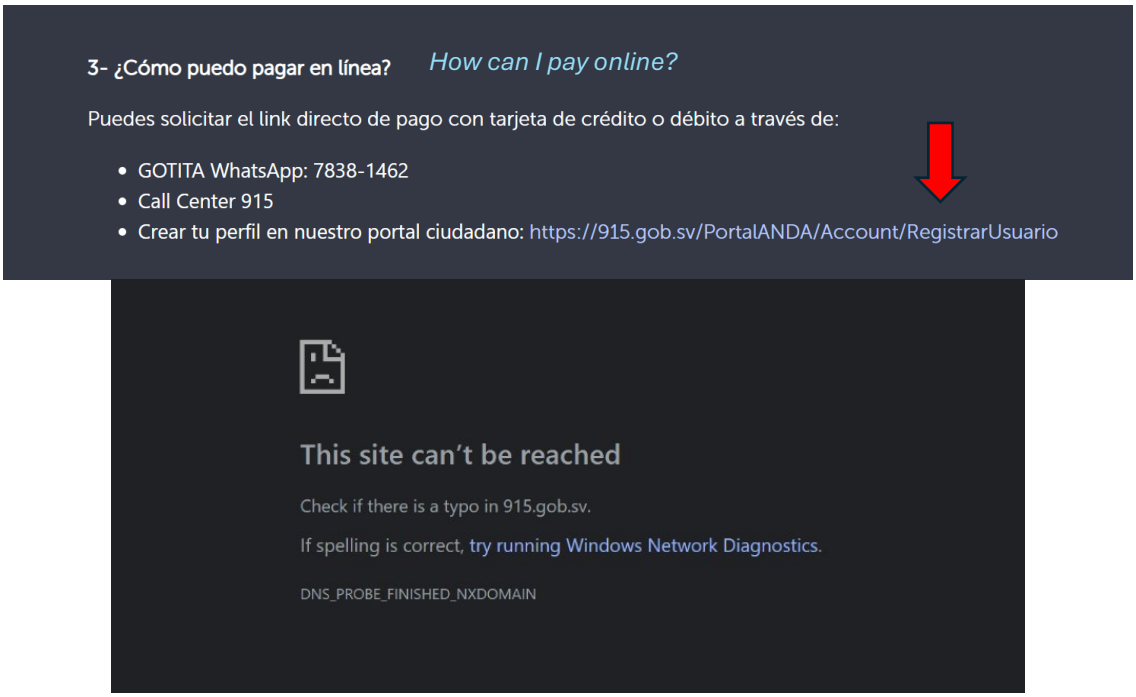

Figure 18 Attempting to simulate payment for water services (Source: ANDA website 2023)

The digital transformation of the water sector is part of broader development plans to adopt more technological innovation in Salvadoran governance. Bukele's national development plan, *Plan Cuscatlán*, was proposed in 2019 when he first entered office, and aimed to achieve sustainable development through technological innovation that would attract foreign direct

investment. *Plan Cuscatlán* initially proposed two new ministries, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Innovation and Modernization of the State (Bortagaray and Aguirre-Bastos, 2021). As of this writing, these ministries have still not been created.

Perhaps the most publicized - and most controversial - move towards a digitalized economy in El Salvador was Bukele's decision to adopt Bitcoin as legal tender. The policy, which cost around $375 million, promised financial inclusion, and enhanced technological investments, committing to "bank the unbanked" (Rosales et al., 2023). Despite official rhetoric of financial freedom and economic control, and the fact that extensive evidence shows Bukele's cryptocurrency scheme has been used for embezzlement (Alvarado, 2021ab), the "banking the unbanked" discourse obscures why 70 percent of Salvadorans don't have formal bank accounts. Rosales et al. (2023: 6) spoke with a Salvadoran financial technology expert who explained that most people are unbanked because they "don't have enough money to deposit into a bank account, considering they live on a day-to-day basis, and a bank account doesn't make sense." Unsurprisingly, the decision to adopt Bitcoin remains hugely unpopular, and less than 1% of the population uses it.

The shift to cryptocurrency was followed by a $500 million deal between the Bukele administration and Google to open a Cloud hub in the country. Titled the *Ley general para la modernización digital del Estado* or "General law for digital modernization in the state," the partnership was signed in 2023, with Bukele promising to turn El Salvador into the "Silicon Valley of Central America." However, details on how much foreign investment Google will actually make are dubious, and at present, it appears that El Salvador is primarily purchasing services from the company as a condition to establish its hub in the country. When he unveiled

the deal, Bukele claimed that this decision signaled El Salvador's "move forward," and the path to open "avenues for innovation, economic growth, and enhanced public services by redefining El Salvador's technological landscape" (Brewster, 2023; Peñate, 2023).

The contradictions of Bukele's digital water governance

Bukele's "disruptor" approaches to governance, which largely rely upon technological tools, have been widely praised by his international supporters, though notably, not specifically related to water services. As I learned from the Salvadoran labor and environmental movements, under the Law of Water Resources, the same water issues not only persist, but have in fact worsened. Indeed, national newspapers corroborate these facts, reporting that during Bukele's tenure, potable water coverage has stagnated (Cea, 2023). The newspaper *El Diario de Hoy* reported in 2023 that around 62 percent of the population had no idea there was official water legislation in place. But as residents told the newspaper, it wouldn't have mattered regardless because access to water had seemingly worsened in the last few years (Parada, 2023b).

Representatives from the environmental movement have been quick to point out ASA's lack of attention to deteriorating water issues, particularly in rural and peri-urban communities. Publicly, Castañeda has promised that *juntas de agua* won't be charged for water, and during our interview, he explained that his team goes all over the country talking with community leaders to learn what people need regarding water service. But as I learned from environmentalists who worked in those same communities, the exact opposite has happened. *Juntas* are receiving higher bills than before, and the process to register their wells or other water networks is increasingly complicated.[102] They also have very little contact with ASA representatives. The water justice

[102] *Alianza* press conference, participant observation, February 28, 2023, author field notes.

movement *Alianza* held a press conference in February 2023 to highlight the omissions in the Law of Water Resources, and to point out that since its codification, registering and securing water permits is now more difficult. They also questioned the structure of ASA's regulatory commission, which was designed to manage and fairly distribute water resources in El Salvador. Environmentalists argued that the makeup of the regulatory commission includes no input from civil society organizations or community leaders who manage *juntas de agua*, and angrily described the hypocrisy of how Castañeda "sells himself on social media as the protector of water and reassures that his mission is to guarantee water justice in the country," while Salvadorans continue experiencing chronic water service interruptions and contaminated tap water.[103]

I heard similar accounts from workers who noted a precipitous decline in water services. When I spoke with Roberto, the general secretary of the public transportation workers union, he told me he lived in a peri-urban neighborhood of San Salvador, and his community relied on a *junta de agua* that they had collectively built and operated for over 20 years. But under the new water regulations, they were required to transfer ownership, maintenance, and delivery over to ASA in 2021:

> "We built our own system, the cistern, installed pumps, and pipes, we even created a water gravity filtration system. The whole community worked, women, children, we put in manpower and our own money to make this project 20 years ago. Services were run through the municipality, which charges $3 [a month]. With the recent law, we had someone from *Nuevas Ideas* come and tell us, "Look you need to prepare all the paperwork from this

[103] *Alianza* press conference, participant observation, February 28, 2023, author field notes.

> project, because we are passing it over to ASA." Who has the time to do all this? I don't. And we don't even know who we're supposed to report to, they didn't say, maybe its ANDA or ASA, some type of moderator, but I don't even know the name. NI just said this all has to do with the new law, that this moderator was in charge now. And they said we should be paying at least double now. I asked for more information, and they didn't tell me anything. It's been days, and I haven't heard anything."[104]

There are many resonances between this story and that of the opening vignette, where Salvadorans were sold one version about the country's transition into a new, modernized system of water governance, while their lived realities tell a different story. Before the LRH came into effect, popular opinion consistently named ANDA as El Salvador's worst rated institution.[105] As I have explained throughout this dissertation, the water utility frequently reports service interruptions, inconsistencies with water bills, and unclear justifications for high prices of water. A year after its implementation, ASA is also beginning to register negative feedback, and people say water governance is now "uncertain and confusing."[106] When I asked about the new digital tools intended to streamline inscription and payment, people responded that communities now "have more difficulty accessing digital information to pay." Héctor from the agriculture workers union SITMAG, told me that now, the only *juntas* able to successfully register their water distribution systems are those who "had more economic capacity and resources," like those with

[104] SITTEAIES union, February 20, 2023; author interview.
[105] Dina Argueta, FMLN politician, April 19, 2023; author interview.
[106] SITMAG union, February 28, 2023; author interview.

more external financial support.[107] "We've already seen poor, rural *juntas* get completely excluded from ASA," he said.

The independent newspaper *Diario Co Latino* profiled some of those facing difficulties registering for water permits from ASA, who urged the Bukele administration to "dignify community water resource management (*dignificar la gestion comunitaria del recurso hídrico*)," telling the newspaper that despite their insistence to meet with ASA representatives, they've only been met with silence (Orellana, 2023b). "They [ASA] have not come to meet with us, and we think it's because they see us as 'the opposition,' but we don't know why. We're not trying to bother anyone, we just want solutions," one resident told *Diario*.

Finally, one of the more bizarre amendments in the Law of Water Resources addresses the need for transboundary water management of the Lempa River and watershed. The Lempa water bodies are some of the most important in El Salvador, spanning around 62 percent of its territory. The Lempa River and watersheds are shared with Guatemala and Honduras, two countries which, unlike El Salvador, still engage in metallic mining operations (Montoya, 2021). The *Foro* and *Alianza* movements insisted that whatever law was in place must include strong language to protect Salvadoran water sources from polluting industries like mining. The current LRH vaguely gestures to transboundary water management; however, according to the Bukele administration, representatives in charge of regional cooperation and negotiation must hold the rank of military general.[108] Concerns that Bukele will overturn the historical metal mining ban are omnipresent in El Salvador. Former politician Johnny Wright Sol is one of the metal mining ban's most fervent advocates. He was previously affiliated with ARENA and was instrumental in

[107] SITMAG union, February 28, 2023; author interview.
[108] *Alianza*, July 29, 2021; author interview.

swinging his party's vote in favor of a gold mining ban in 2017. He founded a new party called *Nuestro Tiempo* (Our Time), and when I interviewed him in 2023, he said he was growing increasingly worried about the mining ban's reversal, saying "If they [NI] can change the constitution to allow reelection, repealing a metal mining ban is easy work."[109]

While my primary focus during interviews was to discuss water governance in El Salvador, my conversations, no matter if they were with unions, environmentalists, or politicians, eventually settled on Bukele's state of exception. As I've explained above, this security policy is incredibly popular because it rapidly tamped down crime and gang violence. Yet, Salvadorans have had to pay a huge price for this, with thousands of innocent people now locked up. Some of the people I spoke with even knew someone who unjustly incarcerated. Furthermore, social movement members told me that because of their collective action, they now feel more acutely targeted under the state of exception. Salvadoran newspapers have widely reported on arbitrary arrests of people with no connection to organized crime (Redacción Nacionales, 2022; Ferrucci and Cabezas, 2023; Palma, 2023). Even as recently as 2024, *El Faro* reported that people in rural El Salvador were being swept up and locked away when they were simply working on plumbing projects to help bring more potable water to their communities (Gavarrete, 2024). In some cases, union members were arrested for demanding months of backpay from their municipal employers (Erazo, 2023). In other cases, as I learned during my interview with the teacher's union SIMEDUCO, unionists were threatened for bringing attention to decaying infrastructure in schools, and demanding the state invest to improve their working conditions.[110]

[109] Johnny Wright Sol, *Nuestro Tiempo*, April 25, 2023; author interview.
[110] SIMEDUCO, February 22, 2023; author interview.

Unions that have engaged in strikes and work stoppages to demand backpay or improved public services also received threatening home visits after these labor actions. Héctor told me about how police came to his home after his union struck in December 2022. “They came looking for me afterwards at my house, but luckily, I wasn’t there. These days, they [the government] don’t respect our human rights,” he said.[111] I heard similar accounts from members of the transportation workers union, who’d been in a constant battle with the state to prevent encroaching privatization in their sector. One member told me that heavily armed soldiers arrived at his 84-year-old mother’s house looking for him. He explained that she is hard of hearing and didn’t hear them knocking on the door. The soldiers preceded to knock the door down and scare her half to death. “She used to be their [Bukele and *Nuevas Ideas*] biggest fan, but after that scare they gave her…. I’m not sure anymore,” he explained, shaking his head.

Finally, when I brought up Bukele’s modernization discourse, members of the *Foro del Agua* said that in his speeches to the nation, Bukele emphasizes “progress, development, and security” to describe how the country could improve.[112] “It’s hard to argue against these things,” Ramón told me when we met in 2023. “People want them.”[113] Though he can expertly weave exciting narratives, Bukele tends to promise large-scale, transformative projects that don’t necessarily pan out, especially on an improved public water network. Moreover, while he has certainly delivered a robust security state, Bukele has also imposed austerity measures on Salvadorans, and dissolved social programs that provided funds for both urban and rural municipalities. This cost-cutting has meant that communities don’t have enough public funds for water infrastructure projects, and thousands of workers involved in social services have been laid

[111] SITMAG union, February 28, 2023; author interview.
[112] *Foro del Agua*, July 28, 2021; author interview.
[113] *Foro del Agua,* April 27, 2023; author interview.

off.[114] Public opinion polls now show that the economy, food insecurity, and the cost-of-living supplant crime as primary concerns for Salvadorans (Gavarrete, 2024; Velásquez Loaiza, 2024). I spoke with FMLN politician Dina Argueta in 2023, and our wide-ranging conversation touched on these aspects of Bukele's administration, where he paints a progressive public image of the country by ignoring people's everyday struggles to secure basic goods and services. "The *canasta básica* (basic food basket) is the most expensive in the country's history, the population remains highly vulnerable to water contamination, farmers report low agricultural productivity, people's daily wages aren't enough to cover the cost of living," she told me. "But, according to Bukele and *Nuevas Ideas*, we live in the best country in the world."

Bukelismo **and its discontents**

In this chapter, I don't necessarily intend to give Bukele's regime a separate and distinct label but rather, I am more interested in tracing the continuities and ruptures that *Bukelismo* represents. Bukele as a political leader may appear novel, especially when he reinforces that image with discourses of modernity, innovation, and technological progress. Yet there are similarities between Bukele and neoliberal politicians of the 1990s like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair (Rauda and Hochuli, 2024). By this, I am referring to how all three candidates presented themselves as "Third Way" political figures intent on rupturing existing political systems and promises to move their countries forward. But if we scrutinize the particularities of Bukele's governance, especially regarding his environmental policies, we observe routine neoliberal continuities that depend on loosening environmental regulations, narratives of self-governance and self-empowerment that preclude state intervention, public sector austerity, and hostility to

[114] SITRAFOPROLYD union, February 13, 2023; author interview.

organized labor. Even security under *Bukelismo* is reminiscent of hardline, broken windows policing and mass incarceration in the United States during the neoliberal period (Gilmore, 2007).

Bukelismo's neoliberal continuities are also coupled with conceptually interesting ruptures with policies on public spending and infrastructure. For one, Bukele isn't resistant to social spending. His ongoing infrastructure projects have already cost the country hundreds of millions of dollars. The state of exception alone, including the CECOT prison, cost over $180 million. Of course, some scholars argue that despite these eye-popping price tags, building a carceral state is far less expensive than developing a robust social welfare state (Clegg and Usmani, 2019). Bukele's Bitcoin project however, which has brought no obvious value to the country, has cost Salvadorans over $375 million, and even those numbers are underestimated because the government does not disclose any public information on transactions. These examples are to demonstrate the contradictions within *Bukelismo*, a political project that relies on massive spending for some infrastructural endeavors while dictating austerity and privatization towards social services and public institutions that millions of people depend on.

These contradictions become even more stark when we interrogate *Bukelismo* through the evolution of water governance in El Salvador. As I've demonstrated above, everyday issues related to access, cost, and quality persist, and while there is a water law in place, the kinds of infrastructure the government has invested in don't address the water crisis in ways that will help poor and working-class Salvadorans. The "improvements" that I observed result in enhanced tracking and surveillance that is now more conveniently mediated through digital tools to monitor who is and is not paying for water. Furthermore, the digitalization in water governance actually makes access to water, and access to information, harder and more *in*accessible. But the

kind of infrastructure people demand, like an expanded, piped water network, is still to be desired. As one public sector worker told me, the government "pays millions of dollars for publicity, but not on fixing our water problem."[115] To be clear, I am not opposed to innovation or technological progress in and of itself. I know that many of my interlocutors would welcome digital platforms that could deliver an abundance of reliable and inexpensive goods and services. Technological progress was at the heart of Marx's conception of an emancipatory project that liberated workers from suffering and exploitation under capitalism. However, I see no indications that the digital directions Bukele is undertaking will better people's lives, hence my skepticism towards claims of a "modern, technologically progressive El Salvador."

Thus far, Bukele's *mano dura* security policies have been an undeniable success in crime reduction (though with the heavy cost of violations to human and civil rights) and his handling of crime and gang violence means that he can avoid making any progress on economic and social issues in El Salvador. Bukele's management of the security crisis has allowed him to circumvent criticism on his subpar developmentalist agenda, which includes projects that have not generated economic growth and are both financially and environmentally unsustainable. In many ways, Bukele does seek forms of electoral legitimacy, which is evident in his portrayal of his opponents as *los mismos de siempre* ("the same ones as always") or blaming the country's socio-economic woes on political corruption.[116] The *Nuevas Ideas* slogan is *El dinero alcanza cuando nadie*

[115] SITRAL union, January 27, 2023; author interview.

[116] Like other right-wing authoritarians, Bukele blames internal enemies for the country's lack of progress. However, unlike Trump, or Bolsonaro for example, Bukele's scapegoating is not explicitly racialized. He uses "criminals and terrorists to describe everyone from white collar political figures accused of corruption, to poor and working-class people living in neighborhoods with heavy gang presence. I should note that Bukele doesn't entirely refrain from engaging in right-wing culture wars. He spoke at the 2024 CPAC conference and railed against "dark forces like Soros" and "globalists", and most recently passed legislation banning "gender ideology" in schools (Espinoza, 2024a; Gomez Licon, 2024).

roba, or "There is money when no one steals." In the most recent elections, Bukele touted how El Salvador was finally democratic, and elections were free and fair, signaling a more prosperous future under his regime. If we consider this assertion in earnest as attempts to bring more technological innovation into El Salvador, *Bukelismo* can be seen as a form of progress, and hence, *improvement* for the country. Yet, by all accounts, Bukele's only notable successes are fundamentally undemocratic, and necessitate further authoritarian entrenchment that has turned El Salvador into the country with the world's highest incarceration rate.

The paradox for *Bukelismo* is that to pursue a robust welfare state, or economic development projects that would alleviate the socio-economic hardships that Salvadorans face daily, he would have to abandon or at the very least rollback some of the investments made in his security project. This of course would mean transitioning away from the forms of governance that have propelled him internationally as a successful leader, even in comparison with other authoritarians. Therefore, if we are to understand *Bukelismo* as a kind of governance committed to developmentalism to "modernize" El Salvador, it is an agenda that is only possible if mediated through an authoritarian, punitive security state. Observing any of these initiatives outside the context of the state of exception reveals them as lackluster and unpopular policies. Therefore, Bukele is perhaps better conceptualized as a very successful authoritarian, and a failed developmentalist. As Bukele continues to accrue power, eliminate any political or social opposition, and weaken checks and balances on his administration, *Bukelismo* will confront its limits, especially if widespread social and economic problems continue to be ignored. Increasingly, candidates campaigning for elected office, and especially those from *Nuevas Ideas*, are met by angry Salvadoran residents whose primary demands include better access to potable water. By all accounts, they still have no answers to the water crisis.

Conclusion

Considering the salience of the "Bukele model" across the Americas, I argue for the necessary analysis of the limits of *Bukelismo* through the lens of water governance. Other governments mostly seek to emulate his ability to tamp down crime and gang violence, but Bukele's success is very context and place specific. For one, Salvadoran gangs are not deeply connected with international drug cartels, compared to Ecuador or Honduras (both countries that have installed their own states of exception, which are much less successful than El Salvador). Additionally, Bukele has virtually no opposition to his political ambitions, from electoral parties to courts that can overrule his policies. This is not necessarily the case across Latin America, whose legislative assemblies are much more heterogeneous than El Salvador.

But I would also caution against exporting *Bukelismo* for more long-term reasons. As I've discussed throughout this chapter, adopting the "Bukele model" for economic development could come at the expense of other institutions, and possibly lead to the disinvestment in public services for education, and environmental goods like water. Despite his image as a modern and innovative leader, throughout most of his political career, Bukele's governance follows the same neoliberal pathways as the conservative ARENA party that favored environmental deregulation. Perhaps the grandiose populist rhetoric is novel, but analyzing the particularities of *Bukelismo,* especially in the context of water governance, reveals old wine in new bottles. Yes, a water law has finally been codified under the Bukele administration, but this legislation hasn't improved coverage, and Salvadorans are now subject to more tracking and surveillance through the applications connected to his water policies. These digital tools are primarily used to ensure timely payments, rather than resolve chronic water shortages. Thus far, no administrations have been able to deliver the kind of water governance that Salvadorans demand, likely because it

would require massive state spending to build up public infrastructure that would guarantee uninterrupted and affordable water for all. For Bukele, this shift would necessitate extricating funding away from his security project and into a more social democratic direction. But there are no indications that this change is on the horizon.

