Biography:
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Abstract:
Current scholarship in Latin America discusses at length how the presence of certain factors promotes collective action of the poor in Latin America. However, this article examines how a lack of these factors restrains the participatory capacity of the poor. Older scholarship that explicitly connects poverty and a lack of collective action is integrated with contemporary theoretical concepts to identify a lack of social capital as a limiting factor on the participatory capacity of the poor. A case study of squatter settlers in Lima, Peru illustrates how heightened poverty and exclusion among the poor in the neoliberal age undermine the development of social capital on which collective mobilization is founded. Despite intense grievances with poverty and the resulting exclusion of their children from public education, settlers do not consider collective action as a way of addressing these shared problems.

Key Words:
Collective Action, Social Capital, Poverty, Exclusion Squatter Settlement, Lima, Peru
Poverty’s Numbing Effect on Collective Action:  
A Case Study of Squatter Settlers in Lima, Peru

Introduction

Current scholarship in Latin America discusses at length how the presence of a number of economic and social resources promotes collective action among the poor in Latin America. Such inquiry presents the relationship between resources and collective action as an upward spiral that results in successful mobilization. However, less work has examined how a lack of those same social and economic resources affects the participatory capacity of the poor. This article reverses the usual line of inquiry to examine the relationship between resources and collective action as a downward spiral in which a lack of resources leads to a lack of collective action among the poor. It argues that mobilization among the poor hinges on the development of particular social resources; whereas the development of social capital opens possibilities for collective action, poverty’s numbing effect on social resources undermines the poor’s ability to even consider mobilization as a method for addressing shared grievances.

With limited scholarship concerning this downward spiral, the discussion revives older theoretical contributions to shed light on the contemporary situation. Oscar Lewis’ (1965) concept of the culture of poverty identifies populations within the downward spiral by linking the poor’s lack of collective action to a lack of both economic and social resources. Robert Putnam (1995) informs Lewis’ conclusions through examination of the corresponding upward spiral as he identifies the development of social capital as a necessary precursor to collective action. The concept of social exclusion updates Lewis’ conclusions with contemporary social processes through an examination of the effects of neoliberalism on the participatory capacity of the poor (Wood, 2005; Mazza, 2004). Although the neoliberal turn institutionalized certain participatory spaces, this article links the simultaneous exacerbation of poverty and exclusion among the poor with the deterioration of the social resources necessary for collective action (see Mazza, 2004; Sunkel, 2005; Putnam, 1995). A case study of the participatory and mobilizational capacities of squatter settlers in Lima, Peru illustrates the path of the downward spiral as it examines how and why resources do not develop in the context of these social processes.

Fieldwork in the squatter settlement of Canto del Mar in the district of Villa el Salvador, Lima, Peru was conducted over the course of three months in early 2009. I gained access to the fieldsite through an educational NGO that aims to increase school matriculation rates in poor areas through advocacy and social assistance. Participant observation and interviews with eleven mothers living in Canto del Mar revealed a high value for education. Despite intense grievances with poverty and the resulting exclusion of their children from public education, settlers do not consider collective action as a way of addressing these shared problems.

The Downward Spiral of Poverty and Collective Action
With very little recent scholarship that connects poverty with a lack of collective action in Latin America, it is necessary to reintroduce older theoretical scholarship to shed light on the contemporary situation. Oscar Lewis’ (1965) concept of the culture of poverty is perhaps the most thorough examination of the effects of poverty on social organization and collective action. Although Lewis’ theoretical perspective has been criticized for treating culture as a homogenizing force that governs what he understood as unchanging behaviors and ideas of the poor (Valentine, 1968), many of his conclusions are still useful to scholars today. This discussion utilizes those contributions as a framework for understanding the contemporary mechanisms and process by which poverty affects collective action.

Through research of poor populations in Mexico and Puerto Rico, Oscar Lewis (1959; 1963; 1965; 1972[1951]) proposed his idea of the culture of poverty to conclude that poverty is not only a socio-economic state but may also be considered a subculture or set of behaviors and ideas when poor people or individuals lack class consciousness. By class consciousness Lewis (1965) meant that, while people are very aware of how their poverty inhibits their integration into the larger society in which they live, this awareness remains individual. Lewis concluded that their limited knowledge of the world beyond their own lives and their lack of an ideology of oppression keep them from recognizing poverty as a shared problem. Lewis connected poverty with collective action as he emphasizes that the strongest characteristic of the culture of poverty is a lack of civil organizations and participation. Indeed, as people or groups begin to organize and participate around shared problems, they are understood to have developed class consciousness and, although they may still be economically poor, can no longer be considered part of the culture of poverty. This lack of collective action against the shared problems of poverty therefore underlines Lewis’ concept of the culture of poverty.