In all my interviews, environmentalists, workers, and politicians discussed how these water issues persisted, and their concerns for the impending economic crisis for El Salvador. Curiously, I also heard another social group express its worry about the country's lackluster growth and worsening water crisis because of *Bukelismo*: The Salvadoran business community. Like the environmental movement, businesses have been stakeholders in the legislative water fight since the early 2000s. But now, as I was surprised to learn, the business community sees the current administration as the antagonist to growth, the barrier to the influx of foreign investment, and the reason for dilapidated water conditions across El Salvador. The Salvadoran business community is the last social group I interviewed for this dissertation, and it is the focus of the next, and final body chapter.

Chapter 6 – "Who better to protect water than us?": Salvadoran *Empresarios* and market-provisioned water justice

My interview was starting to wind down. I had spent the last half hour speaking with Humberto, a businessman from the Salvadoran Chamber of Real Estate and Construction, CASALCO, on the legislative water struggle and the future of water politics in the country.[117] He glanced at my water glass, which was now about a quarter full. "You need more water? Let me get you some," he said. Pressing the intercom button on his desk, he called for Sylvia, the building's custodial worker. She entered carrying a pitcher of ice water.

"Sylvia, help me out," Humberto said. "Do you get water from ANDA into your house?

"We only get water in the morning, around 1 AM, sometimes until 11 AM," Sylvia responded.

"And how much do you pay a month?" Humberto asked.

"Sometimes over $45!" Sylvia exclaimed. "And I know someone in [the upscale neighborhood] *La Metrópolis*, she only pays $2.39."

Humberto gave me a knowing look. "There you go! *Fijate bien*, I'm not making this up. And Sylvia, what do you think your friend would say if they started charging her what she should be paying?"

"She'd probably get mad, since she pays so little already," Sylvia responded. She left the office shortly thereafter.

---

[117] CASALCO, May 2, 2023; author interview. All names in this chapter are pseudonyms.

Humberto nodded vigorously, turning to me. “You see what I mean? There it is. People don’t want to pay.”

Sylvia came back into the office, this time holding a couple of her ANDA bills, wanting to show me how expensive they were. Indeed, even though she only received water in the early morning, her bills were all over $30. “How do you think should I correct this?” she asked Humberto. “Well, you know what I did, was I called them [ANDA], and I made them replace my water meter to charge me correctly,” he responded. “That’s what you need to do.”

Sylvia hesitated. “So, you’re saying I need to change the meter? The thing is it costs something like $100 to replace it. And I’ve heard from others that when they got theirs replaced, they started getting bills for over $1000….”

Humberto shrugged. “Yeah, well I don’t know, I guess those things need to be regulated… people just need to pay…”

Sylvia sighed. “It’s very unjust because we don’t have water.”

The exchange with Sylvia came at the tail end of my conversation with Humberto, where we had spoken almost exclusively on how unbalanced water pricing was in El Salvador. All the social groups I’ve interviewed for this dissertation mentioned uneven price burdens on poor and working-class Salvadorans, so it wasn’t entirely surprising to hear representatives from the Salvadoran business community broach the topic. I open this chapter with Sylvia’s example precisely because it encompasses many of the water injustices that Salvadorans confront daily. Yet despite Humberto acknowledging this kind of water injustice, during the interview, he was

most fixated on attitudes towards price corrections, without addressing how other factors – like water meters – contribute to these expensive and unexplained water bills.

For this final body chapter, I focus on the Salvadoran business community, and its role in the water struggle. The *empresarios*, or businessmen, as I will refer to them throughout the rest of the chapter, were eager to talk with me about the water crisis, and water injustice more generally. I chose to interview representatives from several industries including commercial real estate (like CASALCO), agribusiness, the bottling industry, and the private enterprise association ANEP. Some of these groups, like ANEP and the Chamber of Agribusiness CAMAGRO were involved in the legislative water struggle, in some cases, presenting their own water laws to the Legislative Assembly. Commercial real estate and the bottling industry have adopted more advisory positions rather than creating their own policies. Additionally, during my conversations with environmentalists, FMLN politicians, and unions, they named these industries as the most water-intensive, blaming them for the water crisis and the demise of the *Foro del Agua's* General Water Law. I supplement these interviews with extensive media analysis, including hours of video testimonies from ad-hoc committee meetings, where Salvadoran businesses were invited to comment on the draft proposal of President Nayib Bukele's Law of Water Resources.[118]

Unsurprisingly, the Salvadoran business community portrays itself as a natural leader in water governance, invoking language of efficiency and entrepreneurial spirit. More surprisingly, *empresarios* adopt similar egalitarian language as the other social groups I've written about, highlighting the importance of human rights and environmental justice, condemning how the water crisis impacts everyday Salvadorans. By addressing cost burdens on poor communities and

[118] The ad-hoc committee invited 17 businesses across the private sector to contribute to the Law of Water Resources, of which 10 accepted.

emphasizing sustainability, the Salvadoran business community includes itself in the water struggle. But I argue that its solutions for the water crisis are a kind of branded, market-provisioned water justice that serves to facilitate more profit accumulation. Paradoxically, for the *empresarios* to remain "competitive," their profit-seeking approach necessitates the kind of government intervention they so often critique. Furthermore, there is now unprecedented tension between the Salvadoran business class and Bukele because the *empresarios* criticize the administration's illiberal turn. Their invocation of water injustice is now one more part of their overall disapproval with *Bukelismo*, though only insofar as it presents an obstacle to profit accumulation.

In the next section, I'll describe how sustainability and environmental justice are used by corporations to promote supposed "green" inclinations but are instead exercises in preserving neoliberal environmental governance. The Salvadoran business community subscribes to some of these methods to position itself as the necessary force to resolve the water crisis. After the conceptual framework, I'll give a brief historical summary of the relationship between the traditional capitalist class, which dominated real estate and agrarian markets, and its relationship with the Salvadoran state. I will then turn to my case study to understand how the *empresarios* articulate water justice, which is largely through critiques of why it has yet to be secured. Representatives also have their own solutions to the water crisis, some of which have been codified into the Law of Water Resources, though the Salvadoran business community remains unsatisfied with the new legislation. I'll conclude with a discussion of how the relationship between business and the Bukele administration is growing increasingly tense and explain how water justice fits into this dynamic.

Marketing sustainability as water justice

Corporate adoption of green or justice discourse for profit accumulation has a long tradition. Even before they took on sustainability characteristics, development improvement schemes served to enrich ruling groups by securing more control over people and territories (Ferguson, 1994). This kind of language can certainly be grafted onto "green" or "sustainable" development to control natural resources. As Li (2007) argues, these practices necessitate that political-economic questions be uncoupled from developmental (or environmental) questions, rendering the problem technical. In other words, by framing problems in technical terms, developmental interventions must necessarily be technical, and explicitly *not* political, thereby avoiding the need for political reform. Remarkably, the Salvadoran business community repeatedly said the biggest barrier to water justice was that the issue became "too politicized." They also fault the "bad culture of water in El Salvador," indicating the need for environmental education that cultivates "green" citizens. Here, it is useful to draw from Agrawal (2005) to understand the Foucauldian notion of governmentality as applied to how individuals ascribe to environmental objectives like sustainability or environmental consciousness.

Constructing "green" subjects through these narratives is not new, nor is the incorporation of justice or rights in global sustainability discourse (Conca et al., 1995; Liverman, 2018). Yet when analyzing how this kind of rhetoric is deployed through global environmental governance agreements, Okereke (2006) demonstrates that despite the egalitarian language, the policies themselves are firmly rooted in market-based solutions like privatization and minimal state intervention that bolsters a status quo. In general, sustainability politics can often be ambiguous and easily adoptable by capital, designating them as "empty signifiers" (Brown, 2016). Nevertheless, business sustainability campaigns now also invoke the human right to water

discourse while at the same time championing water concessions that give business exclusive rights to the resource (Bakker, 2007; Sultana and Loftus, 2012, 2020). International financial institutions like the World Bank, and corporate conglomerates like Nestle and Coca-Cola use this language, though as Karunananthan (2019) argues, they just further legitimize forms of accumulation by dispossessing communities of their water. What these companies and institutions are actually most concerned with is competition over water resources.

In El Salvador, multinationals like Coca-Cola, Nestle, and SABMiller, and agribusiness constantly boast their green credentials, and more recently, their concern for the human right to water and water justice. But they also reiterate how they must "stay competitive," regardless of the uneven effects of the water crisis on poor and working-class Salvadorans. These pseudo-social justice agendas are reminiscent of corporate social responsibility programs (Pearson et al., 2019), or ethical branding (Hawkins and Emel, 2014), tactics used to diffuse condemnation for decades of environmental degradation from extractive operations. What these companies will often say is that they provide important (sometimes water-related) infrastructure (Billo, 2015), or funding for "environmental protections" and "green development" (Mendoza et al., 2021). A more recent iteration of neoliberal sustainability discourse are "nature-based solutions," that include social justice, equity, and participatory governance, but still facilitate market-mediated interactions through urban nature (Kotsila et al., 2021). In El Salvador's case, though businesses tout their environmental benefits and sustainable production models, it's hard to actually say *what* they deliver to communities. When asked, they often respond by saying they "provide jobs."[119]

[119] *Asociación Azucarera de El Salvador,* April 21, 2023; CAMAGRO, May 2, 2023; author interviews.

Green capitalism as water (in)justice

Geographers have long written about how sustainability discourse and practices increased alongside neoliberalism's ascent (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Robertson, 2004; Brand, 2007; Castree, 2008). Water services, especially in urban areas, were supposedly more sustainably managed if undertaken by private companies (Bakker, 2003), though this tactic was used to obscure profit accumulation (Swyngedouw, 2007). As Bakker (2007) demonstrated, businesses appropriated a human rights discourse, incorporating it into their corporate social responsibility programs. This does not mean that the ideas themselves are void of meaning, but that they should be more clearly defined in order to better support water justice struggles (Sultana and Loftus, 2012). Indeed, throughout this dissertation, I've sought to expand how water justice can be articulated and understood, both in more radical, emancipatory ways for working people, or through technocratic, neoliberal iterations. It is not unfounded that the business community would misappropriate water justice to their own benefit, intentionally blurring the lines between corporate and human rights (Karunannathan, 2019).

Furthermore, the power of corporate sectors across urban and rural industries facilitates land and water grabs that displace surrounding water users, exacerbating water injustice (Mehta et al., 2012; Boelens et al., 2018). In Jakarta for instance, Colven (2022) shows how rapid urbanization of luxury real estate development, bankrolled by Indonesian financial capital, has caused mass water shortages amongst the city's poorest residents while the wealthy who can afford these properties enjoy uninterrupted water access. Recent work on rural to urban transformation in El Salvador highlights how the country's elites established public-private partnerships with the Ministry of Housing and ANDA (Gutiérrez, 2024). This relationship allowed real estate oligarchs to impose strict clauses for water permits that prioritized high-end

real estate projects over affordable housing. Just like the rest of the world, El Salvador is confronting a cost of living and housing crisis, and despite real estate rhetoric that government subsidies are necessary so builders can continue to provide housing to everyday Salvadorans, it's becoming increasingly difficult for local people to purchase homes (Mendoza, 2023).

Many of these actions from the Salvadoran business community, though egregious, are not necessarily new strategies. Using water justice narratives to greenwash extractive operations and improve profitability is a tried-and-true practice for capitalists to protect their investments. But a more novel use of water justice as a marketing strategy is how the Salvadoran business community invokes the term to position itself against the state, and specifically, against *Bukelismo.* While not a perfect overlap, this shift in capital-state relations resonates with corporate reactions to Trumpism in the United States, with capital virtue signaling by embracing socially liberal causes during his administration (Fraser, 2022). I understand this transition as one consistent with the "not quite so post-neoliberal moment" I've theorized throughout the dissertation.

My discussions on post-neoliberalism have mainly focused on its expression from the left, to understand the current moment as one that is not a full departure from neoliberal governance, but rather a re-politicized period with hybrid state-corporate arrangements (Grugel and Rigirozzi, 2012; Yates and Bakker, 2014; Andreucci and Radhuber, 2017). Scholars have also written about how the post-neoliberal moment produces ideological incoherences and fracturing on the right (Anievas and Saull, 2023), where traditional conservatives and business communities took a neo-Keynesian turn, invoking language of competition and free enterprise as a more "socially just capitalism" (Foster and el-Ojeili, 2023). Applying this to green politics, corporations now seek to adopt environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks into

their business models (Dimmelmeier, 2023). By all accounts, ESG reinforces market power and preserves the logics of capital accumulation, but more revanchist factions of the far right decry its implementation as so-called "woke capitalism" (Thistlethwaite and Paterson, 2016; Petry and Jaspert, 2023). By extension, the nexus of post-neoliberalism and water governance ranges from the proliferation of philantrocapitalism (Menga et al., 2023), to remunicipalization, though with bizarre characteristics where neoliberal businesses and far-right nationalists' partner to construct protectionist, commercialized public water utilities (Medarov and McDonald, 2019). Such nationalist sentiment can also be articulated through a Left state and used against decolonial movements, or ethnic and racialized groups by rolling back (sometimes violently) redistributive, autonomous, or multicultural policies (Hale, 2020; Martínez Novo, 2021).

Political scientists have observed changing state-capital relationships and the rise of the far-right in Latin America, with Brazil and Bolsonaro as a key case study. They argue that despite his erratic authoritarianism, the Brazilian business community provided political and financial support to Bolsonaro when it became clear that he would outsource all economic decisions to his finance minister, the Chicago trained neoliberal economist Paulo Guedes (Søndergaard, 2023). da Silva (2022, 2023) argues that it is specifically these strategic alliances with traditional conservative politicians that instill confidence in finance, real estate, and agribusiness groups to support far-right figures. I see overlapping characteristics between Bolsonaro, Trump, and Bukele that explain the business sector's resistance to supporting *Bukelismo.* As I will expound upon below, Salvadoran capital's embrace of water justice is partly in response to Bukele's hard-right security and economic policies. Yet capital's disapproval of his governance is not because of how much it disadvantages ordinary Salvadorans, but rather because *Bukelismo* is interrupting foreign investment into the country. As for El Salvador's digital economic turn with Bitcoin, real

estate development and agribusiness, who've dominated the corporate world for the last century, see no added benefit. And in a country with a serious water crisis, Salvadoran capital can now virtue signal how much they are concerned with water injustice by claiming that *Bukelismo* is a barrier to it. The growing tension between the Salvadoran state and its capitalist class is a relatively recent development. I will turn to this history next.

The Salvadoran business community through history

Political ecological struggles in El Salvador between elite and mass popular factions haven't always concentrated on water, but on another environment medium inextricable from it: land. Throughout most of its history, land distribution in El Salvador was highly unequal, with 60 percent of the arable land owned by 2 percent of the population (Pettiná, 2022). The Salvadoran oligarchy originated in the nineteenth century through the dominant coffee economy, and enjoyed immense economic, political, and social influence (Sedgewick, 2020). Their power extended to the armed forces, and after a peasant insurrection in 1932 led by Communist leader Farabundo Martí protesting the extreme concentration of land and profits by coffee elites, the military responded by massacring 30,000 Indigenous and *campesino* Salvadorans (Dunkerley, 1983). This defining event set the stage for uninterrupted dictatorships, where revanchist anti-Communist elites maintained a firm hold on military and political power throughout the twentieth century (Ching, 2014).

El Salvador's capitalist class continued to grow wealthier, but bubbling unrest also grew, exploding into the Salvadoran Civil War in the 1980s. Some interpret the tumultuous 1980s as an effort by popular, leftist forces – in the form of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front guerrillas and social movement supporters – trying to establish social democracy against a revanchist oligarchy (Gould, 2019). The war tension simmered down in 1984 after the election of

Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte, who tried to adopt a broadly social democratic project which included land reform, industrialization, and more equitable distribution of the nation's wealth. However, he was prevented from doing so by the nation's coffee and sugarcane elite, and the Reagan administration, which insisted that Duarte adopt a free market economy, cut back on social spending, and abandon land reform (Grandin, 2021). At one point, Duarte even tried to levy a war tax, which would have mainly affected private enterprise, but the Supreme Court threw the policy out after ANEP launched a nationwide capital strike, refusing any form of investment (Gould, 2019).

Hamstrung by economic elites, Duarte was unable to make much forward progress economically, and in the 1989 elections, the right-wing ARENA candidate Alfredo Cristiani, who hailed from coffee wealth, won the presidency handily. By this point, the war was not going well for the military, and after high profile death squad killings of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her 16-year-old daughter at the Central American University, Cristiani began a concerted effort to "modernize" the party, and by extension, the party's elite support base. This meant distancing themselves from more fascist figures like General Roberto D'Aubuisson - the founder of ARENA and a death squad leader - but also by diversifying their business activities to include banking and financial services alongside agribusiness (Paige, 1997). Cristiani was a key figure during El Salvador's neoliberal period, and after the Peace Accords were signed, he privatized the banking and pension systems. Almeida (2008) argues that these decisions helped to fortify the Salvadoran oligarchy's economic power, who now dominated commercial real estate development in addition to finance and sugarcane agribusiness. In 2004, ARENA instituted further market reforms with the Central American Free Trade Agreement (Spalding, 2014).

The Salvadoran business community in the contemporary period

By this point, the primary political ecological concerns in El Salvador centered on water. The *Foro del Agua* introduced their General Water Law to the Legislative Assembly in 2006, but as I detailed in Chapter 2, the proposal sat in limbo for three years. Much of this had to do with the fact that the ARENA-dominated Assembly had strong ties to the business community, with many legislators either coming from the business world themselves or with familial ties to industry. But even when the FMLN was in power, the Assembly hesitated to regulate big water users. As I learned from the *Foro del Agua*, "all parties get money from business, especially the *cañeros* (sugarcane growers), who pay off all the politicians to not pass our legislation."[120] Throughout their tenure, the FMLN administration fielded several water proposals from the business community. In 2013, the agribusiness lobby CAMAGRO presented their *Propuestas de los regantes* (Irrigators Law), a version of the water law whose regulatory body comprised both public and private sector representatives, though with more favorability towards private enterprise in agribusiness, real estate, and tourism (Díaz, 2020; Pacas, 2021). CAMAGRO reportedly received extensive advice from university and think tank researchers while drafting this bill, giving them significant overlap with the *intelectuales*.[121]

The most controversial water law proposal was ANEP's 2017 Comprehensive Water Law, a bill that was widely interpreted as an attempt to privatize water. The policy stipulated a regulatory committee of five seats distributed amongst the private and public sector, one for the corporation of municipalities COMURES, universities, and one for the president. Environmentalists were concerned that even though ANEP's regulatory structure was presented

[120] *Foro del Agua*, June 29, 2019; author interview.
[121] *Foro del Agua*, June 29, 2019; CAMAGRO, May 2, 2023; author interviews.

as public (with only one seat designated to private enterprise), *empresarios* had significant influence over COMURES. Furthermore, if an ARENA (or other right-wing candidate) took the presidency, that would give the board a 3-2 majority favoring the private sector, making the Comprehensive Water Law *de-facto* privatization. Of course, ANEP rejected these claims. During the 2018 anti-water privatization rallies, the business lobby responded by saying that the protests were meant as a distraction from the ongoing legal prosecution of former FMLN president Mauricio Funes for corruption and money laundering (Noticiero Hechos de El Salvador, 2018).

The bottling industry is somewhat of an outlier in this water struggle, though that may be because Salvadoran manufacturers are parts of larger international conglomerates like SABMiller and Coca-Cola, rather than national capital like real estate or agribusiness. While they've not played a prominent role in the legislative water struggle, the bottling sector has nonetheless been enrolled in controversies over extensive water use that resulted in water shortages for months on end to neighboring communities (Gies, 2018a). More recently, bottling manufacturers have engaged in corporate sustainability practices to help foster a "Salvadoran environmental consciousness" (Redacción Economía, 2022; La Tribu Radio, 2022). However, bottling companies like *La Constancia* were embroiled in a series of labor violations, including withholding wages, arbitrary firings, and creating a hostile work environment for workers trying to organize a union (Henríquez, 2021; Trucchi, 2021).

The central role of water in Salvadoran environmental struggles has expressed itself in different capacities in the twenty-first century. While I analyze water policies for this dissertation, my conceptual approach, water justice, goes beyond law itself. For one, environmentalists and the business community agreed on the importance of water justice over a

crucial ecological issue: metal mining. El Salvador passed an unprecedented metal mining ban in 2017 after nearly a decade of struggle. It's tempting to slot this win into an overall anti-extractivist program driven by water justice. That was certainly the rhetoric used by Salvadoran politicians who implemented the ban, and academic analysis which emphasized grassroots efforts that influenced policymakers (Broad and Cavanagh, 2021). But what was interesting about this case was that, unlike the legislative water struggle that pitted internal social groups against one another, the proponents of metal mining in El Salvador were international capital, and national capitalists found very little advantage in the mining industry. Furthermore, they agreed that continuing metal mining would contaminate water resources. Agribusiness in particular uses huge amounts of water for their harvest and worried about what encroaching international competition would do to their production.[122] Therefore, even though the Salvadoran business community leveraged a rhetorical call for water justice against mining extraction, these companies still engage in extractive practices themselves (Artiga-Purcell, 2022).

It was only under Bukele's tenure when the legislative water struggle was finally settled, after his administration passed the Law of Water Resources in December 2021. And as I will explain, the reception of this law amongst the business community is tepid at best. But the business community itself has adopted more environmentally friendly language and positioned itself as a steward of water justice. However, as I will demonstrate in the empirical section, the *empresarios* don't necessarily have a theory of water justice despite using the same narratives as other social groups. Rather, they have their own critiques of water governance and water justice that deflect attention away from their own practices.

[122] To generate 2.2 pounds of sugar, you would need between 396 and 792 gallons of water, and producers use another 2,641 gallons to clean each metric ton of sugar (Díaz, 2019).

"If anyone is interested in protecting water, it's the private sector"

Nearly all my conversations with representatives from the Salvadoran business community began with some version of "we don't have a water scarcity problem; we have a water management problem." In this way, the *empresarios* cohere with the *radicales*. They followed these statements up with comments on the injustices of poor neighborhoods paying higher water bills than affluent ones, including the neighborhoods they lived in. Some *empresarios* complained that the lack of investment in water infrastructure is a major issue in El Salvador. I spoke with William, a representative of CAMAGRO, who said this lack of investment was unjust. "If you take $200 million, replace those bad pipes, you can recoup that money in 5 to 7 years! But you know why they don't do it? Because they have a government mentality, not a private sector mentality. They are corrupt," he concluded.[123] *How* or *where* the government would get that $200 million was less clear from our conversation, though this perhaps should not come as a surprise. Invoking water management as the main issue, rather than absolute water scarcity, can lead to reforms that include deregulation or institutional rearrangements that favor the private sector (c.f. Bakker, 2007).

I opened this chapter with my interview with Humberto from the construction trade association CASALCO. Most of our conversation centered on the cost of water in El Salvador. "The problem here is that water is not properly paid for. Any law needs to include adequate water charges (*que se paga adecuadamente*)," Humberto said near the beginning of our interview. "You need to properly charge for water. Some people get bills of $2.99! We can't have that."[124]

[123] CAMAGRO, May 2, 2023; author interview.
[124] CASALCO, May 2, 2023; author interview.

"Look, I proposed a plan to the president one day in a meeting [with business leaders] on how to fix this," Humberto continued. "I said to him, you take one hundred thousand homes, and make them all pay $20 dollars. What do you have there… $24 million, per year? Use that for water infrastructure! But they don't. Because people don't want to pay more."

Initially, I was surprised at the thematic overlap between my conversations with the *empresarios* and those in the other social groups I interviewed, especially considering that business was often positioned as the adversaries to the General Water Law. However, as our conversations went on, I quickly realized that discursive overlap was where these similarities began and ended. For one, when discussing costs, I couldn't get a clear sense from *empresarios* who should be paying more for water, even though they repeated again and again the injustices of cost burdens on poor neighborhoods. And as I will discuss later, in most cases businesses felt they should not be made to pay for water at all.

I also observed this contradictory back and forth during the Law of Water Resources ad-hoc committee meetings. On the one hand, private sector lobbyists suggested the new law should prioritize domestic water use[125] and incorporate citizen participation to address decades of water injustice.[126] On the other hand, and this was fervently repeated by nearly all the spokespeople for the private sector, the water law needed to have clearly defined incentives and subsidies for Salvadoran industries. Of course, the rhetorical support for water justice and the human right to water for all, and the safeguarding for private sector competition and profit accumulation for the few, is common practice for Salvadoran businesses. In 2014, after backlash from a controversial

[125] *Cooperativa Cafetalera Los Pinos* (Coffee Cooperative Los Pinos) at the ad-hoc committee for the Law of Water Resources, July 22, 2021; author participant observation on livestream (Legislative Assembly, 2021, 53:00).
[126] Sherwin Williams Corporation at the ad-hoc committee for the Law of Water Resources, July 22, 2021; author participant observation on livestream (Legislative Assembly, 2021, 2:10:00).

plan to expand its plant into water stressed Nejapa, the bottling company *La Constancia,* a subsidiary of the international conglomerate SABMiller, put out a statement supporting the *Foro's* General Water Law (Provost and Kennard, 2014). *La Constancia* acknowledged the importance of "supporting local communities in their struggle to access clean water" and that "access to clean water was a human right." However, *La Constancia* also commented that responsibility for water use, protection, and conservation should be shared amongst water users and industry alike.

What *was* clearly articulated was who the Salvadoran business community blamed for delays in water justice, and deficiencies in the current Law of Water Resources. Private sector opinions on the water policy are mixed at best, and no one is particularly enthusiastic about it. Some described it as "not perfect, but a good start," while others said it was a failure because the "completely public regulatory body" shut out the private sector entirely from decision making and the "Bukele dictatorship will probably last 20 years, and only give water to their voters."[127] More optimistic accounts noted how "valuable" it was to have "such a technical person as the head of ASA," in reference to its president Jorge Castañeda.[128] But when I asked why it had taken such a long time for water policy to be established, they all answered one of two ways: that water had become "politicized" either by ideological environmentalists or the FMLN, or that government bureaucracy and corruption (no specifications to which party) delayed codification.

One of my more heated interviews was with William from CAMAGRO. He started by asking me if I was the kind of person who thought that water was "more important for the ecosystem than humanity, or that water use for humans was primary, and that ecology was

[127] *Asociación Azucarera de El Salvador*, April 21, 2023; CASALCO, May 2, 2023; ANEP, April 18, 2023; author interviews.
[128] *Asociación Azucarera de El Salvador*, April 21, 2023; author interview.

important, but seen in relation to humanity."[129] I said that I took the latter position, to which he answered, "Perfect, then we will understand each other." He went on to explain that after the Berlin Wall fell, the left had a void to fill, so they decided to take up the "ecological banner." Because ecology became "mixed up with ideology," El Salvador began to have problems establishing environmental policy. "They [leftists] could no longer say that the private sector exploited workers, so they decided instead to say that we took water away from communities. Which is totally false," he told me.

I interviewed Christian, a spokesperson from ANEP, who was a part of the team that wrote the Comprehensive Water Law. He rejects the privatization label outright, telling me that despite "dissenting voices saying we wanted to privatize…. this was never on the table."[130] Christian told me that his team came up with a proposal that would "achieve universal coverage for water and sanitation in El Salvador."[131] He continued that ANEP "took seriously how Salvadorans suffered water shortages, bad quality, and putrid smells of *ese vital líquido en sus casas"*[132] and that the technical services the organization could offer people through their law would resolve these issues. He bitterly explained that they couldn't implement any of this because groups like the *Foro* and the *Alianza* would tell municipalities that anything ANEP was involved in was water privatization. "We were never interested in privatizing, we just rejected any attempts to politicize this issue, to try and make it something economic or electoral," Christian told me. "That is not treating it with the seriousness it deserves." Yet because of "ideological discursive and physical pressure" – marches and protests – the Legislative Assembly

[129] CAMAGRO, May 2, 2023; author interview.
[130] ANEP, April 18, 2023; CASALCO, May 2, 2023; author interview.
[131] ANEP, April 18, 2023; author interview.
[132] Literally translates to "vital liquid," which in Latin America, is often the term used for water.

made no progress on water policy, and ultimately shut out the private sector from participation.[133] I was told that because sugarcane is the most important cash crop in El Salvador, agribusiness considers itself as another important player in water policy debates, on par with ministries and *juntas de agua*. Yet in the legislative water struggle, *empresarios* found it unfair that business "wouldn't have a vote" on any regulatory committee.[134]

I introduced the animosity between business and the environmental movement in Chapter 2 and was not surprised to hear *empresarios* say that environmentalists opportunistically used the water crisis to their advantage. "They [*Foro*] sell water scarcity, and they take advantage of examples from Soyapango," William told me. "But there is no water scarcity, it's bad management!" Perhaps more cynically, Christian suspected that the *Foro* "didn't even care about water," considering how long it took to pass a water law. The *empresarios* consistently argued that "ideology" and "politicization" gave the environmental movement undue influence on the government, and especially on the FMLN. Salvadoran businesses also blamed state ineptitude, bureaucracy, and corruption - what they called "government mentality" - for delayed results on a water law. "Water governance must be decentralized," Christian insisted. "Our proposal was best because we suggested one representative from the ministries, one from the private sector, one from universities, one from municipalities, and one for the president. That way no one has total control over water, especially not the government." Christian, William, and Humberto insisted water could be used as a "political tool," to sway voters and punish *opositores* (opposition). And all agreed that the new water law's greatest deficiency was that the regulatory body is entirely from the public sector.

---

[133] CAMAGRO, May 2, 2023; author interview.
[134] *Asociación Azucarera de El Salvador*, April 21, 2023; author interview.

Finally, like some of the other groups I've discussed so far, those in the business community commented on cultural attitudes towards water conservation and cost. Despite claiming to understand water injustice as the uneven cost burdens on poor and working-class communities in El Salvador, Humberto repeated several times that Salvadorans had the "bad habit of thinking water should be gifted to us," and that receiving high water bills is "not always the fault of the meters or the water pipes," but rather an unawareness of how much water people actually use. At one point in our interview, he asked me how much my monthly water bill in El Salvador was. I explained that it varied, sometimes $15, but other times $100. "Well, that bad…. But sometimes it's $2.99. We can't have that! We have to charge for water," he replied. Similarly, during the ad-hoc commissions, private sector lobbyists emphasized the importance of sustainability, claiming that it could be achieved through a "culture of water conservation and efficiency."[135]

Towards a market-based water justice

In this first section, I've sought to untangle how business describes water (in)justice, and to analyze its understanding of the legislative water struggle by discussing who it blames for the delay in water policy. For the next section, I will unpack how and why *empresarios* position themselves as the best stewards of water justice. While preparing for these interviews, I wanted to be very delicate with how I extracted this information, expecting this social group to be unsympathetic to environmental causes. My apprehension was unnecessary. Though *empresarios* were hostile towards the Salvadoran environmental movement, they certainly didn't reject environmentalism outright. To my surprise, representatives from the business community wove

[135] *Consejo Empresarial Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Sostenible* (Salvadoran Business Council for Sustainable Development) at the ad-hoc committee for the Law of Water Resources, July 22, 2021; author participant observation on livestream (Legislative Assembly, 2021, 3:54:00)

in the importance of sustainability, conservation, justice, and the human right to water in their answers to my interview questions. And at the ad-hoc committee meetings, business lobbyists underlined their ecological concerns, though notably in service of demands for compensation and benefits for ecosystem services.

One of the sectors that most touted their green credentials was the bottling industry. I interviewed Ricardo, who works for *La Constancia*, and he said that sustainability is a huge part of their program, that "sustainability *is* our business."[136] In fact, it was with this industry where I heard the term "water stewards" used most often. Representatives from this industry used the English term, rather than a Spanish translation, but they followed up by explaining that water stewards were those who *cuidan el agua*, or "took care of the water." Ricardo shared the company's sustainability framework, called "100 years more (*Por Cien años más*)" which was meant to represent how the bottlers took care of the environment to "preserve it for 100 more years." As I learned, because the industry is so dependent on water, they've sought to adopt the principles of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their production to "commit to preserving the resources of the future." I was directed to their website to read their sustainability platform and saw the SDGs prominently featured. Somewhat surprisingly, they were displayed in English, rather than Spanish, with no translation (La Constancia, n.d.).[137] Ricardo said *La Constancia* sees itself as a leader in "water stewardship," and has reduced its water usage by 53 percent in the last 15 years by engaging in a water recycling process known as "circular water," where all the water the company extracts is returned to aquifers to some capacity.

---

[136] *La Constancia*, May 3, 2023; author interview. Emphasis included based on tone of conversation.
[137] I include this detail to indicate who they are marketing themselves towards, given that less than half of the Salvadoran population speaks English (Henríquez, 2018).

Perhaps because the SDGs focus on the environment, other businesses had an affinity for them. In the last few years, the sugarcane industry has aggressively promoted sustainability. Much of the sugarcane industry is dominated by the Regalado's, one of the infamous "fourteen families," a reference to the dynastic, coffee plantation owning elite that had considerable influence in Salvadoran political and economic life for most of the twentieth century (Sedgewick, 2020). At a recent sustainability conference, Tomas Regalado, president of *Asociación Azuacarera*, gave the keynote address, and spoke about the importance of incorporating the SDGs into sugarcane business models, and the role business should play in global environmental policy:

> "Sustainability is sometimes seen as a government responsibility. The SDGs create a valuable platform that encourages public-private cooperation in the attainment of these goals."[138]

At one point during my interview with *La Constancia*, I broached the topic of the water law. Ricardo seemed hesitant to talk about that, saying he wasn't a "spokesperson for that part of the business," and much preferred to discuss their green practices. I couldn't get an on-the-record response from him about the new water law. Luckily, *La Constancia* is not the only bottler in El Salvador. *Agua Alpina* is another major bottling company that distributes to regional supermarkets and convenience stores. While I was unable to secure an interview with someone from the company, I did watch their testimonies with the ad-hoc committee on the Law of Water Resources and got a sense of how they understand and interpret water justice. *Agua Alpina* was

[138] Bonsucro, 2018; Orellana, 2018.

proud of its record of "sustainability and its low water footprint," and because of this, shouldn't be charged for water since "it would make the company regionally uncompetitive." [139] Overall, the bottlers were pleased with the new law, though they proposed that authorizations for water permits be increased from five years to fifteen years, explaining that five years for water permits was too short a time frame since "no one makes investments for five years." This proposition was one of the changes incorporated into the draft and codified into law.

During the ad-hoc commission, agribusiness was also quick to point out the kinds of ecosystem services it provided to El Salvador, and accordingly, should be compensated for. Sugarcane is now the dominant cash crop in El Salvador, surpassing coffee, and several spokespeople from different producers in the country came to the commission to propose modifications on the water law. *Ingenios Azucareros Central de Izalco y Cabañas* (Izalco and Cabañas Sugar Mills) are two conglomerates that represent six sugar mills in northeastern and southwestern provinces of El Salvador. The mills emphasized the importance of their industry to food security, and that agribusiness was a leader in sustainability practices, detailing a laundry list of ecosystem services like "reforestation, water basin management, recycling, corporate social responsibility, conservation, water remediation, and environmental education."[140] These claims to food security are ironic for a few reasons. First, Salvadoran sugarcane is primarily produced for export rather than internal consumption, and small-scale agriculture workers and food sovereignty activists use food security to describe products like beans, milk, or rice. Secondly, it's hard to consider sugarcane essential for food security when high amounts of added

[139] *Agua Alpina* at the ad-hoc committee for the Law of Water Resources, July 22, 2021; author participant observation on livestream (Legislative Assembly, 2021, 1:17:00).
[140] *Ingenios Azucareros Central de Izalco y Cabañas* at the ad-hoc committee for the Law of Water Resources, July 22, 2021; author participant observation on livestream (Legislative Assembly, 2021, 1:45:40).

sugar contribute to the rapid increase of health problems like obesity in developing countries (Otterbach et al., 2021; Abay et al., 2022). Lastly, the expansion of sugarcane production in Central America over the last 30 years has exacerbated food *in*security (Mingorría, 2018)

Finally, during my interviews and observation of the ad-hoc committee meetings, I was acutely aware of how often representatives brought up competition. I gather that this was what businesses are most concerned with, and they leveraged a green profile to lobby the state for subsidies and incentives. The environmental movement has condemned agribusiness, bottling, and commercial real estate for their unregulated use of groundwater, thereby depriving surrounding communities of drinking water. Environmentalists also point to the fact that these industries pay very little for water, despite how much they use. When talking to the *empresarios*, they discussed the cost of water, but were adamant that industry should be exempt from certain expenses. "If we start getting charged for water, we will no longer be competitive," William said. "We shouldn't be paying for water, in fact they [the government] should be paying us for ecosystem services." During the ad-hoc committee meetings, nearly all industry lobbyists argued that the new law had to include incentives to boost "regional competition," arguing that neighboring countries don't charge industry for water, and neither should El Salvador. Aside from renumeration for environmental goods, agribusiness commented on its importance for the economy and jobs. Arturo, a spokesperson from *Asociación Azuacarera*, gave his perspective on the tension between the environment and jobs:

> "Water became too politicized under the FMLN. They would say, oh business is bad because they use water, and we have to stop because others aren't getting water. It's not that simple. If you say, let's stop industry having water so others can have water, then

we can't provide jobs. What happens? The country collapses. We all need water. It's like asking, do you prefer to have water or to have a job?"

From the one hundred and seventy-nine articles in the Law of Water Resources, the ad-hoc committee made twenty modifications to the final version. Of those twenty changes, sixteen were from the Salvadoran business community, and included increasing the time for authorization permits from five to fifteen years and subsidizing its water use. As a comparison, representatives from the Ministry of Education also lobbied the ad-hoc committee for exemptions from paying potable water in public schools, but were denied the subsidy (Escobar, 2022). In February 2023, the Salvadoran Water Authority's president Jorge Castañeda announced that he would suspend water charges for agribusiness because of inflation and the war in Ukraine (Cea and Alas, 2023). I remember the day this story broke. I was interviewing people from a textile workers labor union, and towards the end of our interview, someone came and delivered the daily newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* to the union office. As I was leaving, I noticed the front-page story was about ASA and subsidies for agribusiness. I pointed this out to Doris, the general secretary for the union. We had just spent an hour talking about how expensive everything, and especially water, was for poor and working-class Salvadorans. She glanced at the headline and scoffed. "And for us? Look how nice, and for us, they are even stealing what we don't have (*¿Y nosotros? Mira qué bonito, y a nosotros hasta nos roban lo que no tenemos*)," she said.

Shifting capital-state relationships

My interviews with the business community gave me some important insight on several fronts. By trying to understand how it articulates water justice, I've learned how fundamentally

contradictory its evocations are. Salvadoran businesses were adamant that "government mentality" was why it had taken so long for water legislation to be established, and why the water crisis itself persisted. Whether referring to a slow, bureaucratic process, the refusal to be entrepreneurial or innovative, or simply just corruption, *empresarios* asserted that the state was inherently unable to deliver water justice to Salvadorans. The business community thereby uses a generalized 'state-failure' explanation to argue for market-based solutions to resolve cost pricing and catalyze efficient, sustainable water management (Furlong, 2012; Bakker, 2013). For this to be achieved, there needed to be withdrawal of the state. Yet it was when *empresarios* voiced their water demands, rather than critiques, that I saw a paradox emerge. Alongside its discussion of water injustice par state failure, the business community is most concerned with how the current law inhibits private sector competitiveness, which according to *empresarios*, is only possible through federal subsidies, incentives, or reductions in fees for water use. These financial advantages necessitate state involvement, despite invocations of ineptitude or cronyism. I conclude that the Salvadoran business community favors pro-market water governance where the private sector, and not the state, dictate terms for resource management. Business has repackaged its "support for democracy" by calling for a return of trusted politicians who can restabilize El Salvador and engage in trustworthy water policies that guarantee fiscal incentives for business that enable profit accumulation. The general theory of the neoliberal state promises that private enterprises operate through freely functioning markets and free trade that allow for competition, which is held as a primary virtue (Harvey, 2005). But of course, the fundamental contradiction of the neoliberal state is that in order to preserve competition assumed as an inherent good, business depends on the kind of "state intervention" it so ardently decries to address market failures.

The irony is that by all accounts, the Law of Water Resources already has in place the kinds of incentives the business community demands, including fee reductions and environmental permit timelines favorable for investment. This should not be surprising to anyone who has observed Bukele's political career. He has always embraced free-market water governance, cut planning and environmental regulation, and prioritized water use for the business community (Gutiérrez, 2024). Even so, I came to realize that *empresarios* adopt water justice as a marketing tool to position themselves against the Bukele regime. What became clear during our interviews is that the Salvadoran business community disapproves of *Bukelismo* in general, from his punitive security policies, to Bitcoin, to the president's massive state spending building up El Salvador's tourism industry. The *empresarios* reconfigured their water concerns to assert that Salvadorans continue to suffer water injustice because of *Bukelismo,* but their personal discontent with the current regime has little to do with ordinary Salvadoran's interrupted, and expensive access to water. They disapprove of Bukele because his erratic *mano dura* security and economic policies are making El Salvador an unstable place for investment. But they can assert water justice as another thing that Bukele is a barrier to and embody a kind of faux populism (used by both capitalists and politicians) to portray themselves on the same side as those suffering from the twin water and security crises.

It's important to note that *mano dura* policies have been in place in El Salvador in some form or another since the late 1990s, and only recently has the business community sounded the alarm over "democratic backsliding." I'm not convinced with the sudden concern over how punitive security policies impact poor and working-class people. Since the state of exception was confirmed in March 2022, private enterprise associations like ANEP and the Salvadoran Chamber of Commerce CAMARASAL have spoken out about how this policy is negatively

affecting international investment (Parada, 2023a). During interviews, *empresarios* repeatedly said investors were hesitant to finance projects in El Salvador because they thought the "*regimen* is not an exception, but a permanent fixture now."[141] Recent reporting noted a sharp drop in foreign direct investment because of Bukele's security policies and his adoption of Bitcoin as legal tender (Arévalo, 2023; Rodríguez, 2023). Business leaders worry about an imminent recession because of the country's economic slowdown, which, at less than 2% a year, is Central America's slowest growing economy (Banamericas, 2023).