The application of Lewis’ conclusions to poverty reduction strategies in the United States exposed a flaw in the anthropological theory that underpins the culture of poverty. In theorizing culture as a fixed set of behaviors and ideas that defines a group, the culture of poverty mistook the poor as inherently individualistic and non-participatory (see Eames and Goode, 1980[1977]; Valentine 1968). Although this theoretical hurdle led to the outmoding of the concept of the culture of poverty, this discussion recognizes the relevance of Lewis’ data and practical conclusions to the contemporary situation. In order to revive Lewis’ unique contributions linking poverty and a lack of participation, this article rethinks his data and practical conclusions from a relational theoretical perspective (see Rodman, 1968; Rodman, 1977; Ortner 1984). From this perspective, the poverty and individualism Lewis (1965) observed are understood as dynamic cultural characteristics that result from people’s interaction with broader socio-economic processes. Further, just as a lack of collective action emerges from individuals’ interaction with broader socio-economic processes in the past, continued interaction in the present and future means that every population maintains a potential for collective action. Lewis identified several poor populations that did not mobilize and, while Lewis (1965) concluded that this was a bounded culture with fixed characteristics that perpetuates unchanged across time, a relational
perspective locates these characteristics in a longer historical process that extends from past to future (see Ortner, 1984).

With this theoretical perspective, Lewis’ more useful contributions emerge. The merit of Lewis’ research is evident as more contemporary concepts share his main idea. Essentially, Lewis (1965) pointed out that poverty is not just a lack of economic resources; rather, it can also be understood in the social sense as a lack of social resources. In this way, the culture of poverty directly relates a lack of collective action with a lack of social and economic resources. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996, p.17) define civil society as “that arena of the polity where self-organizing and relatively autonomous groups, movements, and individuals attempt to articulate values, to create associations and solidarities, and to advance their interests.” This definition suggests an inherent social character of civil groups that might mobilize collective action, as members are understood to share common values that influence the interests they pursue and how they organize and participate to advance those interests. Linz and Stepan’s definition suggests that some social resources are needed to form civil groups, which Lewis (1965) pointed out is missing among those in the culture of poverty.

In his examination of the mechanics of civil participation, Robert Putnam (1995) visualized the relationship between social resources and participation as an upward spiral. He concluded that the formation of civil groups relies on the development of social capital, which he defined as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). As the poor, in this case, come to realize their membership in a larger group of people who share the same problems, social capital develops and encourages them to think collectively rather than individualistically. The unity developed even through non-political participation in civil groups encourages members to recognize the needs and interests of their group and, in a democratic setting, to consider whether those interests are being represented (Putnam, 1995). In terms of collective action, this consideration may encourage civil groups to become politically engaged in one of two ways. First, they may participate conventionally by, say, supporting campaigns or block voting for candidates that best represent their interests. If this is not effective, members already share the social capital that enables them to begin mobilizing collective action that petitions the state and/or the majority for representation (Orum, 2001).

Putnam’s (1995) concept of social capital provides a contemporary summary of Lewis’ (1965) connection between class consciousness and collective action. Lewis identified the empirical result of a downward spiral as he concludes that those in the culture of poverty lack economic and social resources and do not mobilize. The concept of social capital links these two conclusions through an upward spiral; social capital is necessary to participate in civil groups, so the development of social capital opens possibilities for collective action. The reversal of this spiral opens questions concerning the process involved in the lack of collective action Lewis observed amongst the poor in Latin America. If social capital is necessary for participation in civil groups, it follows that a lack of social capital inhibits the initiation of collective action.
Rethinking Lewis’ conclusions from a relational theoretical perspective calls for further investigation of the social processes that influence the downward spiral of collective action. Lewis’ main research focus was not a lack of collective action among the poor and his theoretical perspective limited his interest in how broader social processes influence cultural characteristics. He therefore only briefly speculates some mechanisms that influenced a lack of collective action among the poor populations he studied, including discrimination or segregation, the formation of local solutions and a lack of economic resources (Lewis, 1965). Little context is provided for understanding how these three factors might have influenced the development or maintenance of social resources at the time of writing. That Lewis’ conclusions are nearly a half century old gives cause for revision and also presents an opportunity to investigate how more contemporary socio-economic processes have affected collective action among the poor. A consideration of the concept of social exclusion simultaneously explores Lewis’ conclusions and integrates them within contemporary social processes.

The concept of social exclusion refers to the degeneration of opportunity among underrepresented groups like the poor (Wood, 2005; Roberts, 2002). In the contemporary Latin American context, neoliberal policies are often identified as a key exclusionary force (Mazza, 2004). Of course, in Latin America the neoliberal turn was implemented as structural adjustment in the late 80s and 90s after the Debt Crisis (Franko, 2007). In promoting an unrestrained free market to foment private business and foreign investment, the neoliberal model reduces the role of the state in society (Abel and Lewis, 2002; Franko, 2007). The first consequence of this reduction in a democratic setting is that the state loses some control over labor regulations, leaving the workforce exposed to economic competition that it is not prepared to meet. In a democratic setting citizens may petition the state for recognition of their rights as humans and citizens, which safeguard them from economic competition and excessive judicial law (see Agamben, 1997; see Foucault, 1983 [1978]; see Marshall, 1998). However, the second consequence of the reduction of the state is that the state loses its ability to respond to citizens’ petitions through the provision of welfare or programs that may offer them greater social opportunity or competitive power (Abel and Lewis, 2002; see Marshall, 1998).