Further evidence of foreign investment hesitation came in April 2023 when Bukele blocked the International Monetary Fund (IMF) from releasing its annual report on El Salvador's economic and policy strategies (Rauda, 2023). "That was a really bad sign for the country. It doesn't bode well for our financial future at all," Arturo from *Asociación Azuacarera* told me.[142] This news was a surprise to many because El Salvador is actively seeking a $1.3 billion loan from the IMF, though negotiations have stalled because of the Fund's hesitation with Bitcoin and the state of exception (Gressier and Sanz, 2022). Despite these criticisms, and certainly to the chagrin of the Salvadoran business community, the government seems committed to maintaining the hardline security and economic policies of *Bukelismo*. Salvadoran vice president Félix Ulloa was interviewed by Will Freeman from the Council on Foreign Relations in February of this year. Freeman asked if the state were forced to pick between accepting the IMF loan and abandoning Bitcoin, or keeping Bitcoin and abandoning an IMF loan, which they would favor. "Maintain Bitcoin," Ulloa responded (Freeman, 2024). All this context is important to understand why the Salvadoran business community attempts to portray its "losses" (i.e., profits

[141] ANEP, April 18, 2023; author interview.
[142] *Asociación Azucarera de El Salvador*, April 21, 2023; author interview.

and competitiveness) as equivalent to the daily violation of human rights for ordinary Salvadorans under the state of exception, and their ongoing struggle with the water crisis.

I was not expecting a Salvadoran state-business fracturing when I set out to interview this particular social group. Given the relatively amicable relationship between the government and capital throughout El Salvador's history, even during the FMLN years, I assumed that it would be this way under Bukele and *Nuevas Ideas*, considering his pro-market impetus and his embrace (irony aside) of a decentralized economy. I also assumed the *empresarios* would be pleased with the Law of Water Resources because it loosens environmental regulations and waives fees for water use. As it turns out, this was not as straightforward a case as I'd predicted. There is an emerging literature on the growing fissures within the Salvadoran capitalist class (Bull, 2013; Robles Rivera, 2017; Velásquez Carrillo, 2017; Segovia, 2018; Warnecke-Berger, 2020; Gutiérrez, 2024). I see my chapter fitting within this body of work, though my contribution has several distinctions. The first focuses on how Salvadoran *empresarios* capitalized on the support for water justice in El Salvador to portray themselves as loyal to social justice causes in general. More importantly, they also use water justice to align themselves with Salvadorans who endure environmental, economic, and political hardships under Bukele. I am skeptical of this recent egalitarian invocation because despite rhetorically supporting environmental justice and human rights, Salvadoran corporations are still driven by a market calculus to accumulate profit. I argue that their recent adoption of water justice and sustainability more broadly are attempts to widen their market share, customer base, and public support during a time when the country has such a polarizing figure as president.

Second, I see these shifting elite dynamics less as an intra-capitalist class conflict and more as a momentary tension between the state and the capitalist class. Of course, this is not to

say disunity within the Salvadoran capitalist class is nonexistent. There was a notable difference with how factions of capital invoked progressive environmental politics. In fact, during my interviews, representatives from real estate made a point to say that perhaps "*los agricultores* (the agrarians) would disagree with us that water needs to be paid for," indicating to me that there was not a consensus amongst the business community regarding water policy.[143] Conflicts between the Salvadoran capitalist class are recurring. In the mid to late twentieth century, and especially during the Civil War, the Salvadoran oligarchy saw similar fracturing between more cosmopolitan factions of the capitalist class interested in modernizing their business portfolios, and thereby looking for ways out of the bloody conflict, and the recalcitrant agrarians who wanted to resist democratic openings in El Salvador and preserved coffee-based economic development (Paige, 1997).

Today, El Salvador's steady conversion of rural landscapes into urban development may instill confidence in real estate companies for future profit seeking opportunities in ways that disfavor agribusiness (Gutiérrez, 2024). Irrespective of this internal fracturing, I still interpret the Salvadoran case as a state-capital friction because the dominant capitalist industries in El Salvador (i.e., finance, real estate, and agribusiness) are still the primary asset holders, and are still operated by oligarchic families that dominated industry in the twentieth century. Because the Salvadoran capitalist class disapproves with how state budgets are being used, whether through expensive security projects like the state of exception or establishing digital and physical infrastructure for a Bitcoin economy, Bukele's economic governance does little for traditional elites. The *empresarios* I spoke with seemed to favor what they called *gradualidad*, or gradualism, for environmental and economic governance, meaning that policies or laws "can't

[143] CASALCO, May 2, 2023; author interview.

happen all at once," and there needed to be "reasonable goals for the sustainability of businesses and their projects." Bukele's projects are anything but gradual, and Gutiérrez (2024) calls these new patterns of development "city spectacles," to describe the showiness and populism of *Bukelismo.*

Additionally, business favors the stability of technocracy, and insisted on how important it was for "technically minded experts," to oversee policy. [144] At one point during my conversation with Arturo, I brought up the ad-hoc committee in charge of drafting the water law. He shook his head and told me he thought they didn't know anything about the environment or the policies they were writing. Even more unexpectedly, considering we'd just discussed how politicized water was under the FMLN, Arturo admitted that with the previous government, there had at least been "a semblance of democracy and stability that is gone now."[145] But a fundamental part of *Bukelismo* is to disassociate from the political and economic establishment, which includes certain industries that the *empresarios* are affiliated with. Despite these frictions, I still classify the tension between the state and its business class as momentary. In the past, the Salvadoran capitalist class rebelled against policies they didn't favor in order to discipline the state, whether it was a wealth tax or environmental regulation. The *empresarios* may also come around to *Bukelismo* if they see his "city spectacle" generating revenues they could take advantage of. As of this writing, the tourism industry in El Salvador is growing, and Bitcoin has made an unexpected comeback (Yaffe-Bellany, 2024). In any case, I predict the relationship between the Salvadoran business community and a second Bukele administration will be different from the first five years, with fewer surprises and perhaps more compromises on both

[144] ANEP, April 18, 2023; CAMAGRO, May 2, 2023; author interviews.
[145] *Asociación Azucarera de El Salvador,* April 21, 2023; author interview.

sides, considering that the main issue the country must tackle now is economic. However, what this means for ordinary Salvadorans who will face the brunt of state-capital economic, and environmental decisions, is yet to be determined.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I've covered the last social group for this dissertation: the Salvadoran business community. I've explained how it expresses sympathy for poor and working-class Salvadorans who endure chronic water shortages and expensive water bills, describing these instances as water injustice. The Salvadoran business community blames the state and the environmental movement for the delay in water legislation and the persistence of water injustices, thereby positing itself as the leader in water stewardship. However, even though the *empresarios* adopt the language of human rights, water justice, and sustainability, these marketing strategies are used to obfuscate pursuits for capital accumulation. Bukele's Law of Water Resources seemingly ascribes to their demands, granting industry subsidies and loosening environmental regulations, yet Salvadoran capital continues to criticize the administration for its illiberal turn. As I've described above, this has less to do with the perpetuation of injustices amongst the population and is directly related to threats to foreign investment and profit.

Empresarios are generally agnostic about how the water crisis and *Bukelismo* impact working people and are therefore not the social group that will secure water justice for everyday Salvadorans. They are primarily focused on how El Salvador's transnational reconfiguration over the past few decades will affect their competitiveness nationally and regionally. The business community is concerned with the role of water in this transformation, but that apprehension hardly speaks to the kind of water injustices that Salvadorans endure. The momentary capital-state rift, and the business community's adoption of the human right to water versus Bukele's

authoritarianism is emblematic of the inchoate stage of neoliberalism we are currently living through. One notable characteristic of this business-oriented environmental progressivism is the embrace of morality, and the particular emphasis on water justice. The business community can be interpreted as a sympathetic social group more easily when there is a constant barrage of news articles reporting the multi-faceted cruelty of *Bukelismo*. However, I want to draw attention to the fact that this "compassionate" turn for the capitalist class is completely compatible with the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism's depoliticization of social movements, social policy, and the goal of evading political reform. For nearly 30 years after the post-war period, Salvadoran capital was able to pursue some form of neoliberal policy making with the establishment ARENA and FMLN political parties, both of which are all but extinct in the electoral landscape today.

Given the scale of the Salvadoran water crisis, and how it entwines with the country's broader social issues like poverty and inequality, water justice is a political process, and improvements to the water network are expensive, take time, and require state intervention to build up the social and physical infrastructure necessary to improve the lives of millions of working people. But while these changes must be public and not private endeavors, they also must be led by the group that will deliver water justice in ways the vast majority of the population demands. As I've demonstrated in this chapter, that group will not be the business community. In the concluding chapter, I will revisit all the social groups I've discussed in this dissertation and explain which is best suited to secure water justice for everyday Salvadorans.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

Agua del lago de Ilopango no es apta para potabilizar, para usos agropecuarios ni bañarse (Water from Lake Ilopango is not suitable for drinking, agricultural use, or for bathing)

Acceso al agua potable, la principal demanda a los candidatos a alcaldes de San Salvador Sur (Access to potable water is the population's primary demand to mayoral candidates in San Salvador)

Denuncian a la ANDA por cobros excesivos (ANDA is criticized for excessive charges)

Servicio irregular de agua afecta a 160 familias de residencial Los Laureles de Sonsonate (Irregular water services affect 160 families in the *Los Laureles* neighborhood of Sonsonate)

These four headlines appeared in the daily newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* within weeks of one another between February, March, and April 2024 (Espinoza, 2024b; Martínez, 2024; Orellana, 2024; Reyes, 2024). They echo the same message that headlines a decade prior stated: water issues are worsening, and Salvadorans demand more. Even with an established water law, this continues to be the case.

Still waiting, still demanding

In this dissertation, I've focused on these environmental inequalities through my analysis of uneven access to drinking water in El Salvador. I've followed the trajectories of social movements, Salvadoran intelligentsia (a coalition of universities, think tanks, and NGOs), Salvadoran businesses, and lawmakers in their efforts to codify water legislation following a nearly two-decade long struggle to address environmental precarities. The country now has a water law in place, but as the opening headlines indicate, the water issues in El Salvador are

many, and ongoing. Despite the fanfare surrounding the codification of President Nayib Bukele's Law of Water Resources in 2021, many Salvadorans were unaware of such a historic policy considering that two years later, nearly half the population reportedly received water only one day a week (Parada, 2023b).

Considering that water issues persist, and none of the competing social groups are happy with the legal outcome, I've explored why and how the legislative water struggle in El Salvador was so unsuccessful. I was animated by two interrelated questions throughout this dissertation: *Why do Salvadorans still not have reliable access to drinking water?* And *how can they get reliable and affordable access to drinking water?* Through my ethnographic research, I've sought to answer these questions by focusing on how the different social groups pursuing a water law articulate the concept of water justice, and how their approaches to policy reverberate amongst the Salvadoran public. By tracing how their interpretations both overlap and are in tension, I argued that their attempts to codify water justice were unsuccessful since they did not sufficiently link water injustice to everyday desperation and anxiety of chronic service interruptions coupled with high bills that mirrors the experiences of working-class Salvadorans.

Broadly speaking, this dissertation is an examination of strategies and the particularities of how Salvadoran environmentalists, intelligentsia, labor unionists, and the business community understand and express water justice. Dedicating a chapter to each group reveals a holistic view of the Salvadoran waterscape and emphasizes the specific role each social group has played in this water struggle, and the specificities of their differing relationships to the Salvadoran state. Organizing the dissertation in this way also reveals uneven water burdens across the country, as well as insights into comfort, health, workplace grievances, and solidarity. Finally, I've settled on this specific categorization because I noticed that these social groups, and especially the

Salvadoran environmental movement, intelligentsia, and the business community, continuously emerged as the major players in the legislative water struggle. The Salvadoran labor movement did not feature prominently in the fight for a water law, though many accounts of uneven water distribution and unjust water pricing come from workers, some in unions. Furthermore, the labor movement continues to fight impositions of austerity and privatization. These social groups also intersect with one another in surprising ways. The antagonistic relationship between environmentalists and capitalists is perhaps more expected, but I hadn't anticipated the conceptual commonalities between Salvadoran intelligentsia and the business community, for example. Despite these overlays, each social group worked as a separate and distinct faction throughout the history of the legislative water struggle. By devoting a chapter to each group, I sought to explain how their resolutions for the water crisis were complementary and incompatible.

The water scholarship is varied, and vast, and justice as a framework for water is powerfully advocated for by activists, practitioners, and academics across space, place, and scale. I was brought into this work to understand how water injustice is experienced, confronted, and ultimately, resisted. Therefore, much of my analysis throughout the dissertation focuses on what water *justice* is, or potentially, could be, and its policy implications. A key issue I raise in this work is the importance of paying attention to political and social strategies, and how the various social groups leverage their ability to pressure or influence lawmakers towards decisions on water governance. A theory of justice is necessarily coupled with a definition of injustice, and in El Salvador's case, water injustice is expressed through frustrations and anxieties about receiving exorbitantly expensive water bills, having precarious or unstable access to water, or the risks of consuming contaminated water sources. This sensory, vivid description of water injustice

was made clear to me during interviews and participant observation. Therefore, water justice would be a reality where poor and working-class people experiencing the bulk of these environmental burdens would feel a sense of security, calm, and abundance with water, even to the point where they would take it for granted because it was readily available. In a sense, my theory of justice is one where scholars nor social movement actors would have to think about, theorize, or consider justice at all because it was already a given.

This novel theory of water justice necessitates drawing out how various social groups understand and experience water (in)justice, which surfaces different strategies to combat the water crisis. Here, I ground my analysis geographically to answer questions about how policy goals are accomplished, at which scales, how different social actors address forms of justice, and how these relations and negotiations come about. However, water as an object of analysis has distinct social, moral, cultural, infrastructural, and material properties that are revealed through relational conflicts that prioritize varied socioecological meanings depending on which groups one focuses on. I consider my work to be highly interdisciplinary, and accessible to those in sociology, political science, or anthropology, yet its implicit contributions emphasize how struggles over water justice are shaped through specific spaces and at different scales, and how these material and moral struggles influence how justice is lived. In this way, this study contributes to geographic literature by analyzing the varied scales and dimensions of water justice, water governance, and strategies for collective action.

As challenges in global water quality and quantity increase, water ethics frameworks are used to explain how people embody notions of justice to make demands or claims on water (Beresford et al., 2023; MacAfee, 2023). One of the groups that most personifies these characteristics is the Salvadoran environmental movement (*los radicales*), who are the focus of

Chapter 2. They have nuanced critiques of the water crisis, and reject dominant narratives of individual blame, choosing instead to use structural critiques of power and influence that Salvadoran oligarchs hold over policy makers, in order to make demands for water legislation. Yet their strategies, which relied heavily on activist oriented appeals to morality on the state in pursuit of legal reforms and fairer representation in participatory governance, were not antagonistic enough to sway the legislature in their favor. The *radicales* accurately pointed to the political nature of water, with radical critiques rooted in their years of activism, but their mechanisms for pressure – marches, press conferences, and advocacy – didn't produce the urgency necessary amongst policy makers to pass the community water law they proposed in 2006.

The leverage that environmentalists hold over political structures is relatively weak, though they hold more sympathy amongst the Salvadoran population than some of the other social groups I discussed. Just as water justice is not a purely moral or ethical pursuit, neither is it merely a technical or engineering issue. Even so, and somewhat juxtaposed to the *radicales*, others preferred to depoliticize water politics, as I demonstrated with the Salvadoran intelligentsia (*los intelectuales*) and the business community (*empresarios*) in Chapters 3 and 6. Both these groups can be broadly categorized as technocratic, though of distinct varieties. The coalition of *intelectuales* draws from universities, centrist think tanks, and NGOs throughout the country focused on sustainability and shoring up institutional credibility. Their commitment to instilling confidence in these institutions led them to describe water justice, and by extension, what they called 'good water governance,' as a calculable, *not political*, issue that is simply resolvable through bipartisanship, expert knowledge, and price corrective tools like water metering. *Empresarios* ascribed some of these suggestions, though their efforts to instill

confidence in state institutions was directly related to assuring international financiers of El Salvador's trustworthiness to secure foreign direct investment. In this way, water justice for the Salvadoran business community was coopted as a framework for profit accumulation and to justify its own extractive operations. *Empresarios* relied heavily on the incorporation of sustainability discourse into their business models, and the use of water justice as part of their overall disapproval with the current Bukele administration.

The fight for water justice is undoubtedly a political struggle, and because it often demands policy changes to address decades of global neoliberal deprivation, it is also an economic and workplace struggle. As my study focuses on strategies that could potentially secure affordable and reliable access to drinking water for poor and working-class Salvadorans, I thought about the kinds of leverage that would be necessary to pressure policy makers to move quickly on demands addressing the water crisis. This query led me to the Salvadoran labor movement, the focus for Chapter 4. As I mentioned, this social group wasn't directly involved in the battle over a water law, but labor cares deeply about water justice because they see it as inextricable from social and economic justice. Salvadoran labor unions are at the forefront of fights against austerity and privatization, and at the core of all these struggles – including those for water justice – lie demands for a robust social democratic project with more investment to build up stronger public institutions and infrastructure. This chapter was unique because I also used it to suggest possible tactics used by workers, like work stoppages, strike threats, marches, and collective bargaining, strategies used to reclaim control over a 'just and dignified life.'

Workers continue fights like these and confront an increasingly aggressive state under President Nayib Bukele. The Salvadoran state is shot through each chapter of the dissertation, though its relationship with each social group varies. It was only under the current administration

that a water law finally came to pass, yet water governance in El Salvador is more chaotic and disorganized than it has ever been. In Chapter 5 I analyze water governance under *Bukelismo*, the moniker I use in reference to the current regime and its approach to the twin security and water crises in the country. Despite grandiose rhetoric about Bukele as a "disruptor" president who is bringing El Salvador into a modern, efficient, and innovative future, a closer look at his specific water policies reveals a continuity of neoliberal environmental governance. Perhaps the *Bukelismo* idiosyncrasy is that Salvadorans are now subject to more tracking and surveillance mediated through digital tools that enforce payment for water bills.

The imperative question then is, who will successfully deliver water justice for Salvadorans and oppose a repressive state? Water justice is more a political than moral or technical problem, and the structural conditions that facilitate water injustice mean that the issues are not redound to individual choices or lack of knowledge. This is why solutions to the water crisis won't come from the *intelectuales.* The environmental movement understands that water issues are political, but they've given little indication about an alternative and positive vision for economic development alongside their progressive ecological politics. Both groups also lack a mass base and are comprised mainly of professional class activists or those working in media, academia, or advocacy organizations. The capitalist class continue to insist that water justice is vital for Salvadorans, but it supports this framework only insofar as it's compatible with businesses' narrow interests for profit accumulation. *Empresarios* won't accept, for example, free or heavily subsidized water distribution for the vast majority of society (though they do demand it for themselves). But as I've argued in this dissertation, because most of the water issues that impact ordinary Salvadorans are related to fees and infrastructure (which is inextricable from cost), water justice is a fundamentally material struggle.

I argue that the Salvadoran labor movement is the social group that can adequately challenge the adversarial forces against social, economic, and water justice. I understand working-class water justice as one component of a broader social democratic project to build up stronger public institutions for working-class people. Just like the labor movement 50 years ago (Gould, 2019), today's unions are mobilizing to ensure that workers across El Salvador have improved working and living conditions, of which water justice is an essential part. Drawing from Perreault et al. (2018: 357) on broader principles and implications for water and social justice struggles, I agree that water justice is "a means to an end, rather than an end in itself." Environmental justice has long been a working-class issue, with poor people resisting environmental harms in their communities (Bullard, 1990; Martinez-Alier, 2003, 2014), and trade unionists drawing attention to the ecological damage to working-class lives at the site of production (Revkin, 2004; Barca, 2014; Bell, 2020; Barca and Milanez, 2021). Because of this, I suggest that for El Salvador, a robust working-class movement for water justice led by labor must also include the growing population of informal workers, who make up about 40 percent of the Salvadoran workforce. Right-wing forces across Latin America have successfully tapped into the discontent of informal workers (Ruggeri and Vieto, 2023). The growing informal sector must become a part of justice struggles to improve economic, social, and environmental conditions, and these struggles should be led by a popular, rather than a political left. Recent work at the nexus of collective action, unions, and the informal sector are important contributions (Hummel, 2021; Pérez, 2022), and I would urge (and hopefully in the future, contribute to) more work along these intellectual lines with a specific political ecological focus.

Looking ahead

While writing this dissertation, the political climate in El Salvador has taken a hard right turn, even more so than it was when I was conducting my fieldwork. Bukele was elected for a second term in office, and the political left has been virtually eliminated. There is no longer any FMLN representation in the Legislative Assembly. Furthermore, the current administration is reconfiguring constitutional mandates to facilitate indefinite presidential reelections. I see no indications for concrete environmental or economic changes to better the lives of working people. I opened this chapter with several headlines indicating as much, and another recent water-related development intersects with climate catastrophe: the lack of water and intense heatwave moving across El Salvador has seen a resurgence in dengue virus, with over 700 cases reported this year (Alfaro, 2024). Now is the time to cultivate a mass social movement rooted in working-class institutions to combat further austerity and repression from a state hostile to social and water justice.

Water crises abound in Latin America, with recent cases in Mexico and Chile of severe, drought-induced water scarcity leading to serious concerns for national security (Bartlett, 2022; Paddison et al., 2024). El Salvador's water battle is not unique to the region, and socio-ecological struggles spearheaded by labor and environmental movements alike have thus far characterized the 2020s in Central America. El Salvador's northwestern neighbor Guatemala recently elected leftist president Bernardo Arévalo, and his political party *Movimiento Semilla* (Seed Movement) represents an institutionalized approach to social democratic politics and social justice. Mayoral candidates of his party are forming budding left coalitions with social movements throughout Guatemala with explicitly environmental policies in mind: publicly funding and fortifying water infrastructure that will provide greater access to water for working class neighborhoods (Ford

Lemus, 2023). Along the Isthmus in Panama and Costa Rica, countries with relatively less volatile political histories than Guatemala or El Salvador, are seeing mass unrest amongst the popular masses. Marches and protests led by public sector unions, environmental groups, and Indigenous movements, are contesting neoliberal policies that push for labor flexibility and international extractive capital that will further contaminate water sources amidst a time of intense, climate induced droughts (Fox and Cuéllar, 2023; Villalon, 2023).

These struggles resonate with Salvadorans who've endured water shortages, expensive bills, and contaminated water sources because of months' long drought conditions. As the water crisis continues to worsen, and is exacerbated by the climate crisis, I see an opportunity for solidarity within Salvadoran social movements, and across Central American labor and environmental movements fighting their own, yet related, political ecological struggles. It is important to focus on shared experiences of injustice and precarity that tie working-class people together, and I believe affordable and reliable access to water is the locus in which to rebuild mass popular movements, and forms of physical and social infrastructure. Ultimately, justice is too important a cause to be left up to social groups who don't have the interests of the vast majority of society in mind.

Bibliography

Abay, K. A., Ibrahim, H., and C. Breisinger. (2022). Food policies and obesity in low-and middle-income countries. *World Development* 151: 1-16.

Acosta García, N. and F. López Vega. (2023). Oil and water: unlikely alliances in the opposition to extractive industries during popular consultations in Colombia. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 51(1): 237-257.

AECID (2023, March 28). "La Cooperación Española y ANDA garantizan el acceso a agua y saneamiento a 3,500 titulares de derechos en el municipio de Suchitoto, Cuscatlán." *Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo*. https://aecid.sv/la-cooperacion-espanola-y-anda-garantizan-el-acceso-a-agua-y-saneamiento-a-3500-titulares-de-derechos-en-el-municipio-de-suchitoto-cuscatlan/. (last accessed November 9, 2023).

Agrawal, A. (2005*). Environmentality: technologies of government and the making of subjects*. Duke University Press.

Aguilar, G. (2022, September 30). "Eso es lodo": presidente de ANDA afirma que turbidez del agua ha alcanzado niveles récord." *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Eso-es-lodo-presidente-de-ANDA-afirma-que-turbidez-del-agua-ha-alcanzado-niveles-record- 20220930-0059.html. (last accessed November 8, 2023).

Aguilar, G., Alas, S., and LPG Datos. (2023, April 14). "Muertes por diarrea se duplicaron en marzo en El Salvador." *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Muertes-por-diarrea- se-duplicaron-en-marzo-en-El-Salvador-20230413-0096.html. (last accessed December 29, 2023).

Ahlers, R., and M. Zwarteveen. (2009). The water question in feminism: water control and gender inequities in a neo-liberal era. *Gender, Place and Culture* 16(4): 409-426.

Alas, R. (2020, January 29). Sindicato de ANDA afirma que ineficacia en Las Pavas provocó agua pestilente. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/681787/anda-sindicato-agua-las-pavas.html (last accessed February 26, 2024)

----- (2022, September 26). "Denuncian a ANDA por presuntos cobros discrecionales y cambio inconsulto de medidores." *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Denuncian-a-ANDA-por-presuntos-cobros-discrecionales-y-cambio-inconsulto-de-medidores-20220926-0047.html. (last accessed November 8, 2023).

----- (2023a, February 12). “Denuncian falta de agua en Hospital El Salvador.” *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Denuncian-falta-de-agua-en-Hospital-El-Salvador- 20230212-0031.html. (last accessed December 28, 2023).

----- (2023b, February 24). Sector agro solicitaría la exoneración de cánones por usar agua. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Sector-agro--solicitaria-la-exoneracion-de-canones-por-usar-agua-20230223-0112.html. (accessed October 11, 2023).

Alfaro, X. (2019, December 3). China ofrece construir en El Salvador un nuevo estadio, una planta potabilizadora de agua y una biblioteca nacional. *El Diario de Hoy.* https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/664836/china-construira-en-el-pais-nuevo-estadio-una-planta-potabilizadora-de-agua-y-una-biblioteca-nacional.html (last accessed February 26, 2024).

----- (2024, March 8). El Salvador registra más de 700 casos de dengue en lo que va de 2024. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/el-salvador- registra-720-casos-dengue-en-2024/1128327/2024/ (last accessed April 5, 2024)

Alfaro, K. (2023, October 20). “La canasta de alimentos volvió a subir en El Salvador durante septiembre.” *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/economia/La-canasta-de-alimentos-volvio-a-subir-en-El-Salvador-durante-septiembre-20231019-0058.html. (last accessed December 28, 2023).

Allen, A., Hofmann, P., Mukherjee, J., and A. Walnycki. (2017). Water trajectories through non-networked infrastructure: Insights from peri-urban Dar es Salaam, Cochabamba, and Kolkata. *Urban Research & Practice* 10(1): 22-42.

Almeida, P. (2008). *Waves of protest: Popular struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

---- (2009, November 9). Social movements, political parties, and electoral triumph in El Salvador. *NACLA Report on the Americas*. https://nacla.org/article/social-movements-political-parties-and-electoral-triumph-el-salvador. (accessed September 28, 2023).

Almeida, P., and L. R. González Márquez. (2023). Interpreting repressive and economic threats: Música *contestataria* and collective resistance in Central America. *Latin American Perspectives* 50(3): 134-156.

Alpízar Rodríguez, F. (2014). “El ciclo de las demandas políticas: una propuesta metodológica aplicada a la contienda por la reforma del marco institucional del agua en Costa Rica”. *Política y Sociedad* 51(2): 619-640.

Alvarado, J (2021a, September 8) Chivo es una empresa privada financiada con fondos públicos. *El Faro*. https://elfaro.net/es/202109/el_salvador/25707 (last accessed February 19, 2024).

Alvarado, J (2021b, October 28) Las sombras de Alba Petróleos en Chivo. *El Faro*. https://elfaro.net/es/202110/el_salvador/25788 (last accessed February 19, 2024).

Alvarez Solís, F., and P. Martin. (1993). The role of Salvadorean NGOs in post-war reconstruction. *Development in Practice* 2(2): 103-113.

Álvarez, A. (2019). The revolutionary movement in El Salvador. In *Latin American Guerrilla Movements: Origins, Evolution, Outcomes*, eds. D. Kruijt, E. Tristán, and A. Álvarez (141-150). New York, NY: Routledge.

Amankwaa, G., Heeks, R., and A. Browne. (2022). Water ATMs and access to water: digitalisation of off-grid water infrastructure in peri-urban Ghana. *Water Alternatives* 15(3): 733-753.

Amaya Umaña, A.D., Girón Aguillón, M. E., and W. A. Pérez Cruz. (2006). Reconstrucción del movimiento contra la privatización de la salud, 1998-2006. [Master's thesis, University of El Salvador].

Amaya, C. (2020, September 25). Bukele prioriza proyectos urbanísticos antes que firmar el Acuerdo de Escazú. *Gato Encerrado.* https://gatoencerrado.news/2020/09/25/bukele-prioriza-proyectos-urbanisticos-antes-que-firmar-el-acuerdo-de-escazu/ (accessed October 11, 2023)

Anand, N. (2017). *Hydraulic city: Water and the infrastructures of citizenship in Mumbai*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

---- (2020). Consuming citizenship: Prepaid meters and the politics of technology in Mumbai. *City & Society* 32(1): 47-70.

ANDA - Administración Nacional De Acueductos y Alcantarillados. (2022, November 21). "Entrevista de nuestro titular en TVO Canal 23 Ruben Aleman." *Gobierno de El Salvador Portal de Transparencia.* https://www.anda.gob.sv/index.php/entrevista-de-nuestro-titular-en-tvo-canal-23/. (last accessed November 8, 2023).

ANDA – Administración Nacional De Acueductos y Alcantarillados (2023). *Preguntas frecuentes*. https://www.anda.gob.sv/index.php/preguntas-frecuentes-99/ (last accessed March 7, 2024)

Andreucci, D., and I. M. Radhuber. (2017). Limits to "counter-neoliberal" reform: Mining expansion and the marginalisation of post-extractivist forces in Evo Morales's Bolivia. *Geoforum* 84: 280-291.

Angel, J. and A. Loftus. (2019). With-against-and-beyond the human right to water. *Geoforum* 98: 206-213.

Anguelovski, I., and J.M. Alier. (2014). The 'Environmentalism of the Poor' revisited: Territory and place in disconnected glocal struggles. *Ecological Economics* 102: 167-176.

Anievas, A., and R. Saull. (2023). The far-right in world politics/world politics in the far-right. *Globalizations* 20(5): 715-730.

Anner, M. (2011). *Solidarity transformed: Labor responses to globalization and crisis in Latin America.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Anria, S. (2018). *When movements become parties: The Bolivian MAS in comparative perspective*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Arboleda, M. (2020). *Planetary mine: Territories of extraction under late capitalism*. London, UK: Verso Books.

Arévalo, K. (2023, March 11). Bukele afirma que el turismo en El Salvador aumentó 95 % por el Bitcoin, pero el dato es engañoso. *Gato Encerrado*. https://gatoencerrado.news/2023/03/11/es-enganoso-que-el-turismo-en-el-salvador-aumento-95-por-bitcoin/ (last accessed March 29, 2024)

Arias, E., and J. Burt. (2023). The "new" extreme right in Latin America. *LASA Forum* 54(4): 4-8.

Arsel, M., Adaman, F., and A. Saad-Filho. (2021). Authoritarian developmentalism: The latest stage of neoliberalism? *Geoforum* 124: 261-266.

Artiga-Purcell, J. A. (2022). Hydrosocial extractive territories: Gold, sugarcane and contested water politics in El Salvador. *Geoforum* 131: 93-104.

ASA – Autoridad Salvadoreña del Agua. (2023). *Autoridad Salvadoreña del Agua*. https://www.asa.gob.sv/sihi/.

Auyero, J. (2012). *Patients of the state: The politics of waiting in Argentina*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bakker, K., Kooy, M., Shofiani, N. E., E. J. Martijn. (2008). Governance failure: rethinking the institutional dimensions of urban water supply to poor households. *World Development* 36(10): 1891-1915.

Bakker, K., and M. Ritts. (2018). Smart Earth: A meta-review and implications for environmental governance. *Global Environmental Change* 52: 201-211.

Bakker, K., Knight, R., Ng, R. T., Mackworth, A. K., and M. Ritts. (2024). Digital water. In *Routledge Handbook of Water and Development*, eds. S. Hellberg, F. Söderbaum, A. Swain, and J. Öjendal (333-343). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Bakker, K. (2002). From state to market?: water mercantilización in Spain. *Environment and planning A* 34(5): 767-790.

---- (2003). *An uncooperative commodity: Privatizing water in England and Wales*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

---- (2007). The 'commons' versus the 'commodity': Alter-globalization, anti-privatization and the human right to rater in the global south. *Antipode* 39: 430–455.

---- (2010). *Privatizing water: Governance failure and the world's urban water crisis.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

---- (2013). Constructing 'public' water: The World Bank, urban water supply, and the biopolitics of development. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 31: 280–300.

BanAmericas. (2023, January 18). Why El Salvador's economy is in trouble. *Business News Americas*. https://www.bnamericas.com/en/interviews/why-el-salvadors-economy-is-in-trouble (last accessed March 29, 2024)

Barca, S. and E. Leonardi. (2018). Working-class ecology and union politics: a conceptual topology. *Globalizations* 15(4): 487-503.

Barca, S. and F. Milanez. (2021). Labouring the commons: Amazonia's 'extractive reserves' and the legacy of Chico Mendes. In *The Palgrave handbook of environmental labour studies*, eds. N. Räthzel, D. Stevis and D. Uzzell, 319–338. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan Cham.

Barca, S. (2014). Laboring the Earth: Transnational reflections on the environmental history of work. *Environmental History* 19(1): 3-27.

Barchiesi, F. (2007). Privatization and the historical trajectory of "social movement unionism": A case study of municipal workers in Johannesburg, South Africa. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 71: 50–69.

Barrera, C. (2024, February 6). Portraits from El Salvador's nearly 2-year, sprawling crackdown on gang suspects. *NPR.*

Bartlett, J. (2022, June 1). "Consequences will be dire": Chile's water crisis is reaching breaking point. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/01/chiles-water-crisis-megadrought-reaching-breaking-point (last accessed April 9, 2024)

Bauer, C. (2015). Water conflicts and entrenched governance problems in Chile's market model. *Water Alternatives* 8(2): 147-172.

Bear, L. (2016). Time as technique. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45: 487-502.

Bebbington, A. (2015). At the boundaries of *La Politica:* Political ecology, policy networks, and moments of government. In *The handbook of political ecology,* eds. T. Perreault, G. Bridge, and J. McCarthy, 198-208. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bebbington, A., Fash, B., and J. Rogan. (2019). Socio-environmental conflict, political settlements, and mining governance: A cross-border comparison, El Salvador and Honduras. *Latin American Perspectives* 46(2): 84-106.

Bell, K. (2020). *Working-class environmentalism: An agenda for a just and fair transition to sustainability.* Bristol, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.

Ben-Ghiat, R. (2020). *Strongmen: Mussolini to the present.* New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.

Beresford, M., Wutich, A., Garrick, D., and G. Drew. (2023). Moral economies for water: A framework for analyzing norms of justice, economic behavior, and social enforcement in the contexts of water inequality. *WIREs Water* 10(2): 1-19.

Bieler, A. (2020). Against the trend: structure and agency in the struggle for public water in Europe. In *Water Politics: Governance, Justice, and the Right to Water,* eds. F. Sultana and A. Loftus., 129-142. New York, NY: Routledge Press.

Billo, E. (2015). Sovereignty and subterranean resources: An institutional ethnography of Repsol's corporate social responsibility programs in Ecuador. *Geoforum* 59: 268-277.

Binford, L. (2010). A perfect storm of neglect and failure: postwar capitalist restoration in Northern Morazán, El Salvador. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37(3): 531-557.

Birkenholtz, T. (2009). Irrigated landscapes, produced scarcity, and adaptive social institutions in Rajasthan, India. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99 (1): 118-137.

Björkman, L. (2018). The engineer and the plumber: Mediating Mumbai's conflicting infrastructural imaginaries. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42(2): 276-294.

Boelens, R., Perreault, T., and J. Vos. (2018). *Water justice*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Bonsucro. (2018, February 13). Sugarcane & the SDGS: A Q&A with Fundazucar's Tomás Regalado. *Bonsucro*. https://bonsucro.com/sugarcane-sdgs-qa-fundazucars-tomas-regalado/ (last accessed March 19, 2024)

Booth, J.A., Wade, C.J., and T.W. Walker. (2020). *Understanding Central America: Global forces and political change.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Bortagaray, I., and C. Aguirre-Bastos. (2021). Innovation policies for inclusive and sustainable development: Insights from the Central American region. In *Policy and Governance of Science, Technology, and Innovation: Social Inclusion and Sustainable Development in Latin America*, eds. G. Ordóñez-Matamoros, L. A. Orozco, J. H. Sierra-González, I. Bortagaray, and J. García-Estévez (55-79). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan Cham.

Brand P. (2007). Green subjection: The politics of neoliberal urban environmental management. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31(3): 616–632.

Brewster, F. (2023, August 30). El Salvador's president inks deal with Google for Central American tech hub. *Fox KTVU*. https://www.ktvu.com/news/el-salvadors-president-inks-deal-with-google-for-central-american-tech-hub (last accessed February 20, 2024).

Bridge, G. and T. Perreault. (2009). Environmental governance. In *A Companion to Environmental Geography,* eds. N. Castree, D. Demeritt, D. Liverman, and B. Rhoads, 475-497. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Brigida, A. (2018, September 25). "Campaigners fear creeping privatisation of El Salvador's water." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/sep/25/campaigners-fear-creeping-privatisation-el-salvador-water. (last accessed January 23, 2024)

Broad, R. and J. Cavanaugh. (2021). *The water defenders: How ordinary people saved a country from corporate greed.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Brown, T. (2016). Sustainability as empty signifier: Its rise, fall, and radical potential. *Antipode* 48(1): 115-133.

Buckley, E. (2017). *Technocrats and the politics of drought and development in twentieth century Brazil.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Budds, J. (2004). Power, nature and neoliberalism: The political ecology of water in Chile. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 25 (3): 322–342.

---- (2009). Contested H2O: Science, policy and politics in water resources management in Chile. *Geoforum* 40(3): 418-430.

---- (2013). Water, power, and the production of neoliberalism in Chile, 1973–2005. *Environment and planning D: Society and Space* 31(2): 301-318.

Bull, B. (2013). Diversified business groups and the transnationalisation of the Salvadorean economy. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 45(2): 265–295.

Bull, B., Cuéllar, N., and S. Kandel. (2014). El Salvador: the challenge to entrenched elites and the difficult road to a sustainable development model. In *Environmental Politics in Latin America: Elite dynamics,* eds. B. Bull and M. Aguilar- Støen, 33-50. London, UK: Routledge.

Bull, B., and M. Aguilar-Støen. (2016). Changing elites, institutions and environmental governance. In *Environmental Governance in Latin America*, eds. F. de Castro, B. Hogenboom, and M. Baud, 137-163. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bullard, R. (1990). *Dumping in Dixie: Race, class, and environmental quality.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Burridge, D. (2020). The horizon of critical collaboration: Feminist cogovernance and movement-state negotiations in El Salvador. *Latin American Perspectives* 47(4): 150-169.

Calderón, B. (2018a, July 5). Realizan cuatro marchas contra la privatización del agua en El Salvador este jueves. *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Realizan-cuatro-marchas-contra-la-privatizacion-del-agua-en-El-Salvador-este-jueves-20180705-0014.html. (accessed September 7, 2023).

Calderón, B. (2018b, June 19). "Sindicatos y organizaciones sociales contra la privatización del agua marchan hacia el COENA." *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Sindicatos-y-organizaciones-sociales-contra-la-privatizacion-del-agua-marchan-hacia-el-COENA-20180619-0048.html. (last accessed January 23, 2024)

Calderón, B., Rivas, H., Barahona, J.C., and F. Lazo. (2018, July 19). Bloquean varias carreteras principales de El Salvador en protesta contra privatización del agua. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Bloquean-varias-carreteras-principales-de-El-Salvador-en-protesta-contra-privatizacion-del-agua-20180719-0029.html. (last accessed September 7, 2023).

Carranza, E. (2022, September 5). En las colonias las Brisas urgen mejoras en el servicio de agua potable. *El Diario de Hoy.* https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/colonia-brisas-sin-agua-potable-soyapango/993831/2022/. (last accessed July 24, 2023).

Cartagena Cruz, R. (2015). Environmental conflicts and social movements in postwar El Salvador. In *Handbook of social movements across Latin America*, eds. P. Almeida and A. Cordero Ulate, 237-254. New York, NY: Springer Science and Business Media Dordrecht.

Castree, N. (2008). Neoliberalising nature: Processes, effects, and evaluations. *Environment and planning A* 40(1): 153-173.

CDC: Centro para la Defensa del Consumidor. (2011, October 10). Solicitan aprobar "Ley General de Agua". *CDC: Centro para la Defensa del Consumidor.* http://www.cdc.org.sv/index.php/noticias/nacionales/279-solicitan-aprobar-ley-general-de-agua. (accessed October 5, 2023)

---- (2012, March 3). Debate político sobre Ley de Agua. *CDC: Centro para la Defensa del Consumidor.* http://www.cdc.org.sv/index.php/noticias/nacionales/326-debate-politico-sobre-ley-de- agua. (accessed October 5, 2023)

Cea, M., and S. Alas. (2023, February 23). Autoridad Salvadoreña del Agua suspende cobro por agua en el agro por crisis de precios. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Autoridad-Salvadorena-del-Agua-suspende-cobro-por-agua-en-el-agro-por-crisis-de-precios-20230222-0109.html (last accessed March 20, 2024)

Cea, M. (2023, September 25). Se estanca la cobertura de agua potable en El Salvador. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Se-estanca-la-cobertura-de-agua-potable-en-El-Salvador-20230924-0057.html (last accessed February 20, 2024).

CEPAL - Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe. (2010). *La economía del cambio climático en Centroamérica* (Mexico City: CEPAL).

Chastain, A., and T. Lorek. (2020). *Itineraries of expertise: Science, technology, and the environment in Latin America's long Cold War*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Chávez, J. (2017). *Poets and prophets of the resistance: Intellectuals and the origins of El Salvador's Civil War*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Chibber, V. (2022a). *Confronting capitalism: How the world works and how to change it.* London, UK: Verso Books.

Chibber, V. (2022b). *The class matrix: Social theory after the cultural turn.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ching, E. (2014). *Authoritarian El Salvador: politics and the origins of the military regimes, 1880-1940*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Pess.