The process of social exclusion therefore begins with the empowerment of the capitalist sector through the neoliberal reduction of the state (Pastor and Wise, 1997). Capitalists who control access to labor may make choices based on individual social preferences and a reduced state with fewer regulations leaves room for high rates of discriminatory hiring. In Latin America, this empowerment of the capitalist sector leads to un(der)employment of the same people who have traditionally suffered discrimination, namely people from rural areas, native populations and the poor, who may be one in the same (see Mazza, 2004; Doughty, 1970; Wood, 2005). The process continues as exclusion from economic rights and opportunities serves to exclude an individual from other rights (Mazza, 2004). To highlight the example of participation in civil society, exclusion from the labor market leads to a low income and dependence on informal labor. This serves to exclude people from any institution that requires time or money as input including education, health services and, ultimately, participation in civil society.
The concept of social exclusion allows for an examination of how each of Lewis’ (1965) three conclusions connects social capital with collective action in a downward spiral, particularly in the context of neoliberal Latin America. First, Lewis suggested that a lack of resources may contribute to a lack of organization and collective action of those in the culture of poverty. Contemporary social movement scholarship supports the corresponding upward spiral fueled by the availability of a number of tangible and intangible resources (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Tangible resources include material items such as money, equipment and meeting space, among others (Jenkins, 1983, p. 533). Poverty in Peru and many other Latin American countries specifically refers to the inability to afford basic needs (INEI, 2006), rendering the ability to afford tangible resources for collective action less likely. Intangible resources include specialized skills such as organization, legal or communication skills but also physical labor and dependability (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Again the poor, and especially the urban poor, are at a disadvantage. Informal employment and exclusion from state services like education inhibit the development of many specialized skills necessary to organize (Mazza, 2004). Labor and dependability, both of which relate to time as a resource, are difficult for excluded people who rely on the informal market. Without set wages, work hours and paid vacation days, time spent participating and mobilizing takes away from time spent earning money for basic necessities (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977; see Mazza, 2004).

This list of tangible and intangible resources is by no means exhaustive. In fact, this discussion has highlighted one final intangible resource that is so basic that it is almost taken for granted: social capital. Social capital is a precursor to collective action and is therefore essential in the initial formation of civil groups (Putnam, 1995). After formation, the strength and dynamics of social capital influence the participatory capacity of a group. While social capital plays a fundamental role in all civil participation, strong social capital is of greatest importance to the poor who lack other tangible and intangible resources. Building social capital expands the networks of people who share the same interest, which has the practical effect of expanding the resources and skill set of the group (Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998). Collective action of the poor therefore hinges upon the development of social capital. With this social resource, the poor can both spark a fire and fan the flame. Without it, the potential for collective action remains dormant.

Second, Lewis (1965) noted that the development of local or self-help solutions to problems of poverty may lead to a lack of collective action among those in the culture of poverty. The informal economy and land invasions are two examples of contemporary self-help solutions that have changed in meaning since Lewis wrote in 1965. In the past, the informal sector brought much needed relief to the urban poor and economic hope in developing countries (Gerry, 1987). Although it promoted the competition and individualism inherent in capitalism and therefore may have begun to threaten the poor’s social resources to some degree, it allowed for the maintenance of families’ minimal economic resources. Further, in Lewis’ time, land invasions were a participatory method for destitute but hopeful people to ban together to petition the state for better living conditions while earning a land title for their efforts (Mangin, 1967;
Dietz, 1969). Land invasions were therefore a participatory strategy that, in their organization, simultaneously increased families’ economic and social resources.

Growing dependence on the informal sector and land invasions over the last two decades has ultimately challenged the development of social capital among the poor. In the context of deepening poverty and low levels of state assistance to the poor (Pastor and Wise, 1997; Sunkel, 2005; Abel and Lewis, 2002), both of these institutions now foment competition for basic needs among the poor. In the informal sector, the poor compete against the poor for an increasingly limited number of low-skilled labor opportunities and, in the case of informal vendors, for customers. Although the informal market was once a safety valve, the poor’s dependence on it in the 21st century now promotes individuality and opportunism that are counterproductive to the development of social capital among the poor (see Gerry, 1987). Further, in the neoliberal age, land invasions were institutionalized in many Latin American countries, including Peru, as a method of self-help housing that came at little cost to the government (see Yi Yang, 1999; Gilbert, 2002). Unlike invasions in the past, today’s settlers confirm that they do not invade for political protest, but to satisfy a basic need for shelter. The case study below demonstrates that land invasions in the neoliberal age are fundamentally competitive as they are initiated and enacted by individuals’ prospect of gaining certified land titles at a very low cost. Essentially, the local solutions of the informal economy and land invasions have changed in the neoliberal age into institutions that promote competition among the poor for land and capital (Portes and Landolt, 2000; Gilbert, 2002). This competition challenges the development of social capital and therefore threatens the participatory capacity of the poor.

Third, Lewis (1965) suggested that segregation and discrimination may contribute to the lack of social capital that underpins a lack of collective action among the poor. While segregation and discrimination undoubtedly limit social resources such as social mobility and the development of diverse social networks (Mazza, 2004; Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998), this alone is not enough to inhibit the development of social capital within segregated communities or discriminated groups. In fact, Tonnies’ (2001[1887]) concept of Gemeinschaft holds that people in neighborhoods are more likely to share positive social relations, as members of the same neighborhood are in constant contact with one another and have in common the daily routines of their living environment. Using Putnam’s (1995) terms in the context of the current discussion, people segregated into poor neighborhoods share the same quotidian norms and, whether they realize it or not, also share many of the norms associated with poverty including the daily struggle to meet basic needs, balancing limited resources, confrontations with discrimination, etc.

Lewis’ (1965) context for suggesting a connection between segregation, discrimination and a lack of collective action is unknown, but the concept of social exclusion sheds some light on how these elements connect in the contemporary situation. For one, the concept of social exclusion speaks specifically to the institutionalization of discrimination of groups like the poor, particularly in neoliberal Latin America (Wood, 2005; Mazza, 2004). Discrimination links with segregation as discrimination in the job market limits the economic resources of groups like the
poor and ultimately limits their housing options to low-cost areas such as slums, squatter settlements and invasions (Mazza, 2004). Further, as poverty and exclusion deepened during the neoliberal age (Pastor and Wise, 1997; Pastor, 1987; Mazza, 2004), the poor were increasingly forced to depend on these segregated communities for subsistence or survival (Gray-Molina et al., 2003). As the case study will demonstrate, the institutionalization of survival strategies like land invasions fundamentally changed the relationships within them. As competition for basic needs heightens among neighbors, the development of social capital retrogrades.

Although Oscar Lewis’ (1965) theoretical perspective did not hold up in the policy arena and eventually led to the outmoding of the idea of the culture of poverty, his contributions were among the few that recognized the multifaceted difficulties the poor face in mobilizing collective action. He conceptualized poverty as a lack of both economic and social resources that correlates with a lack of collective action of the poor. Contemporary theory supports this idea of a downward spiral, but tends to present it in reverse as an upward spiral. Current social movement scholars agree with Lewis that economic poverty limits participatory capacity as significant tangible resources are needed to mobilize (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Social exclusion theorists also agree that the poor face added difficulty in mobilizing as their longer-term exclusion from institutions limits their ability to contribute the many intangible resources needed to mobilize (Mazza, 2004; Roberts, 2002). Most importantly, Putnam (1995) agreed with Lewis (1965) that social capital is the most fundamental resource of mobilization. Without it, mobilization cannot even be considered, much less enacted.

Although current social science scholarship visualizes the relationship between collective action and factors such tangible, intangible and social resources as an upward spiral, practical data is needed to explicitly support the corresponding downward spiral. Oscar Lewis’ (1965) research of several poor populations in Latin America provides some practical data to support the downward relationship between social capital and collective action. The following case study of a squatter settlement in Lima, Peru illustrates a downward spiral as a lack of social capital directly relates to a lack of collective action against settlers’ shared grievances of poverty.

Pluralism and Education Policy in Peru

In order to understand the significance of the lack of collection action among the poor in Lima’s squatter settlements, it is important to identify the role of civil participation in Peru’s political organization. Peru, like many other Latin American countries, was part of the third wave of democracy that took place around the late 70s as military dictators ceded power to the people (Huntington, 1991). Fujimori’s autocracy reversed democratic consolidation in Peru just long enough to usher the country through the process of structural adjustment and neoliberalization. Massive decentralization efforts of subsequent governments in the early 21st century aimed to place more power and responsibility in the hands of Peru’s citizenry and have today resulted in the establishment of a neo-Toquevillian or pluralist form of democracy (see Guidry and Sawyer, 2003).
Pluralist democracy is characterized in Latin America as a highly inclusive form of governance, as it encourages civil society to play an active role in shaping political structures that both reflect and meet the needs of a diverse population. Most importantly to this discussion, a pluralist perspective promotes the inclusion of minority and under-represented groups and pinpoints civil society as the outlet through which these groups may advance their inclusion. In the Latin American context, pluralist democracy has been described as a process or a “journey rather than a destination,” as citizens actively participate in the inclusion of their perspectives in the democratic structure (Guidry and Sawyer, 2003, p. 274).

Peru’s education policy aptly illustrates the government’s move to pluralism in the 21st century while at the same time providing a clear example of civil society’s anticipated role in democratic processes. As Alberto Fujimori’s autocracy fell out of favor in the late 90s, the results of several national and international tests publicized the extremely low competence level of students in Peru’s public schools (Montero, 2009). In 2001, President Alejandro Toledo declared Peru’s education system to be in a state of emergency and immediately implemented a number of educational programs, laws and organizational reforms aimed at improving the public education system. Three significant and long lasting steps toward addressing the educational crisis were 1) decentralization of the education system, 2) the enactment of the General Law of Education in 2003 and 3) the implementation of a mechanism for citizen enforcement of the law in 2005.