CISPES. (2020, February 20). Dirty water, dirtier profits: An update on El Salvador's fight for clean water. *CISPES*. https://cispes.org/article/dirty-water-dirtier-profits-update-el-salvador%e2%80%99s-fight-clean-water?key=47733530 (last accessed February 26, 2024).

Clark, C. (2020). Race, austerity and water justice in the United States: Fighting for the human right to water in Detroit and Flint, Michigan. In *Water politics: Governance, justice, and*

the right to water, eds. F. Sultana and A. Loftus, 173-188. London, UK: Earthscan Routledge.

Clegg, J., and A. Usmani. (2019). The economic origins of mass incarceration. *Catalyst* 3(3): 1-41.

Cohen, E. (2018). *The political value of time: Citizenship, duration, and democratic justice*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Colven, E. (2022). A political ecology of speculative urbanism: The role of financial and environmental speculation in Jakarta's water crisis. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 55(2): 490-510.

Conca, K., Alberty, M., and D.G. Dabelko. (1995). *Green planet blues: Environmental politics from Stockholm to Rio*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Coordinadora Salvadoreña de Movimientos Populares (n.d.) *Home* [Facebook page]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/MovPopularSV/ (last accessed April 12, 2024)

Correia, J. (2022). Between flood and drought: Environmental racism, settler waterscapes, and Indigenous water justice in South America's Chaco. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 112 (7): 1890-1910.

Crow, B. (2018). Urban water and sanitation injustice: An analytic framework. In *Water Justice,* eds. R. Boelens, T. Perreault, and J. Vos, 89-105. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Cruz, J. M. (2022). Gangs and criminal governance in El Salvador. In *Crime, Violence, and Justice in Latin America*, eds. C. Solar and C. Pérez Ricart (44-62). New York, NY: Routledge.

Cuéllar, N., and O. Díaz. (2018). Degradación ambiental y desafíos del agua el área metropolitana de San Salvador AMSS). In *La crisis hídrica en El Salvador: Hechos y Retos,* ed. Andrés McKinley, 53-87. San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores.

Cuéllar, J. (2020). El Salvador's hydrosocial crisis. *NACLA Report on the Americas* 52 (3): 317-323.

----- (2021, November 1). The value of the volcano. *NACLA*. https://nacla.org/news/2021/10/29/bitcoin-volcano-el-salvador (last accessed February 27, 2024)

----- (2022, June 23). "No one is safe in Bukele's gang war." *North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA).* https://nacla.org/bukele-gang-war. (last accessed January 23, 2024).

Cumbers, A., and F. Paul. (2022). Remunicipalisation, mutating neoliberalism, and the conjuncture. *Antipode* 54(1): 197-217.

da Silva, P. P. (2022). Post-neoliberalism and capital flow management in Latin America: assessing the role of social forces. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26(1): 30-60.

da Silva, P.P. (2023). Post-neoliberalism and external financial liberalization: Comparing left-wing and right-wing populism. *Government and Opposition* 58(3): 535-555.

Das, R. (2006). Marxist theories of the state. In *Alternative theories of the state,* ed. S. Pressman, 64-90. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Das, R. (2022). The good and the bad in David Harvey's popular Marxism. *Critical Sociology* 49(7-8): 1079-1094.

Davidson-Harden, A., Naidoo, A., and A. Harden, A. (2007). The geopolitics of the water justice movement. *Peace, conflict and development* 11(11): 1-34.

Davis, M. (2006). *Planet of slums.* London, UK: Verso Books.

De Burgos, H. (2013). La pila de San Juan: Historic transformations of water as a public symbol in Suchitoto, El Salvador. In *The Social Life of Water*, ed. J. Wagner, 98-118. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.

Decreto No. 1024. (2002). *Garantía estatal de la salud y la seguridad social*. Asamblea Legislativa de la Republica de El Salvador.

Decreto No. 666. (2014). *Reformas a la Ley Especial de Asocios Publico Privados.* Asamblea Legislativa de la Republica de El Salvador.

Decreto No. 205. (2019). *Ley Transitoria para facilitar a los usuarios el cumplimiento voluntario del pago por deudas provenientes del servicio de agua potable y alcantarillado prestado por la ANDA.* Asamblea Legislativa de la Republica de El Salvador.

Deitz, S. and K. Meehan. (2019). Plumbing poverty: Mapping hot spots of racial and geographic inequality in U.S. household water insecurity. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 109(4): 1092-1109.

Di Chiro, G. (2008). Living environmentalisms: coalition politics, social reproduction, and environmental justice. *Environmental Politics* 17(2): 276-298.

Diálogo con Ernesto Lopez. (2022, October 20). Programa Diálogo con Ernesto López: 20 de octubre - Proyecto potabilización del lago de Ilopango. Programa Diálogo con Ernesto López. https://megavision.com.sv/programa-dialogo-con-ernesto-lopez-20-de-octubre-3/. (last accessed July 25, 2023).

Diario CoLatino. (2014, May 24). “Quisiéramos que esta legislatura entregue este marco jurídico”: Lourdes Palacios. *Diario CoLatino*. https://www.diariocolatino.com/quisieramos-que-esta-legislatura-entregue-este-marco-juridico-lourdes-palacios/. (accessed October 3, 2023).

---- (2021, March 23). Organizaciones demandan Ley de Aguas con visión de derechos humanos. *Diario CoLatino.* https://www.diariocolatino.com/organizaciones-demandan-ley-de-aguas-con-vision-de-derechos-humanos/?fbclid=IwAR166XSMkvtsFV-9u6bOu4Gp3_LOrw4ziAjp7AC6G7gChluUxGXEBTeIvOE (accessed October 11, 2023)

Díaz, M. and M. Beltrán. (2019). “MARN: Aciertos, Desaciertos, Retos.” *GatoEncerrado*. https://gatoencerrado.news/2019/06/14/especial-aciertos-desaciertos-y-retos-en-el-marn/. (last accessed December 12, 2023).

Díaz, M. (2019, October 29). Suchitoto se impone ante una Asamblea que retrasa Ley de Agua. *Gato Encerrado*. https://gatoencerrado.news/2019/11/02/suchitoto-se-impone-ante-una-asamblea-que-retrasa-ley-de-agua/ (last accessed March 22, 2024)

----- (2020, February 20). Sobran propuestas para Ley de Agua y escasean acuerdos de los diputados. *Gato Encerrado.* https://gatoencerrado.news/2020/02/06/sobran-propuestas-para-ley-de-agua-y-escasean-acuerdos-de-los-diputados/ (last accessed March 22, 2024)

----- (2021, June 5). Gobierno antepone la inversión económica sobre el medioambiente. *Gato Encerrado*. https://gatoencerrado.news/2021/06/05/gobierno-antepone-la-inversion-economica-sobre-el-medioambiente/ (last accessed February 26, 2024).

----- (2022, November 1). El MARN cambió sus directrices para avalar un aeropuerto en una zona de manglar. *Gato Encerrado*. https://gatoencerrado.news/2022/11/01/el-marn-cambio-sus-directrices-para-permitir-la-construccion-del-aeropuerto-del-pacifico/ (last accessed February 26, 2024).

DIGESTYC (Dirección General de Estadística y Censos). (2018). "Encuesta de hogares de propósitos múltiples 2017." Ministerio de Economía, Gobierno de la Republica de El Salvador.

Dimmelmeier, A. (2023). Expanding the politics of measurement in sustainable finance: Reconceptualizing environmental, social and governance information as infrastructure. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*: 1-21.

Dull, R. A. (2008). Unpacking El Salvador's ecological predicament: Theoretical templates and “long-view” ecologies. *Global Environmental Change*, 18(2): 319-329.

Dunkerley, J. (1983). *The long war: Dictatorship and revolution in El Salvador*. London, UK: Verso Books.

Edelman, M. (2001). Social movements: changing paradigms and forms of politics. *Annual review of anthropology* 30(1): 285-317.

Edenhofer, N. (2022). Mining boom and contentious politics across Central America: Elites, Movements and Party Systems. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 54(2): 253-281.

El Foro del Agua. (2010). “Ley General de Aguas: un Debate Impostergable para la Sustentabilidad de El Salvador.” *Ecodes.* https://ecodes.org/docs/Foro-del-Agua-El-Salvador.pdf (accessed October 5, 2023).

Elson, D. (1979). *Value: The representation of labour in capitalism.* London, UK: Verso Books.

Enqvist J. and G. Ziervogel. (2019). Water governance and justice in Cape Town: An overview. *WIREs Water* 6:1354.

Erazo, R. (2023, April 18). "Hemos sido objeto hasta de amenazas de muerte": sindicalistas de alcaldía de Soyapango sin recibir pago de bonos. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Hemos-sido-objeto-hasta-de-amenazas-de-muerte-sindicalistas-de-alcaldia-de-Soyapango-sin-recibir-pago-de-bonos-20230418-0011.html (last accessed March 4, 2024)

Escobar, C. V. (2020, January 23). Frederick Benítez mintió cuando dijo que el agua de Anda es bebible. *Gato Encerrado*. https://gatoencerrado.news/2020/01/23/frederick-benitez-mintio-cuando-dijo-que-el-agua-anda-es-bebible/ (last accessed February 26, 2024)

----- (2022, January 4). Es engañoso que la Ley de Recursos Hídricos incluye aportes de todos los sectores. *GatoEncerrado*. https://gatoencerrado.news/2022/01/04/es-enganoso-que-la-ley-de-recursos-hidricos-incluye-aportes-de-todos-los-sectores/ (last accessed March 20, 2024)

Espinoza, C. (2024a, February 27). Ministerio de Educación dice haber sacado la "ideología de género" de las escuelas salvadoreñas. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Ministerio-de-Educacion-dice-haber-sacado-la-ideologia-de-genero-de-las-escuelas-20240227-0052.html (last accessed March 6, 2024)

----- (2024b, March 22). Agua del lago de Ilopango no es apta para potabilizar, para usos agropecuarios ni bañarse, advierte estudio de la UES. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Agua-del-lago-de-Ilopango-no-es-apta-para-potabilizar-para-usos-agropecuarios-ni-banarse-advierte-estudio-de-la-UES-20240322-0099.html (last accessed April 5, 2024)

Estes, N. (2019). *Our history is the future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the long tradition of Indigenous resistance.* London, UK: Verso Books.

Estrada, Y. (2020, January 22). ANDA con reducción de $7.5 millones en agua potable y saneamiento para 2020. *Diario CoLatino*. https://www.diariocolatino.com/anda-con-reduccion-de-7-5-millones-en-agua-potable-y-saneamiento-para-2020/ (last accessed February 26, 2024)

Etchemendy, S. (2020). The politics of popular coalitions: Unions and territorial social movements in post-neoliberal Latin America (2000–15). *Journal of Latin American Studies* 52: 157–188.

Eubanks, V. (2018). *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Ferge, Z. (2002). The changed welfare paradigm: the individualization of the social. *Social policy & administration* 31(1): 20-44.

Ferguson, J. (1994). *The anti-politics machine: 'Development,' depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Fernandez, B. (2018). Dispossession and the depletion of social reproduction. *Antipode* 50(1): 142-163.

Ferrucci, G., and P. Cabezas. (2023, February 1). El Salvador arrests prominent anti-mining activists. *NACLA*. https://nacla.org/el-salvador-arrests-prominent-anti-mining-activists (last accessed March 4, 2024)

Fitzsimmons, T., and M. Anner. (1999). Civil society in a postwar period: Labor in the Salvadoran democratic transition. *Latin American Research Review* 34(3): 103-128.

Flint, A. (1998). Social movements, NGOs and the state: contesting political space in the transition to democracy in El Salvador. Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Latin American Studies Association. Chicago, IL, September 24–26.

Ford Lemus, M. (2023, June 13). Hydrocracy at the center of Guatemala City's elections. *NACLA.* https://nacla.org/hydrocracy-center-guatemala-citys-elections (last accessed April 8, 2024)

Foster, J., and C. el-Ojeili. (2023). Centrist utopianism in retreat: ideological fragmentation after the financial crisis. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 28(2): 199-218.

Fox, M., and J. Cuéllar. (2023, December 11). Panama protests: A model for pushing back extractive capitalism. *NACLA*. https://nacla.org/panama-mining-protest-extractive-capital (last accessed April 8, 2024)

Fraser, S. (2022). It's time to take woke capital seriously. *Dissent Magazine* 69(1): 107-114.

Freedman, E. (2012). Mapping the Salvadoran media. *Envio Digital*. https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/4483 (accessed September, 26, 2023).

Freeman, W. (2024, February 14). El Salvador's economy will test Bukele 2.0. *Americas Quarterly*. https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/el-salvadors-economy-will-test-bukele-2-0/#:~:text=Bukele's%20growth%20model&text=%E2%80%9CWe%20have%20the%20war%20against,a%20plan%20to%20reactivate%20agriculture (last accessed March 29, 2024)

Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of history? *The National Interest*, 16: 3–18.

Funes J., and M. González. (2023, May 1). "Fotos: Así se desarrolló la marcha del 1 de mayo contra arbitrariedades del gobierno de Bukele." *El Diario de Hoy.* https://www.elsalvador.com/fotogalerias/noticias-fotogalerias/220ía-internacional-del-trabajo-marcha-regimen-de-excepcion-veteranos-guerra-nayib-bukele-/1058025/2023/ (last accessed January 2, 2024).

Furlong, K. (2010). Small technologies, big change: Rethinking infrastructure through STS and geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 35(4): 460-482.

---- (2012). Good water governance without good urban governance? Regulation, service delivery models, and local government. *Environment and Planning A* 44: 2721-2741.

---- (2013). The dialectics of equity: Consumer citizenship and the extension of water supply in Medellín, Colombia. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103(5): 1176-1192.

Gandy, M. (2002). *Concrete and clay: Reworking nature in New York City.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Gandy, M. (2014). *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

García, J. (2023, July 20). "Usuarios de ANDA aún no pueden optar a condonación de mora por deudas." *El Diario de Hoy.* https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/anda-publicaciones-oficiales-decretos-condonacion-de-la-deuda-asamblea-legislativa/1077072/2023/ (last accessed November 8, 2023).

Gavarrete, J. (2021, October 26). Bitcoin but no water for this Salvadoran town. *El Faro.* https://elfaro.net/en/202110/el_salvador/25808/Bitcoin-but-no-water-for-this-Salvadoran-town.htm (last accessed February 27, 2024)

----- (2024, January 19). Nearly one million Salvadorans on the verge of starvation. *El Faro*. https://especiales.elfaro.net/en/hunger (last accessed February 23, 2024).

Gershuny, J., and O. Sullivan. (2019). *What we really do all day: Insights from the centre for time use research.* London, UK: Penguin Random House Books.

Gies, H. (2018a, August 5). Battle for Water Rights Heats Up in El Salvador. *TruthOut*. https://truthout.org/articles/battle-for-water-rights-heats-up-in-el-salvador/. (accessed September 7, 2023).

----- (2018b, November 2). Once lush, El Salvador is dangerously close to running dry. *National Geographic*. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/el-salvador-water-crisis-drought-climate-change. (last accessed March 22, 2024).

Gilmore, R.W. (2007). *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

----- (2024, February 7). The jail is a monster. *Verso Blog Post*. https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/the-jail-is-a-monster?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social (last accessed March 8, 2024)

Goldman, M. (2007). How "Water for All!" policy became hegemonic: The power of the World Bank and its transnational policy networks. *Geoforum* 38(5), 786-800.

Gomez Licon, A. (2024, February 22). El Salvador's president gets rock-star welcome at conservative gathering outside Washington. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/cpac-nayib-bukele-trump-conservative-dc454b92a57fad8907b376b6eacf5b7e (last accessed March 6, 2024)

González Rivas, M. and C. Schroering. (2021). Pittsburgh's translocal social movement: A case of the new public water. *Utilities Policy* 71: 101230.

González, O. (2021, April 20). La ley de agua estancada en el tiempo. *GatoEncerrado*. https://gatoencerrado.news/2021/04/20/ley-de-agua-estancada-en-el-tiempo/. (last accessed August 2, 2023).

Goodfriend, H. (2017a, January 16). "El Salvador's new battlefield." *Jacobin*. https://jacobin.com/2017/01/el-salvador-fmln-arena-peace-accords (last accessed November 8, 2023)

---- (2017b, September 1). Water wars in El Salvador: Tacuba resists. *NACLA Reporting on the Americas.* https://nacla.org/news/2017/09/01/water-wars-el-salvador-tacuba-resists. (accessed October 5, 2023).

---- (2020). The limits to change: El Salvador's FMLN in power. In *Latin America's Pink Tide: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings*, ed. S. Ellner, 295-318. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

----- (2023, September 8). Indefinite exception. *New Left Review Sidecar*. https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/indefinite-exception (last accessed February 28, 2024)

----- (2024, February 20). El Salvador's Nayib Bukele committed blatant election fraud. *Jacobin*. https://jacobin.com/2024/02/nayib-bukele-el-salvador-election-fraud (last accessed February 28, 2024)

Gould, J., and A. Lauria-Santiago. (2008). *To rise in darkness: Revolution, repression, and memory in El Salvador, 1920–1932*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Gould, J. (2019). *Solidarity under siege: The Salvadoran labor movement, 1970-1990*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Grandin, G. (2021). *Empire's workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the making of an imperial republic*. New York, NY: Picador.

Gressier, R., and J. L. Sanz (2022, July 14). El Salvador government still floats possibility of IMF deal. *El Faro*. https://elfaro.net/en/202207/el_salvador/26268/El-Salvador-Government-Still-Floats-Possibility-of-IMF-Deal.htm (last accessed March 29, 2024).

Grugel, J., and P. Riggirozzi. (2012). Post-neoliberalism in Latin America: Rebuilding and reclaiming the state after crisis. *Development and change* 43(1): 1-21.

Grugel, J., and P. Riggirozzi. (2018). Neoliberal disruption and neoliberalism's afterlife in Latin America: What is left of postneoliberalism? *Critical Social Policy* 38(3): 47–566.

Gutiérrez, J. (2024) Real estate oligarchs: elites and the urbanization of the land question in El Salvador. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 51(2): 489-511.

Hale, C. (2020). Using and refusing the law: indigenous struggles and legal strategies after neoliberal multiculturalism. *American Anthropologist* 122(3): 618-631.

Harris, L., McKenzie, S., Rodina, L., Shah, S., and N. Wilson. (2018). Water justice: Key concepts, debates, and research agendas. In *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Justice,* eds. R. Holifield, J. Chakraborty, and G. Walker, 338-349. New York, NY: Routledge.

Harris, L. M., and M. C. Roa-García. (2013). Recent waves of water governance: Constitutional reform and resistance to neoliberalization in Latin America (1990–2012). *Geoforum* 50: 20-30.

Harris, L. (2020). Assessing states: Water service delivery and evolving state–society relations in Accra, Ghana and Cape Town, South Africa. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38 (2): 290-311.

---- (2022). Learning from Aotearoa: Water governance challenges and debates. *New Zealand Geographer* 78 (1): 104-108.

Harvey, D. (1974). Population, resources, and the ideology of science. *Economic Geography* 50: 256–277.

---- (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Hawkins, R., and J. Emel. (2014). Paradoxes of ethically branded bottled water: Constituting the solution to the world water crisis. *cultural geographies* 21(4): 727-743.

Hecht, S. B., Kandel, S., Gomes, I., Cuellar, N., and H. Rosa, H. (2006). Globalization, forest resurgence, and environmental politics in El Salvador. *World Development* 34(2): 308-323.

Heller, J. (1997). Supporting sustainable development in post-war El Salvador. *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 16(2): 14-18.

Henríquez, J. (2018, November 2). El Salvador es uno de los países con menor nivel de inglés en América Latina. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/535331/el-salvador-es-uno-de-los-paises-con-menor-nivel-de-ingles-en-america-latina.html (last accessed March 21, 2024).

Henríquez, A. (2021, February 15). Sindicalistas de La Constancia exigen diálogo con la empresa por violación a derechos laborales. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Sindicalistas-de-La-Constancia-exigen-dialogo-con-la-empresa-por-violacion-a-derechos-laborales-20210215-0033.html (last accessed March 22, 2024)

Herrán-Ávila, L. (2023) The reinvention of the Latin American right. *NACLA Report on the Americas* 55(1): 25-31.

Himley, M. (2008). Geographies of environmental governance: The nexus of nature and neoliberalism. *Geography Compass* 2 (2): 433-451.

Hochuli, A., Hoare, G., and P. Cunliffe. (2021). *The end of the end of history: Politics in the twenty-first century.* Winchester, UK: Zero Books.

Hogan, M. (2015). Data flows and water woes: The Utah data center. *Big Data & Society* 2(2): 1–12.

Hompanera, Y. (2022, May 14). FOTOS: Surf City y Puerto de La Libertad: Así lucen los avances en la costa salvadoreña. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/fotogalerias/noticias-fotogalerias/surf-city-puerto-la-libertad-avances-en-contruccion-china/955081/2022/ (last accessed February 26, 2024).

Hong, E. (2021, 30 November). How does Bitcoin mining work? *Investopedia*. https://www.investopedia.com/tech/how-does-bitcoin-mining-work/ (last accessed February 27, 2024)

Huber, M. (2022). *Climate change as class war: Building socialism on a warming planet.* Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books.

Human Rights Watch. (2003). *El Salvador's failure to protect workers' human rights: Implications for CAFTA*. Washington, DC: Human Rights Watch.

Hummel, C. (2021). *Why informal workers organize: Contentious politics, enforcement, and the state*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

IUDOP - Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (2022). *La población salvadoreña evalúa la situación del país al final del año 2022 (Reporte No. 2)*. Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP) de la Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA). chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/Bol.-Eva-de-anio-2022-Seguridad.pdf

Jepson, W., and E. Vandawalle. (2016). Household water insecurity in the Global North: A study of rural and peri-urban settlements on the Texas-Mexico border. *The Professional Geographer* 68(1): 66-81.

Jepson, W., Budds, J., Eichelberger, L., Harris, L., Norman, E., Reilly, K., Pearson, A., Shah, S., Shinn, J., Staddon, C., Stoler, J., Wutich, A., and S. Young. (2017). Advancing human capabilities for water security: A relational approach. *Water Security* 1: 46–52.

Jerez, B., Garcés, I., and R. Torres. (2021). Lithium extractivism and water injustices in the Salar de Atacama, Chile: The colonial shadow of green electromobility. *Political Geography* 87, 1-11.

Jollymore, A., Haines, M. J., Satterfield, T., and M. S. Johnson. (2017). Citizen science for water quality monitoring: Data implications of citizen perspectives. *Journal of Environmental Management* 200: 456–467.

Joma, S. (2022, August 28). "La ANDA bajo lluvia de críticas por cambio y costos de medidores de agua." *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/anda-denuncias-de- consumidores-el-salvador-precios-suministro-agua-potable-/992053/2022/. (last accessed November 8, 2023).

Jurado, V., and X. Oliva. (2020, January 18). Salud dice que el agua se puede consumir pero recomienda hervirla o usar filtros. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/678308/agua-potable-anda-pruebas-mal-olor-sabor.html (last accessed February 26, 2024)

Kaltwasser, C. R. (2022). Rethinking the right in Latin America. *Latin American Politics and Society* 64(4): 146-156.

Karunananthan, M. and S. Spronk. (2015). *Water at the heart of El Salvador's struggle against neoliberalism*. Blue Planet Project. https://www.blueplanetproject.net/index.php/water-at-the-heart-of-el-salvadors-struggle-against-neoliberalism/ (last accessed August 16, 2023).

Karunananthan, M. (2019). Can the human right to water disrupt neoliberal water policies in the era of corporate policy-making? *Geoforum* 98: 244-253.

King, M., M. Pastora, M. Salazar and C. Rodriguez. (2016). Environmental governance and peacebuilding in post-conflict Central America: Lessons from the Central American commission for environment and development. In *Governance, Natural Resources and Post-conflict Peacebuilding,* eds. C. Muffett, and S. Nichols, 777-802. London, UK: Routledge.

Koch, N., and T. Perreault. (2019). Resource nationalism. *Progress in Human Geography* 43(4): 611-631.

Kooy, M. and K. Bakker. (2008a). Splintered networks: The colonial and contemporary waters of Jakarta. *Geoforum* 39(6): 1843-1858.

----- (2008b). Technologies of government: constituting subjectivities, spaces, and infrastructures in colonial and contemporary Jakarta. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32(2): 375-391.

Kotsila, P., Anguelovski, I., Baró, F., Langemeyer, J., Sekulova, F., and J. Connolly. (2021). Nature-based solutions as discursive tools and contested practices in urban nature's neoliberalisation processes. *Environment and planning E: Nature and space* 4(2): 252-274.

La Constancia. (N.d.). *Sostenibilidad – La Constancia*. La Constancia. https://laconstancia.com/sostenibilidad/ (last accessed March 20, 2024).

La Prensa Gráfica. (2018, July 15). "Realizan cuatro marchas contra la privatización del agua en El Salvador este jueves." *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Realizan-cuatro-marchas-contra-la-privatizacion-del-agua-en-El-Salvador-este-jueves-20180705-0014.html (accessed October 4, 2023)

La Tribu Radio. (2022). "Carol Colorado (Directora Legal y de Asuntos Corporativos de La Constancia)." YouTube, uploaded by La Tribu FM, 21 October 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmyUcKFpG2s&t=2s.

----- (2023, March 9). El tema del dia: Rubén Alemán. *La Tribu Radio.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfrd-HHD880. (last accessed July 25, 2023).

Labrador, G. (2022, May 3). How Bukele crafted a best-selling political brand. *El Faro*. https://elfaro.net/en/202205/el_salvador/26155/How-Bukele-Crafted-a-Best-Selling-Political-Brand.htm (last accessed February 26, 2024)

Laguan, J. (2018, June 14). "Sindicato de empleados de ANDA se unieron a marcha contra la privatización del agua en horas laborales." *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Sindicato-de-empleados-de-ANDA-se-unieron-a-marcha-contra-la-privatizacion-del-agua-en-horas-laborales-20180614-0096.html. (last accessed January 23, 2024).

Legislative Assembly. (2021). "#EnVivo | Comisión Ad Hoc para el estudio del proyecto de Ley General de Recursos Hídricos." YouTube, uploaded by Asamblea Legislativa El Salvador, 22 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HA01aRTyNnk&t=3s.

Legislative Assembly Press (2021a, October 25). Presidente Nayib Bukele inaugura moderna Planta Potabilizadora Torogoz y salda con ello una deuda histórica que dejaron los gobiernos anteriores. *Prensa Asamblea Legislativa*. https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/presidente-nayib-bukele-inaugura-moderna-planta-potabilizadora-torogoz-y-salda-con-ello-una-deuda-historica-que-dejaron-los-gobiernos-anteriores/ (last accessed February 26, 2024)

Legislative Assembly Press. (2021b, December 21). Asamblea Legislativa aprueba Ley General de Recursos Hídricos. *Prensa Asamblea Legislativa.* https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/11857#:~:text=Con%2065%20votos%2C%20los%20diputados,buen%20uso%20de%20este%20recurso. (last accessed August 14, 2023).

Leopold, L. (2007). *The man who hated work and loved labor: The life and times of Tony Mazzocchi.* White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green.

Levitsky, S., and L. Way. (2002). Elections without democracy: The rise of competitive authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy* 13(2): 51-65.

Li, T.M. (2007). *The will to improve: Governmentality, development, and the practice of politics.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Linares, A. (2021, November 30). A 'Bitcoin City' in El Salvador inspired by ancient Greeks? Here's a reality check. *NBC News*. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/bitcoin-city-el-salvador-inspired-ancient-greeks-s-reality-check-rcna6944 (last accessed February 27, 2024)

Linton, J., and J. Budds. (2014). The hydrosocial cycle: Defining and mobilizing a relational-dialectical approach to water. *Geoforum* 57 (57): 170-180.

Liverman, D. M. (2018). Geographic perspectives on development goals: Constructive engagements and critical perspectives on the MDGs and the SDGs. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 8(2): 168-185.

LPG. (2017a, May 1). Como protesta, joven de Apopa pagó en centavos multa de ANDA por $408. *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Como-protesta-joven-de-Apopa-pago-en-centavos-multa-de-ANDA-por-408-Video-20170501-0001.html. (last accessed August 25, 2023)

LPG. (2017b, May 4). Cuatro personas y un conejo consumen $2,484 en agua, según factura de la ANDA. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Cuatro-personas-y-un-conejo-consumen-2484-en-agua-segun-factura-de-la-ANDA-20170504-0030.html. (last accessed July 26, 2023)

LPG. (2017c, June 14). Mecafé, amigo de Funes acusado de lavar millones de dólares, paga $2.39 de factura de agua. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Mecafe-amigo-de-Funes-acusado-de-lavar-millones-de-dolares-paga-2.39-de-factura-de-agua-20180614-0043.html. (last accessed July 31, 2023).

LPG. (2022, April 25). LPG Datos | La desconocida Ley del agua. *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/lpgdatos/LPG-Datos--La-desconocida-Ley-del-agua-20220424-0060.html. (August 10, 2023).

Loftus, A., March, H., and T. F. Purcell. (2019). The political economy of water infrastructure: An introduction to financialization. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water* 6(1): 1-7.

Loftus, A. (2006). Reification and the dictatorship of the water meter. *Antipode* 38(5): 1023-1045.

Lopez, S. (2001). Contesting the global city: Pittsburgh's public service unions confront a neoliberal agenda. In *Global ethnography: Forces, connections, and imaginations in a postmodern world,* ed. M. Burawoy, 268-298. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

López Vides, C. (2022a, September 27). "ANDA pide a población que denuncie fallos y quejas por cambio de medidores." *El Diario de Hoy.* https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/anda-consumo-de-agua-suministro-potable-/1001909/2022/ (last accessed November 8, 2023).

----- (2022b, October 2). "Reemplazo de medidores de ANDA: guía fácil para usuarios." *El Diario de Hoy.* https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/anda-suministro-de-agua-potable-tuberias-/1003089/2022/ (last accessed November 8, 2023)

-----. (2022c, November 27). "Gobierno construye oficinas para Hacienda en el Parque de la Familia." *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/gobierno-construye-sede-hacienda-parque-familia/1019642/2022/ (last accessed January 9, 2024).

MacAfee, E. (2023). Critically assembling water quality ethics beyond thresholds, hierarchies and best practices. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 6(4): 2595-2613.

MacFarlane, C. (2023). *Waste and the city: The crisis of sanitation and the right to citylife*. London, UK: Verso Books.

Magaña, Y. (2023, October 13). Solo 14 % de las juntas de agua del país se han inscrito en la ASA. *Diario El Mundo*. https://diario.elmundo.sv/politica/solo-14-de-las-juntas-de-agua-del-pais-se-han-inscrito-en-la-asa (last accessed February 20, 2024).

Magdahl, J. E., and D. Jordhus-Lier. (2020). Labour internationalism and the public sector: The case of the Public Services International. *Political Geography* 79: 1-10.

Magdahl, J. (2022) Theorising approaches to social movement spatialities: Local and global contestations of neoliberal water services. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 47: 1028–1043.

Mann, G. (2016). Keynes resurrected? Saving civilization, again and again. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 6(2): 119-134.

Manning, C. (2007). Party-building on the heels of war: El Salvador, Bosnia, Kosovo and Mozambique. *Democratisation* 14(2): 253-272.

March, H. Grau-Satorras, M. Saurí, D. and E. Swyngedouw. (2019). The deadlock of metropolitan remunicipalisation of water services management in Barcelona. *Water Alternatives* 12(2): 360-379.

MARN - Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales. (2017). *Plan Nacional de Gestión Integrada del Recurso Hídrico de El Salvador, con énfasis en zonas prioritarias*. Instalaciones ISTA, San Salvador, El Salvador.

Martinez-Alier, J., Temper, L., Del Bene, D., and A. Scheidel. (2016). Is there a global environmental justice movement? *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 43(3): 731-755.

Martinez-Alier, J. (2003). *The Environmentalism of the poor: a study of ecological conflicts and valuation*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

----- (2014). The environmentalism of the poor. *Geoforum* 54: 239-241.

Martínez, C., Martínez, O., Arauz, S., and E. Lemus. (2020). Bukele has been negotiating with MS-13 for a reduction in homicides and electoral support. *El Faro*. https://elfaro.net/en/202009/el_salvador/24785/Bukele-Has-Been-Negotiating-with-MS-13-for-a-Reduction-in-Homicides-and-Electoral-Support.htm (last accessed March 1, 2024)

Martínez, V., Alas, S., and LPG Datos. (2022, December 26). “ANDA produce más agua, pero el 65 % se pierde por malas tuberías.” *La Prensa Gráfica.*

https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/ANDA-produce-mas-agua-pero-el-65--se-pierde- por-malas-tuberias-20221225-0053.html. (last accessed December 13, 2022).

Martínez, C. (2022a, May 17). Collapsed government talks with MS-13 sparked record homicides in El Salvador, audios reveal. *El Faro*. https://elfaro.net/en/202205/el_salvador/26177/Collapsed-Government-Talks-with-MS-13-Sparked-Record-Homicides-in-El-Salvador-Audios-Reveal.htm (last accessed February 27, 2024)

Martínez, V. (2022b, September 7). "Escuelas públicas de El Salvador no han recibido el presupuesto anual para pagar sus gastos básicos." *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Escuelas-publicas-de-El-Salvador-no-han-recibido-el-presupuesto-anual-para-pagar-sus-gastos-basicos-20220907-0035.html. (last accessed December 28, 2023).

----- (2023a, January 31). "Usuarios se quejan de cobros excesivos en ANDA." *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Usuarios-se-quejan-de-cobros-excesivos-en-ANDA-20230130-0090.html. (last accessed November 8, 2023).

----- (2023b, November 1). "Docentes salvadoreños suspenderían clases en 2024 por incumplimiento del ajuste salarial." *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Docentes-suspenderian-clases-en-2024-por-incumplimiento-del-ajuste-salarial-20231101-0070.html (last accessed January 2, 2024).

----- (2024, February 24). Acceso al agua potable, la principal demanda a los candidatos a alcaldes de San Salvador Sur. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Acceso-al-agua-potable-la-principal-demanda-a-los-candidatos-a-alcaldes-de-San-Salvador-Sur-20240224-0065.html (last accessed April 5, 2024)

Martínez Novo, C. (2021). *Undoing multiculturalism: Resource extraction and indigenous rights in Ecuador*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Mason, M. 2022. Infrastructure under pressure: water management and state-making in southern Iraq. *Geoforum* 132: 52-61.

Matthews, J. (2023). Waves, floods, currents: The politics and poetics of water in social movement analysis. *Antipode* 1-19.

Marx, K. (1990 [1867]). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1.* London, UK: Penguin Classics.

McAlevey, J. (2016). *No shortcuts: Organizing for power in the new gilded age.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

McCarthy, J., and S. Prudham. (2004). Neoliberal nature and the nature of neoliberalism. *Geoforum* 35(3): 275–283.

McCarthy, J. (2019). Authoritarianism, populism, and the environment: Comparative experiences, insights, and perspectives. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 109(2): 301-313.

McDonald, D.A. and E. Swyngedouw. (2019). The new water wars: Struggles for remunicipalisation. *Water Alternatives* 12(2): 322-333.

McDonald, D. A. (2018). Remunicipalization: The future of water services? *Geoforum* 91: 47-56.

----- (2020). Remunicipalization and the human right to water: a signifier half full? In *Water politics: Governance, justice, and the right to water*, eds. F. Sultana and A. Loftus, 143-160. London, UK: Routledge Earthscan.

Medarov, G., and D.A. McDonald. (2019). Which way will the winds blow? Post-privatisation water struggles in Sofia, Bulgaria. *Water Alternatives* 12(2): 438-458.

Mehmood, A., and J. Cousins. (2022). Judicialising urban political ecologies: Post-politics and environmental governance in South Asia. *Antipode* 54(6): 1944-1964.

Meléndez-Sánchez, M. (2021). Latin America erupts: Millennial authoritarianism in El Salvador. *Journal of Democracy* 32(3): 19-32.

----- (2023, March 28). Bukele has defeated El Salvador's gangs—for now. How? And what does it mean for the region? *Lawfare Magazine.* https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/bukele-has-defeated-el-salvadors-gangs-now-how-and-what-does-it-mean-region (last accessed February 28, 2024)

Méndez-Barrientos, L. E., Fencl, A. L., Workman, C. L., and S. H. Shah. (2023). Race, citizenship, and belonging in the pursuit of water and climate justice in California. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 6(3): 1614-1635.

Mendoza, M., Greenleaf, M., and E. H. Thomas. (2021). Green distributive politics: Legitimizing green capitalism and environmental protection in Latin America. *Geoforum* 126: 1-12.

Mendoza, I. (2023, September 11). "Hoy está más difícil para la mayoría de las familias el poder adquirir una propiedad." *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/negocios/vivienda-la-union-conchagua-el-salvador-/1089499/2023/ (last accessed March 26, 2024)

Menga, F., Rusca, M., and R. Alba. (2023). Philantrocapitalism and the re-making of global water charity. *Geoforum* 144: 1-10.

Mehta, L., Veldwisch, G.J., and J. Franco. (2012). Introduction to the special issue: Water grabbing? Focus on the (re) appropriation of finite water resources. *Water Alternatives* 5(2): 193-207.

Menton, M., and P. Le Billon. (2021). *Environmental defenders: Deadly struggles for life and territory.* New York, NY: Earthscan by Routledge.

Mills-Novoa, M., Boelens, R., Hoogesteger, J., and J. Vos. (2020). Governmentalities, hydrosocial territories & recognition politics: The making of objects and subjects for climate change adaptation in Ecuador. *Geoforum* 115: 90-101.

Mingorría, S. (2018) Violence and visibility in oil palm and sugarcane conflicts: the case of Polochic Valley, Guatemala. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(7): 1314-1340.

Mirosa, O., and L. M. Harris. (2012). Human right to water: Contemporary challenges and contours of a global debate. *Antipode* 44(3): 932-949.

Mitchell, K., Marston, S., and C. Katz. (2003). Life's work: An introduction, review and critique. *Antipode* 35(3): 415–442.

Mitchell, T. (2002). *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Moncada, E. (2021). *Resisting extortion: victims, criminals and states in Latin America*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Monterrosa, L. (2022, December 28). "Basura, huelgas y mal uso de fondos: por esto capturaron a la Alcaldesa de Soyapango." *El Diario de Hoy.* https://www.elsalvador.com/fotogalerias/noticias- fotogalerias/alcaldia-de-soyapango-orden-captura-huelgas-sindicatos-policia-/1027875/2022/ (last accessed January 2, 2024).

Montoya, A. (2018). *The violence of democracy: Political life in postwar El Salvador*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

----- (2021). On care for our common home: Ecological materiality and sovereignty over the Lempa transboundary watershed. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 53: 297–322.

Moodie, E. (2010). *El Salvador in the aftermath of peace: Crime, uncertainty, and the transition to democracy.* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mudde, C. (2019). *The far right today*. Medford, MA: Polity Press.

Muehlebach, A. (2023). *A vital frontier: Water insurgencies in Europe.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Murray, W. and J. Overton. (2011). Neoliberalism is dead, long live neoliberalism? Neostructuralism and the international aid regime of the 2000s. *Progress in Development Studies* 11 (4): 307–19.

Nash, J. (2005). *Social movements: An anthropological reader.* Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing.

Nelson, P. (2017) Citizens, consumers, workers, and activists: civil society during and after water privatization struggles. *Journal of Civil Society* 13(2): 202-221.

Neuman, S. (2020, February 10). Troops occupy El Salvador's legislature to back president's crime package. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2020/02/10/804407503/troops-occupy-el-salvadors-legislature-to-back-president-s-crime-package (last accessed February 27, 2024)

Nilsson M. (2022). Nayib Bukele: populism and autocratization, or a very popular democratically elected president? *Journal of Geography, Politics and Society* 12(2): 16–26.

NIMD – Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy. (2023). *El Salvador: What we do.* https://nimd.org/programmes/el-salvador/#our-work. (last accessed November 13, 2023)

Noticiero Hechos de El Salvador. (2018). ANEP se refirió a las intenciones de privatizar el agua. YouTube, uploaded by Noticieros Hecho de El Salvador, 18 June 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1N_4eL3yLo,

Ofstehage, A., Wolford, W., and S. M. Borras Jr. (2022). Contemporary populism and the environment. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 47: 671-696.

O'Hare, P. (2018). The benefits of slowing things down: Reflections on research with clasificadores and técnicos in Montevideo. In *Anthropological contributions for sustainable futures*, eds. J. Taks and S. Alzugaray, 84-89. Montevideo, Uruguay: Unidad de Comunicación y Ediciones (UCE).

Okereke, C. (2006). Global environmental sustainability: Intragenerational equity and conceptions of justice in multilateral environmental regimes. *Geoforum* 37(5): 725-738.

Orellana, J. (2018, January 19). Promueven sostenibilidad en la industria azucarera. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/economia/Promueven-sostenibilidad-en-la-industria-azucarera-20180118-0110.html (last accessed March 19, 2024)

Orellana, G. (2023a, May 2). "Gobierno en "saldo rojo" con los trabajadores y trabajadoras." *Diario Co Latino.* https://www.diariocolatino.com/gobierno-en-saldo-rojo-con-los-trabajadores-y-trabajadoras/ (last accessed January 2, 2024).

----- (2023b, July 27). “Dignificar la gestión comunitaria del agua” buscará la Red Nacional de Juntas de Agua. *Diario CoLatino*. https://www.diariocolatino.com/dignificar-la-gestion-comunitaria-del-agua-buscara-la-red-nacional-de-juntas-de-agua/ (last accessed February 22, 2024).

----- (2024, April 6). Denuncian a la ANDA por cobros excesivos. *Diario Co Latino*. https://www.diariocolatino.com/denuncian-a-la-anda-y-df-por-cobros-excesivos/ (last accessed April 7, 2024)

Otterbach, S., Oskorouchi, H. R., Rogan, M., and M. Qaim. (2021). Using Google data to measure the role of Big Food and fast food in South Africa’s obesity epidemic. *World Development* 140: 1-13.

Pacas, L. (2021, April 20). La ley de agua estancada en el tiempo. *Gato Encerrado.* https://gatoencerrado.news/2021/04/20/ley-de-agua-estancada-en-el-tiempo/ (last accessed March 22, 2024)

Paddison, L., Guy, J., and F. Gutiérrez. (2024, February 25). One of the world’s biggest cities may be just months away from running out of water. *CNN.* https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/25/climate/mexico-city-water-crisis-climate-intl/index.html (last accessed April 9, 2024)

Paerregaard, K. and A. Andersen. (2019). Moving beyond the commons/commodity dichotomy: The socio-political complexity of Peru’s water crisis. *Water Alternatives* 12 (2): 459-469.