First, because Fujimori had centralized many functions of the public education system, the Toledo government reestablished national, regional and district level bodies to oversee the new laws, policies and programs. Emphasis on the importance of civil participation intended to engage students, parents and school employees in shaping an educational system that met their needs. Second, Toledo passed the General Law of Education, which establishes “general guidelines of education and of the Peruvian Education System, the attributions and obligations of the state and the rights and responsibilities of people and society in their educative function” (MINEDU, 2003, p. 1, translated by author). Third, while the law holds that a national regulatory body would be responsible for policing compliance with the General Law of Education, the state later provided the necessary mechanisms for parents and students to police the system (MINEDU, 2005). The Commissions of Attention to Denunciations and Reclamations (CADER - Comisiones de Atención de Denuncias y Reclamos), which have offices at the district level, maintain a telephone hotline and a portal from the Ministry of Education website to accept claims of corruption and abuse at any level of the educational system (Ibid). State-provided attorneys assess citizen claims and, in the case of valid injustice, the CADER may take action against the offending body. As such, a parent’s first step is to approach professors or directors about their concern for abuse or corruption. If this yields no result, the parent may then report his or her claim to the CADER.

Education policy reflects the pluralist democracy of the state as it works to include the voices of minority and under-represented voices through civil participation. The constitution provides the right to a full course of basic education while the General Law of Education works
specifically to reduce barriers to education faced by historically disadvantaged groups. Educational policy also reflects the pluralist relationship between citizen and state. In terms of rights, the state opens spaces for citizens to participate in the formation of education policy that fits their social situation, no matter how unique. In terms of responsibilities, it mandates participation as a civic responsibility of parents and students who are faced with barriers in accessing a full course of basic education.

Villa el Salvador

The history of the district of Villa el Salvador, in which Canto del Mar is located, reflects the above mentioned effects of the neoliberal turn. The district has a long history of contentious political involvement and was, in fact, founded as the result of a land invasion in 1970. The persistence and precise planning of the original settlers attracted national and international attention to this successful movement among the poor (MVES, 2009a). Despite the district’s progress and strong participatory history, it is today plagued with a number of mutually re-enforcing socioeconomic problems. For one, poverty is high. Nearly 57 percent of the district’s population lives on an average family income of about 230 USD a month. Only 37.3 percent of Villa el Salvador’s economically active population is employed, which is nearly 20 percent lower than Metropolitan Lima’s average employment levels. Informal employment is extremely high as continued migration from rural provinces has long exceeded the demands of the labor market (MVES, 2009b).

The arrival of about 12,000 migrants per year to Villa el Salvador has also stressed the housing situation (MVES, 2009c). Overcrowding has created massive areas of substandard housing that are not connected with basic utilities or sewerage and continued in-migration threatens the development of slums as poor people are forced to share housing and rent out small spaces for extra income (Ibid). While land invasions were once heralded as courageous acts of collective action to expose the reality of poverty and poor housing conditions (MVES, 2009a), the municipality today views invasions as a persistent nuisance and a threat to the district’s progress (MVES, 2009c). In this way, Villa el Salvador’s history epitomizes the relationship between broad socio-economic shifts in the region and the changing role and social understanding of invasion settlements over time.

Canto del Mar

Canto del Mar is one such invasion settlement that has attracted negative municipal attention. In early 2005, a group of about 30 comuneros or co-proprietors finalized their plans to invade a piece of vacant land at the end of a main avenue in Villa el Salvador. The vacant lot, about 200 meters wide and 1.5 kilometers long, extends from the end of the avenue over a hill, where it then descends to the Panamerican Highway on the Peruvian coast. The municipality had intentionally left the land empty for future plans to pave the avenue to the coast and develop a park that would help meet a state-sanctioned quota for green areas (see MVES, 2009c). However, the comuneros had gained (or perhaps generated) information that the road could not
be extended because the sandy ground was not adequately sturdy. This argument formed the centerpiece of their plan to invade as they anticipated municipal disapproval and an ensuing judicial trial before they could gain titles to the land.

As the comuneros invaded, word quickly spread to nearby areas and hundreds of people ascended the side of the hill to claim their plots. Among these secondary invaders were poor families who had outgrown relatives’ homes, young men and women who hoped to become landowners, entrepreneurs who saw invasion as a lucrative business opportunity and even rural relatives of Villa el Salvadoreans who migrated overnight to claim plots. Over the course of a month, these settlers suffered extreme heat, hunger, thirst and tear gas attacks from the police as they defended their newly claimed plots.

When the police attacks stopped and the municipality issued a court order, the invasion was broken into smaller sub-sections, one of which was Canto del Mar. Each subsection appointed a committee of settlers that would oversee all matters related to the trial and came to fill the role of informal settlement governance. The first task of Canto del Mar’s committee was to divide the land among the settlers. Having people join the invasion turned bittersweet. On one hand, more people had meant greater protection against police eviction and likely contributed to the success of the invasion. Further, more people would be sharing the court costs of defending the settlement against the municipality, which no one could afford alone. On the other hand, it also meant that the very limited amount of land would have to be divided among more people. Each family received a plot measuring about four by five meters, leading to especially cramped conditions for larger families.

The Settlers of Canto del Mar

The demographics of Canto del Mar are more or less representative of most invasion settlements. Most interviewees migrated from rural provinces of Peru. While the hope of providing their children a better future through greater access to state institutions drew many out of the countryside, the rural terrorism of the Sendero Luminoso in the 1980s also accounts for some migration. Migrants who came to the city from rural areas overwhelmingly sought low cost housing, leading them to the homes of relatives until other housing becomes available. Invasions, now engrained among the poor as a survival strategy, provide housing to many such rural-to-urban migrants as well as the extremely poor in other districts of Lima.

On the whole, residents of Canto del Mar are classified by the Peruvian state as poor or extremely poor because they cannot afford to meet their basic needs (INEI, 2006). Interviewees who provided information about their family income average about 700 soles (237 US Dollars) per month and provide for two to four children. Several married mothers explained that their husband’s income affords the family’s food and housing costs whereas the mother’s income, if she earns one, affords other necessities such as clothing and educational expenses. In cases of single parent homes and families in which the mother earns no income, children may work part time jobs to afford clothing and school expenses for themselves.
The formal job opportunities for the residents of Canto del Mar are extremely limited. For one, a large number of residents have not completed the required eleven years of schooling, meaning that they are only qualified for low-skilled or manual labor. Female settlers are almost exclusively employed in the informal sector. Men are less likely than women to default to informal employment, though opportunities in formal employment are so limited that many do come to rely on informal work.

The Downward Spiral of Social Capital and Collective Action in Canto del Mar

Long-term fieldwork in the squatter settlement of Canto del Mar determined that settlers’ had developed very little social capital that would promote a sense of community and/or collective sentiment about the frustrations of poverty (see Putnam, 1995). Several factors limited the formation of social capital within the settlement that parallel with the previous theoretical discussion. First, Peru is one such state that has “turned a blind eye” toward invasions, as it essentially allows the poor to overcome Lima’s housing problem at little cost to the government (Yi Yang, 1999). This lack of government attention has engrained the poor with a sense of individualistic entitlement toward the act of invading and the land titles it may produce.

Second, Peru’s policy required the settlers to develop and enforce their own regulations within the settlement. The neutral rationality of the social relations between settlers soured as the settlement governance was ordered to reduce the population of the settlement by half, most likely to keep the overcrowded invasion from appearing like a slum to the court. Each sub-settlement within the entire invasion set its own rules for eviction. Community leadership of Canto del Mar announced that those who did not live full time in the invasion or who had missed monthly payments of attorney’s fees would be the first to be ejected. Newly vacant lots would continue to be joined with adjacent lots to extend remaining neighbors’ landholding.

This mandate immediately dashed any semblance of social capital in three key ways. First, long standing tensions exploded to stratify the settlement into four contentious categories. Land traffickers were, by consensus, the most resented members of the settlement as settlers shamed them for abusing the institution of invasion through profiteering. A second category included those who had entered the settlement by receiving their homes from relatives or friends who had participated in the actual invasion. Another category, made up of those who participated in the original invasion but did not mobilize it, argued that these two groups, entrepreneurs and secondary invaders, should be the first to be ejected as they had selfish intentions and/or had not suffered the trying process of invasion. However, entrepreneurs and secondary invaders were quick to point out that many of the original invaders who had invaded for reasons of poverty had not been paying their monthly fees. Finally, the comuneros, distinguished by their mobilization of the original act of invasion, argued that they were the only ones who should be safe from scrutiny, as they had initiated the invasion and did so to build a community rather than pursue individualistic gain. Not surprisingly, the other three groups disagreed with their calls for immunity and doubted their altruism. The development of social capital was at best limited to people of the same categories.
Second, because these four categories were mostly speculative with no clear membership, the in-fighting involved a great deal of individual entitlement and competition. Each person felt they had earned their land and their home and both resented and feared others who could also make a strong case for their entitlement. It was generally thought that those whose entitlement was validated by the committee were allowed to displace those who were less convincing. Daily interactions with neighbors were strained as people conducted their own investigations into who should be evicted, and publicized the results of their investigations through gossip rings and visits with committee members. These individualistic tactics, inspired by a fear of eviction and/or a hope of extending one’s own landholding, undermined the development or maintenance of social capital.

Third, this investigatory speculation led many settlers, especially those who were unable or unwilling to justify their entitlement, to seek refuge in privacy and silence. Many interviewees living in Canto del Mar purposefully spent as many hours in their houses as possible to avoid prolonged interactions with others. However, the thin pressboard walls of their homes made total privacy difficult as adjacent neighbors could hear conversations held within the house. Interviewees complained that no information could be kept secret unless it was not discussed. Although most people in the settlement shared the same challenges of poverty and exclusion, they chose not to discuss them as they feared it would lead to speculation about their finances and whether they had been paying their fees. Essentially, this desire for privacy and unwillingness to share information shut down possibilities of developing social capital among settlers. Settlers may have shared common space and common habits and may have even agreed about issues related to the community, but their distrust and fear of eviction kept them from acting collectively.