Paige, J. (1997). *Coffee and power: Revolution and the rise of democracy in Central America*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Palacio Ludeña, M.G. (2021). Falling through the cracks: Digital infrastructures of social protection in Ecuador. *Development and Change* 52(4): 805-828.

Palma, M. (2023, April 13). Más de una decena de sindicalistas han sido detenidos bajo el régimen de excepción en El Salvador. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Mas-de-una-decena-de-sindicalistas-han-sido-detenidos-bajo-el-regimen-de-excepcion-en-El-Salvador-20230413-0021.html (last accessed March 4, 2024)

Parada, A. (2023a, February 27). Régimen de excepción afecta la inversión extranjera, señala Cámara de Comercio. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/negocios/inversion-industrial-inversionistas-empresarios-regimen-de-excepcion/1043040/2023/ (last accessed March 29, 2024)

----- (2023b, March 22). Cuatro de diez salvadoreños reciben agua un solo día a la semana. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/40-poblacion-recibe-agua-un-dia/1048722/2023/ (last accessed February 20, 2024).

Patterson, M., and A. López. (2013). El Salvador. In *The UN Watercourses Convention in Force Strengthening International Law for Transboundary Water Management,* eds. F. Loures and A. Rieu-Clarke, 196-204. London, UK: Routledge.

Pearson, Z., Ellingrod, S., Billo, E., and K. McSweeney. (2019). Corporate social responsibility and the reproduction of (neo) colonialism in the Ecuadorian Amazon. *The Extractive Industries and Society* 6(3): 881-888.

Peet, R. and E. Hartwick. (2015). *Theories of development: Contentions, arguments, alternatives.* New York, NY: The Guildford Press.

Peñate, S. (2023, September 5). Alianza de servicios de Google le costará a El Salvador $500 millones, según ley aprobada. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/aprobaran-marco-legal-para-implementacion-de-alianza-con-google/1087963/2023/ (last accessed February 19, 2024).

----- (2024, February 20). Casi la mitad del electorado no acudió a votar el 4 de febrero. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/elecciones-2024-casi-la-mitad-electorado-no-acudio-votar/1124390/2024/ (last accessed February 28, 2024)

Perelló, L., and P. Navia. (2022). The disruption of an institutionalised and polarized party system: Discontent with democracy and the rise of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. *Politics* 42 (3): 267-288.

Pérez, M. (2022). *Proletarian lives: Routines, identity, and culture in contentious politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Perreault, T., Boelens, R., and J. Vos. (2018). Conclusions: Struggles for justice in a changing water world. In *Water justice*, eds. R. Boelens, T. Perreault, and J. Vos (346-36). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Perreault, T. (2006). From the *Guerra Del Agua* to the *Guerra Del Gas*: resource governance, neoliberalism and popular protest in Bolivia. *Antipode* 38(1): 150-172.

----- (2008). Latin American social movements: A review and critique of the geographical literature. *Geography Compass* 2(5): 1363-1385.

----- (2014). What kind of governance for what kind of equity? Towards a theorization of justice in water governance. *Water International* 39 (2): 233-245.

----- (2015). Performing participation: Mining, power, and the limits of public consultation in Bolivia. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 20(3): 433-451

----- (2016). Governing from the ground up? Translocal networks and the ambiguous politics of environmental justice in Bolivia. In *Grassroots environmental governance: Community engagements with industry*, eds. L. Horowitz and M. Watts, 115-137. London and New York: Routledge.

----- (2020). State of nature: on the co-constitution of resources, state and nation. In *Handbook on the changing geographies of the state,* eds. S. Moisio, N. Koch, A. Jonas, C. Lizotte, and J. Luukkonen (228-239). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Petry, J., and R. Jaspert. (2023, July 2). "Woke" capital won't decarbonize the economy. *Jacobin*. https://jacobin.com/2023/07/woke-capital-esg-investing-climate-change-state-action (last accessed March 27, 2024)

Pettiná, V. (2022). *A compact history of Latin America's Cold War* (Q. Pope, Translator). Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. (Original work published 2018).

Provost, C., and M. Kennard. (2014, November 14). Water everywhere for profit in Nejapa, but few drops for local people to drink. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/nov/03/nejapa-water-access-el-salvador-business-profit-locals (last accessed March 13, 2024)

Pulido, L., Kohl, E., and N. Cotton. (2016). State regulation and environmental justice: The need for strategy reassessment. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27 (2): 12-31.

Quintanilla Gómez, N.J. (2022). *Una mirada a los 40 años del FMLN: aportes, errores, y desafíos.* San Salvador, El Salvador: Editorial Universitaria.

Quito Bure, M., Rodríguez Guerrero, E., Uriguen Aguirre, P., and L. Brito Gaona. (2021). Evolución del precio de la canasta básica del Ecuador. Análisis del periodo 2000 – 2019. *Revista Científica y Tecnológica UPSE* 8(2): 59-67.

Ramakrishnan, K., O'Reilly, K., and J. Budds. (2021). The temporal fragility of infrastructure: Theorizing decay, maintenance, and repair. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4(3): 674-695.

Räthzel, N., Stevis, D., and D. Uzzell. (2021). *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rauda, N., A. Hochuli. (2024, February 6). "Betting on Bukele." Aufhebunga Bunga. Podcast audio.

Rauda, N. (2020, March 16). Sin agua y con el Coronavirus rondando. *El Faro.* https://elfaro.net/es/202003/el_salvador/24126/Sin-agua-y-con-el-Coronavirus-rondando.htm. (last accessed July 27, 2023).

----- (2023, April 23). Bukele blocks release of IMF annual report on El Salvador economy. *El Faro*. https://elfaro.net/en/202304/el_salvador/26810/bukele-blocks-release-of-imf-annual-report-on-el-salvador-economy (last accessed March 29, 2024)

Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Razavi, N. (2022). *Water governance in Bolivia – Cochabamba since the water war.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Redacción Economía. (2022, October 20). La Constancia completa sus operaciones con energía solar. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/economia/La-Constancia-completa-sus-operaciones-con-energia-solar-20221019-0058.html (last accessed March 22, 2024)

Redacción Nacionales. (2022, May 17). Denuncian capturas de sindicalistas. *Diario CoLatino*. https://www.diariocolatino.com/denuncian-capturas-de-sindicalistas/ (last accessed March 4, 2024)

Revkin, A. (2004). *The burning season: The murder of Chico Mendes and the fight for the Amazon rain forest.* Washington, DC: First Island Press.

Reyes, O. (2022, November 3). "Familias denuncian a ANDA por cobros de hasta $200 tras cambio de contadores en sus viviendas." *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Familias-denuncian-a-ANDA-por-cobros-de-hasta200tras-cambio-de-contadores-en-sus-viviendas-20221103-0027.html. (last accessed November 8, 2023).

----- (2024, March 27). Servicio irregular de agua afecta a 160 familias de residencial Los Laureles de Sonsonate. *La Prensa Gráfica*. https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Servicio-irregular-de-agua-afecta-a-160-familias-de-residencial---20240327-0079.html (last accessed April 5, 2024).

Rivera, M. (2022, December 29). "Sindicalistas de alcaldía de Soyapango mantendrían protesta a inicios de 2023." *El Diario de Hoy.* https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/alcaldia-de-soyapango-sindicalismo-sindicatos/1027999/2022/ (last accessed January 2, 2024).

Roa-García, M. (2017). Environmental democratization and water justice in extractive frontiers of Colombia. *Geoforum* 85: 58-71.

Robbins, P. (2012). *Political ecology: A critical introduction*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Roberts, A. (2008). Privatizing social reproduction: The primitive accumulation of water in an era of neoliberalism. *Antipode* 40(4): 535-560.

Robertson, M. (2004). The neoliberalization of ecosystem services: wetland mitigation banking and problems in environmental governance. *Geoforum* 35(3): 361-373.

Robinson, W. (2003). *Transnational conflicts: Central America, social change, and globalization*. New York, NY: Verso.

Robles Rivera, F. (2017). Élites en El Salvador: Cambios y continuidades (2000-2016). *Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos* 43: 99–124.

Rodríguez, C., and J. Quintanilla. (2022, April 18). La toma de Nuevas Ideas: la historia oculta del partido de Bukele. *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/La-toma-de-Nuevas-Ideas-la-historia-oculta-del-partido-de-Bukele-l202204160001.html (last accessed February 26, 2024).

Rodríguez, M. (2023, February 16). El gobierno de Bukele sigue sin atraer inversión extranjera, según estudio. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/gobierno-bukele-sigue-sin-atraer-inversion-extranjera-estudio/1040124/2023/ (last accessed March 29, 2024)

Romano, S. T. (2012). From Protest to Proposal: The Contentious Politics of the Nicaraguan Anti-Water Privatisation Social Movement. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 31(4): 499-514.

Rosales, A., van Roekel, E., Howson, P., and C. Kanters. (2023). Poor miners and empty e-wallets: Latin American experiences with cryptocurrencies in crisis. *Human Geography*, 19427786231193985.

Rubio, F. (2021, September 6). "No queremos Bitcoin, queremos Ley de Agua": movimiento ambientalista pide a diputados se apruebe la ley. *El Diario de Hoy.* https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/846589/marcha-protestas-sociales-ley-de-agua-asamblea-legislativa-diputados.html (accessed October 11, 2023)

Ruckert, A., Macdonald L., and K. Proulx. (2017). Post-neoliberalism in Latin America: a conceptual review. *Third World Quarterly* 38 (7): 1583-1602.

Ruggeri, A., and M. Vieta. (2023, December 14). Javier Milei has tapped into the discontent of a new, informal working class. *Jacobin*. https://jacobin.com/2023/12/javier-milei-voter-base-precarious-working-class-far-right-discontent (last accessed April 8, 2024)

Saad-Filho, A. and L. Morais. (2018). *Brazil: Neoliberalism versus democracy.* London, UK: Pluto Press.

Salazar, J. (2020, January 23). Gobierno prepara un Plan Nacional de Agua. *Diario CoLatino*. https://www.diariocolatino.com/gobierno-prepara-un-plan-nacional-de-agua/ (last accessed February 26, 2024)

Schmidt, J. (2020). Pop-up infrastructure: Water ATMs and new delivery networks in India. *Water Alternatives* 13(1): 119-140.

Sedgewick, A. (2020). *Coffeeland: One man's dark empire and the making of our favorite drug.* New York, NY: Penguin Press.

Segovia, A. (2018). *Economía y poder: recomposición de las élites económicas salvadoreñas*. Guatemala City, Guatemala: F&G Editores.

Segura, E. (2020, December 14). El AMSS sufre más cortes de agua. *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/lpgdatos/El-AMSS-sufre-mas-cortes-de-agua-20201214-0004.html. (last accessed July 26, 2023).

Sheng, J. and M. Webber. (2019). Governance rescaling and neoliberalization of China's water governance: The case of China's South–North Water Transfer Project. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 51 (8): 1644-1664.

Sindicato SIES. (2018, August 14). SIES en contra de la privatización del agua 2018 [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tviKVzcezJQ.

Singh, S. (2014) Developing bureaucracies for environmental governance: State authority and World Bank conditionality in Laos. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44(2): 322-341.

Smith-Nonini, S. (1998). Health 'anti-reform' in El Salvador: Community health NGOs and the state in the neoliberal era. *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 21 (1): 99-113.

Søndergaard, N. (2023). Between markets and barracks: The economic policy narrative of Brazilian authoritarianism. *Latin American Perspectives* 50(1): 64-79.

Spalding, R. (2014). *Contesting trade in Central America: Market reform and resistance.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Sprenkels, R. (2018). *After insurgency: Revolution and electoral politics in El Salvador*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Sultana, F., and A. Loftus. (2012). *The right to water: Politics, governance, and social struggles.* London, UK: Earthscan Routledge.

---- (2020). *Water politics: Governance, justice and the right to water*. London, UK: Earthscan Routledge

Sultana, F. (2011). Suffering for water, suffering from water: Emotional geographies of resource access, control and conflict. *Geoforum* 42(2): 163-172.

----- (2018). Water justice: why it matters and how to achieve it. *Water International* 43(4): 483-493.

----- (2020). Embodied intersectionalities of urban citizenship: Water, infrastructure, and gender in the global south. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 110(5): 1407-1424.

Swyngedouw, E. (2004). *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

----- (2005). Dispossessing H2O: The contested terrain of water privatization. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 16(1): 81-98.

----- (2007). Dispossessing H2O: the contested terrain of water privatization. In *Neoliberal environments: False promises and unnatural consequences*, eds. N. Heynen, J. McCarthy, S. Prudham and P. Robbins (51-62). New York, NY: Routledge.

----- (2018). *Promises of the political: Insurgent cities in a post-political environment*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Taylor, L. (2022). The world's first bitcoin republic. *New Scientist* 253(3376): 14.

Tegel, S. (2022, May 10). Behold the Bitcoin City: El Salvador's 'millennial dictator' reveals plans for futuristic metropolis. *The Telegraph*. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/05/10/behold-bitcoin-city-el-salvadors-millennial-dictator-reveals/ (last accessed February 27, 2024)

Tejada, R., Beltrán, J. and M. Cortez (2020, January 19). "Cuando cae, viene con sabor a tierra", persisten denuncias de la población por mal olor y sabor del agua en el Gran San Salvador. *El Diario de Hoy*. https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/678532/agua-mal-olor-calidad-anda-poblacion-san-salvador.html (last accessed February 26, 2024)

Thaler, K. (2017). Nicaragua: A return to caudillismo. *Journal of Democracy* 28(2): 157-169.

The Economist. (2023, July 20). What the world's budding autocrats are learning from El Salvador. *The Economist*. https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/07/20/what-the-worlds-budding-autocrats-are-learning-from-el-salvador (last accessed February 28, 2024)

Thistlethwaite, J., and M. Paterson. (2016). Private governance and accounting for sustainability networks. *Environment and planning C: Government and policy* 34(7): 1197-1221.

Tilzey, M. (2019) Authoritarian populism and neo-extractivism in Bolivia and Ecuador: The unresolved agrarian question and the prospects for food sovereignty as counter-hegemony. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46(3): 626-652.

Towers, M. and S. Borutzky. (2004). The socioeconomic implications of dollarization in El Salvador. *Latin American Politics and Society* 46(3): 29-54.

Trinational Network to Rescue the Lempa River. http://riolempa.org/mapa-del-lempa-v2/ (accessed September 26, 2023).

Tristl, C. (2023). Financializing water service provision with digital devices: pro-commercialization alliances and the securitization of revenue from the unbankable in Mathare, Nairobi. *Globalizations:* 1-20.

Trucchi, G. (2021, March 28). Despidos masivos en La Constancia. *Regional Latinoamericana de la UITA.* https://www.rel-uita.org/sindicatos/despidos-masivos-la-constancia/ (last accessed March 22, 2024).

Truelove, Y. (2011). (Re-) Conceptualizing water inequality in Delhi, India through a feminist political ecology framework. *Geoforum* 42(2): 143-152.

Truelove, Y., and K. O'Reilly. (2021). Making India's cleanest city: Sanitation, intersectionality, and infrastructural violence. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and space* 4(3): 718-735.

Ulloa, A. (2020). The rights of the Wayúu people and water in the context of mining in La Guajira, Colombia: demands of relational water justice. *Human Geography* 13 (1): 6-15.

Valencia, R. (2010, May 2). El agua más cara es para el que menos tiene. *El Faro.* https://elfaro.net/es/201005/especiales/1624/El-agua-m%C3%A1s-cara-es-para-el-que-menos-tiene.htm. (last accessed July 26, 2023).

Valencia, D.H., i Juncà, M.B., Linde, D.V., and E.M. Riera. (2011). Tropical forest recovery and socio-economic change in El Salvador: An opportunity for the introduction of new approaches to biodiversity protection. *Applied Geography* 31(1): 259-268.

van den Berge, J., Boelens, R., and J. Vos. (2018). Uniting diversity to build Europe's Right2Water movement. In *Water justice,* eds. R. Boelens, T. Perreault, and J. Vos, 226-245. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Vázquez, E. (2022). The technical fix: Bitcoin in El Salvador. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 121(3): 600-611.

Velásquez Carrillo, C. (2017). The reconsolidation of oligarchic rule in El Salvador: The contours of neoliberal transformation. In *Dominant elites in Latin America: From neoliberalism to the 'Pink Tide'*, eds. L. North and T. Clark (149–179). Cham, UK: Springer International.

Velásquez Loaiza, M. (2024, February 2). ANÁLISIS | La economía es la principal preocupación de los salvadoreños mientras el país crece a ritmo lento. *CNN Español*. https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2024/02/02/analisis-economia-principal-preocupacion-salvadorenos-crecimiento-lento-orix/ (last accessed February 23, 2024).

Velásquez, C. and T. Wachtendorf. (2023). Desalination and the reproduction of water injustices in the San Andrés Island water crisis. *Water Alternatives* 16 (2): 632-658.

Villalon, I. (2023, May 25). Amid inflation, Costa Rican workers face longer workdays and cuts to overtime. *NACLA*. https://nacla.org/amid-inflation-costa-rica-workers-face-longer-workdays-and-cuts-overtime (last accessed April 8, 2024)

Villarroel, G. (2023, April 18). “Al menos 16 sindicalistas detenidos durante régimen de excepción.” *La Prensa Gráfica.* https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Al-menos-16-sindicalistas-detenidos-durante-regimen-de-excepcion-20230418-0059.html (last accessed January 23, 2024).

von Schnitzler, A. (2008). Citizenship prepaid: Water, calculability, and techno-politics in South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 34(4): 899-917.

Wade, C. (2016). *Captured peace: Elites and peacebuilding in El Salvador.* Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

----- (2022). El Salvador: Democracy in peril? In *Latin American Politics and Development*, eds. H. Kline and C. Wade, (418-435). New York, NY: Routledge.

Wainwright, J., and G. Mann. (2013). Climate Leviathan. *Antipode* 45(1): 1–22.

Walter, C. (2024). Digital technologies for the future of the water sector? Examining the discourse on digital water. *Geoforum* 148: 103918.

Warnecke-Berger, H. (2020). Remittances, the rescaling of social conflicts, and the stasis of elite rule in El Salvador. *Latin American Perspectives* 47(3): 202–220.

Webber, J. (2017). *The last day of oppression and the first day of the same: The politics and economics of the new Latin American left.* Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

Wilder, M., Martínez Austria, P.F., Hernández Romero, P. and M.B. Cruz Ayala. (2020). The human right to water in Mexico: Challenges and opportunities. *Water Alternatives* 13(1): 28-48.

Williams, J. (2018). Assembling the water factory: Seawater desalination and the techno-politics of water privatisation in the San Diego–Tijuana metropolitan region. *Geoforum* 93: 32-39.

Wilson, N., Harris, L., Nelson, J., and S. Shah. (2019). Re-theorizing politics in water governance. *Water* 11(7): 1470.

Winders, J., and B. Smith. (2019). Social reproduction and capitalist production: A genealogy of dominant imaginaries. *Progress in Human Geography* 43(5): 871-889.

Wisner, B. (2001). Risk and the neoliberal state: Why post-Mitch lessons didn’t reduce El Salvador’s earthquake losses. *Disasters* 25(3): 251-268.

Wolf, S. (2017). *Mano dura: The politics of gang control in El Salvador.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

----- (2021). A populist president tests El Salvador’s democracy. *Current History* 120(823): 64-70.

----- (2023). El Salvador's state of exception: A piece in Nayib Bukele's political project. *LASA Forum* 54(4): 34-41.

Wolford, W. (2010). *This land is ours now: Social mobilization and the meanings of land in Brazil.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Yaffe-Bellany, D. (2024, March 5). Bitcoin hits record high, completing a stunning comeback. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/05/technology/bitcoin-price-record-high.html#:~:text=Bitcoin%20Reaches%20Record%20High%20of,Meltdown%20%2D%20The%20New%20York%20Times (last accessed April 1, 2024)

Yates, J., and K. Bakker. (2014). Debating the 'post-neoliberal turn' in Latin America. *Progress in Human Geography* 38(1): 62-90.

Yates, J., Tadaki, M., and C. Clark. (2022). Political ecologies of urban water governance. In *Routledge handbook of urban water governance*, eds. F. Silva Pinto, M. Farrelly, and T. Bolognesi, 331-344. London, UK: Taylor and Francis.

Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zetland, D. (2016). The struggle for residential water metering in England and Wales. *Water Alternatives* 9(1): 120-138.

Zwarteveen, M. and R. Boelens. (2014). Defining, researching and struggling for water justice: some conceptual building blocks for research and action. *Water International* 39 (2): 143-158.

Vita

NAME OF AUTHOR: Claudia Díaz-Combs

PLACE OF BIRTH: Tucson, AZ

DATE OF BIRTH: May 23, 1991

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

The University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Arts in Latin American Studies, 2018, The University of Arizona

Master of Public Health – Environmental Health, 2018, The University of Arizona

Bachelor of Science in Soil, Water, and Environmental Science, 2013, The University of Arizona

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Teaching Assistant, Department of Geography, Syracuse University, 2019-2022

Instructor of Record, Introductory Spanish, The University of Arizona, 2017