Educational Exclusion in Canto del Mar

Participant observation coupled with interviews of eleven mothers of Canto del Mar determined that the education of their child(ren) was highly valued. Mothers unanimously agreed that education is the most fundamental step in opening opportunities for their children to break the cycle of poverty and ultimately improve their lives. Mothers detailed the sacrifices they had made to provide their children a better education. Several mothers said that their move to the capital from rural provinces was motivated by the prospect of providing their children a better education. Although they were dissatisfied with their living conditions and economic poverty, their concern for their children superseded their concern for self. Another mother who grew up in Lima relocated to the invasion to save money on rent, which she then put into her children’s tuition at a private grammar school. Her family struggled to afford enough food to eat, but this mother validated immediate sacrifice as a necessary input to a better future. In short, mothers’ high value for education factored into each and every family’s struggle and perseverance in the invasion.

Parents’ value for education coupled with a pluralist education policy should result in universal, free access to basic education. However, high drop-out rates among children in Canto
del Mar suggest a gap between policy and practice. Several factors were responsible for this gap, many of which are related to the difficulties the poor face in participating. To begin, the General Law of Education is available online through the Ministry of Education website (see MINEDU, 2003). While this is meant to promote transparency and knowledge of the law, it does neither for parents and students who do not have access to a computer. Since at least 2007, the educational director of Villa el Salvador has compensated for this problem by providing a paper copy of the General Law of Education to each public school in the district and mandating that it be posted at the main entryway for public use (UGEL01, 2008). Only one of ten schools visited during fieldwork had complied with this mandate. This negligence on the part of local schools blocks checks on power and abuse at the local level as parents are left unaware of their rights and responsibilities within the educational system.

Perhaps the most obvious example of an unchecked abuse is that, with only a few exceptions, public schools in Villa el Salvador did not provide free education as mandated by the General Law of Education. Rather, schools required students to purchase a number of extra items in order to matriculate, which included uniforms, books and parent association membership, to name a few. These three costs alone add up to a minimum of 13 to 40 US dollars per child per year, with an extra 10 dollars when a child needs a new uniform. These unsanctioned costs were cited as the biggest challenge to matriculation for families with two to four children who earn about 237 USD per month. The inability to afford the costs of public schooling is exacerbated by the fact that the mother’s informal work often provides the only income available for educational expenses.

Parents’ high value for education and the sacrifices they have made for it encourage them to approach teachers and principals about their inability to afford the costs of schooling. With no knowledge of the legal rights and responsibilities within the education system, parents believe that their children’s education, indeed their children’s future, is at the mercy of school officials. The desperation of mothers plays into pre-existing power structures. On one side, school officials are, in general, both respected for their educational background and feared for their ability to academically punish children for their parent’s complaints. That parents approach officials making a request rather than a demand opens space for school officials to reinforce their superiority in the power structure. On the other side, given the municipality’s public disapproval of invasion settlements, mothers enter these meetings feeling inferior both for their lack of education and poverty. In effect, these meetings are unbalanced both by the residual effects of long term educational and social exclusion and by school officials’ decision to withhold information that would otherwise empower parents within the education system. Parents’ requests are often denied or dismissed, leading parents to pursue other strategies.

It should be noted that, while the CADER is available for parents to report abuse and seek legal help, only one interviewee with problems affording school for their children had utilized the CADER serving Villa el Salvador. This interviewee, a single-mother of two, explained that office visits to the CADER are time consuming and its method for addressing problems requires parents to make more than one visit. For parents like this interviewee who
work in the informal market, time spent at CADER cuts into time spent earning wages. In this mother’s case, the CADER attorney gave her recommendations for addressing the school again. Her subsequent meeting with the school was also ineffective, as she did not fully understand the recommendations and became nervous when speaking with the director. She blamed her failure on her lack of education. Two more visits with the CADER yielded the same result at which point the educational NGO presented her claim and convinced the CADER to contact the school on her behalf (Personal Communication, March 31, 2009).

High out-of-school rates and dropout rates among poor urban families point to a flaw in pluralist theory relating to the oversight of the practical challenges faced by the poor. Theoretically, the success of pluralist democracy relies on citizens’ ability and willingness to participate in the formation of policy (Linz and Stepan, 1996). In the case of Peru’s education policy, parents and students are expected to confront their challenges in accessing education. A lack of participation is interpreted within this education policy as a lack of interest in change or, put another way, an interest in the maintenance of existing conditions.

The example of Canto del Mar highlights that a lack of participation does not necessarily represent interest in the maintenance of current conditions. Rather, lack of participation may also represent an inability to participate. This example illuminates yet another theoretical oversight that may be endemic in policies of newly transitioned pluralist democracies. That is, the pluralist theory guiding the General Law of Education overlooks the long-term history of power imbalance and educational exclusion that would have affected the parents of today’s excluded children. As these parents suffered social and education exclusion prior to the implementation of the law, they do not feel capacitated to participate on behalf of their own interests.

Potential for Mobilization

The educational situation in Canto del Mar provides a clear example in which democratic mechanisms are blocked, rendering conventional participation ineffective. Although parents are unaware of their legal rights and responsibilities within the education system, their value for education and unwillingness to give up on their investment allow them to recognize the problem and address it through the legal mechanisms familiar to them. Their meetings with teachers and principals exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, particularly those relating to poverty, while school officials’ apathy toward the situation threatens the path parents have lain for their children to escape poverty. As they realize that democratic mechanisms are blocked, their perseverance can be directed into two solutions.

The first and perhaps easiest option is to look for non-participatory solutions within the family, what Lewis (1965) referred to as local solutions. Family-based solutions include several strategies in which the family bears the burden of overcoming a blockage in democratic mechanisms. First, parents may borrow money from relatives, but this is limited as most settlers come from poor rural families and/or have maxed out local relatives’ benevolence. Second, parents may find an extra job but in many cases, parents are already working as much as possible. Other solutions are that the child may drop out of school until the parents can find the
money to re-enroll him or her, or the child may take on a part time job to afford the costs of schooling. These strategies are usually intended to be temporary but often become permanent as the child engages in other social networks and activities and falls behind in schooling. Interviewees with dropout or working children expressed feelings of helplessness at not being able to rectify the situation.

The abundance of scholarship concerning social movements among the poor would suggest collective action as a final option made likely in the exhaustion of all other strategies. Many of the pieces are in place. Democratic mechanisms are blocked and mothers are motivated to resolve the clearly defined problem of not being able to afford public schooling. The problem is shared by a large group of people living in close proximity who are members of an organized civil group. Indeed, the people affected by the problem are very aware of the positive potential for collective action as the establishment of both their district and their settlement resulted from collective action on the part of people motivated by the same desire to improve their lives. Further, those affected by the problem clearly link it to poverty, their discontent with which was already established. That the problem actually threatens the paths that parents have made to escape poverty only heightens the expectation that the urban poor of Canto del Mar would organize collective action against educational exclusion. Yet, despite this great potential for mobilization, the mothers of Canto del Mar do not mobilize.

Conclusion

The theoretical contributions reviewed above suggest a downward spiral between collective action and resources as a lack of collective action among the residents of Canto del Mar relates to a lack of the social, tangible and intangible resources necessary to mobilize (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Putnam, 1995; Lewis, 1965). This article has specifically highlighted the neoliberal turn as a key process that has fundamentally challenged the development of social resources among the poor. The situation in Canto del Mar illustrates that social capital among the poor dwindled through heightened competition for basic necessities. Where land invasions once doubled as political protests against poor housing conditions, their institutionalization in the neoliberal age has converted them into individualistic opportunities for low-cost housing and the acquisition of a land title (Yi Yang, 1999; Gilbert, 2002). Recent efforts to reduce the population of the settlement exacerbated settler’s sense of entitlement and willingness to compete with neighbors. Resulting feelings of distrust and jealousy amongst neighbors stunt the possibility of collaboration. Further, communication, which is the very foundation of building social capital, is challenged as people fear that admitting their difficulties financing their children’s education, even if these difficulties are shared by others, will invite speculation as to whether the family has been paying their monthly fees. This is understandably too risky when there are no guarantees that participation would materialize, much less be successful. Hence, social relations troubled by intense competition shut down the possibility of forming social capital and collaborating for collective action (Putnam, 1995). The
potential for collective action, while ever-present, may remain dormant in the face of increased competition for basic necessities.

Beyond the development of social resources, this article also highlights that increased poverty and exclusion in the neoliberal age add to the difficulties the poor face in mobilization (Mazza, 2004; Pastor and Wise, 1997; Sunkel, 2005). Parents living in Canto del Mar are overwhelmingly excluded in terms of social institutions, which limits the tangible and intangible resources they may contribute to collective action (see Jenkins, 1983; Mazza, 2004). Because many residents were unable to complete a full education, they can contribute few of the skills necessary to mobilize collective action including legal, communications and organizational skills (see Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). This lack of education has also forced their reliance on informal employment (Mazza, 2004), which limits people’s ability to contribute money, materials or time to participation. Further, the inconsistency of their wages and work makes their participation undependable. Finally, social exclusion has led to residential isolation as their need for low-cost housing segregates them into settlements that are populated with other excluded people (Ibid.). This segregation further limits social resources by limiting networks with people outside the community who may have resources to contribute to participation (see Putnam, 1995; Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998; Jenkins, 1983).

While heightened exclusion and poverty in the neoliberal age have further limited the tangible and intangible resources of the poor (Sunkel, 2005; Mazza, 2004; Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977), the deterioration of social resources appears to be the greatest impediment to collective action among the poor. This is illustrated in the case of Canto del Mar, as zero-sum competition for basic resources obliterate the social capital necessary to mobilize against educational exclusion. Mothers of children excluded from the education system are aware of their shared problem and an educational NGO operating in the invasion has educated them of their rights and responsibilities within pluralist education policy. However, they lack the social capital necessary to even consider mobilization (Putnam, 1995), much less begin assessing the tangible and intangible resources they may be able to contribute. In this way, the case of Canto del Mar suggests that collective action among the poor hinges on the development of social capital and highlights the need for democratic policies that recognize and address poverty’s numbing effect on social relations among the poor.

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Note: Pseudonyms are used in place of actual names of people and the settlement.