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"We Are Fingers of a Hand That Make a Fist": Working Class Alliances in Colorado River Water Protests in the Mexicali Valley, Mexico

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ABSTRACT: This article explores recent water protests across northern Mexico which emanated from the Mexicali Valley in Baja California, Mexico. Beginning in 2015, communal farmers and industrial labourers, among other groups, aligned under the banner of Defense of Water to protest the construction of a United States-based beverage production facility. Through interviews, participant observation and archival research, we study this social movement through a class-based, historical lens to show how the meaning of water presupposes and represents a century of class politics that has allowed seemingly disparate groups to find meaning and build alliances within it. It is this history that has allowed protesters to achieve shared goals.

KEYWORDS: Social movements, class analysis, *longue durée*, Colorado River, Mexicali, Mexico

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2015, farmers and industrial labourers in and around Mexicali, the capital of the Mexican state of Baja California, began marching and occupying government properties in response to the construction of a United States-based beverage production facility. Ultimately, in 2020, their efforts forced the Mexican government to hold a plebiscite in which 76.1% of voters cast ballots against the continued construction of the US\$1.4 billion facility. This vote forced President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to cancel its construction permits and water allocations. This social movement was notable for many reasons; not least of these was its successful defeat of powerful interests in achieving its primary goal – a rare occurrence in Mexico.

This article explores the role of water in this social movement, which was launched when the state government in its water allocation scheme prioritised an industrial, United States-headquartered beverage production facility over communal farmers and municipalities. We begin this exploration with Munck's (2020) finding that social movements in Latin America are often studied as though they are self-contained; they are rarely examined from the perspective of having been built from an historical frame. In our approach to the recent social movement, we use the explanatory power of *longue durée* analysis because our early research made apparent the movement's class-based, historical roots.¹ We show that Colorado River water is fundamental to the valley's class politics, which were born from Mexican

¹ We rely on the French historian Fernand Braudel to define '*longue durée*' as an historical method that extends further into history than human memory and charts the ramifications of historical events that may not be readily recognised by the people who are impacted by them. Class analysis often requires a *longue durée* perspective, given the historical dependence of crises in capitalism (Braudel and Wallerstein, 2009).

struggles against the United States in a relationship that, according to protesters, was responsible for undermining their class interests.

Theoretical underpinnings

We attempt to show how *longue durée* class analysis can contribute to dominant theories of alliance formation within social movements and is perhaps essential to the effective formulation of such theories. We rely on a definition provided by Munck (2020: 1-14), which defines social movements as networks of interactions among individuals, groups and/or organisations that are engaged in political conflicts. They are not necessarily progressive and may, indeed, be revolutionary, reformist or reactionary. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) dominate explanations of alliance building and formation in social movements. They explain the notion of articulation, which builds on the contingent, undetermined links between social movements; they argue that the basis of alliance formation lies in the creation of "empty signifiers", that is, words and ideas that express a universal idea of justice and symbolically structure the political environment (Laclau, 2005: 154).

We ground our Laclaudian analysis, however, in class rather than discourse. In doing so, we avoid the "sterile debate between an economistic form of class analysis that ignores the subjective aspects of class formation on the one hand, and an overly subjectivist and idealist postmodernist interpretation on the other" (Veltmeyer, 1997: 149). As such, we build from a rich literature that explores the class-based foundations of social movements across the globe. While some have deemed social movement research a "theoretical nightmare" (Dean, 2017), it has been ongoing since Marx showed how class struggle determines social evolution. This foundation allowed Lenin and Trotsky to define how people establish organisational links to act in unison under certain conditions, namely alienated labour (Trotsky, 2008).

Class analysis of heterogeneity, unity and alliance formation in social movements has elucidated the inner differentiation within movements and has therefore challenged perceptions of homogeneity or relative unity in any movement. By class analysis, we mean an investigation of the interconnections between positions defined by labour relations and production units in different economic sectors, the processes through which individuals are distributed among these positions, and the consequences of this distribution on their life chances and on the interests they pursue (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992). We now understand social movements as being varied in their composition (for example, from different economic sectors). From this, unity within a movement develops through the establishment of a shared project for change (Barker and Dale, 1998), and through the building of "infrastructures of dissent". These are means through which activists and organisers develop political communities within which to learn, communicate and mobilise (McCafferty et al., 2009).

To date, class analysis of alliance formation in social movements has distinguished between labour and community-based or agrarian struggles. As explained by Katznelson (1982), the links between the two types of movements are usually tenuous if they exist at all, and each type of conflict has its own separate vocabulary and set of institutions. He goes on to suggest that this lack of alliance formation between the two types of movements explains the relative weakness of radical politics in the United States.

Alexander and Pfaffe (2014) build on this understanding to show how both types of movements are often born from shared working class struggles, with community-based movements representing reserve labour, and workplace movements representing employed labour. In their work on South African service provisioning and labour protests, however, they show how the two groups often contradict each other's efforts due to a lack of cooperation and communication. Similarly, in an analysis of Spanish protests during the Franco regime, Castells shows how labour and community-based groups remained separate, even as they fought for the same things against the same police, and exchanged messages of solidarity (Encarnación, 2010).

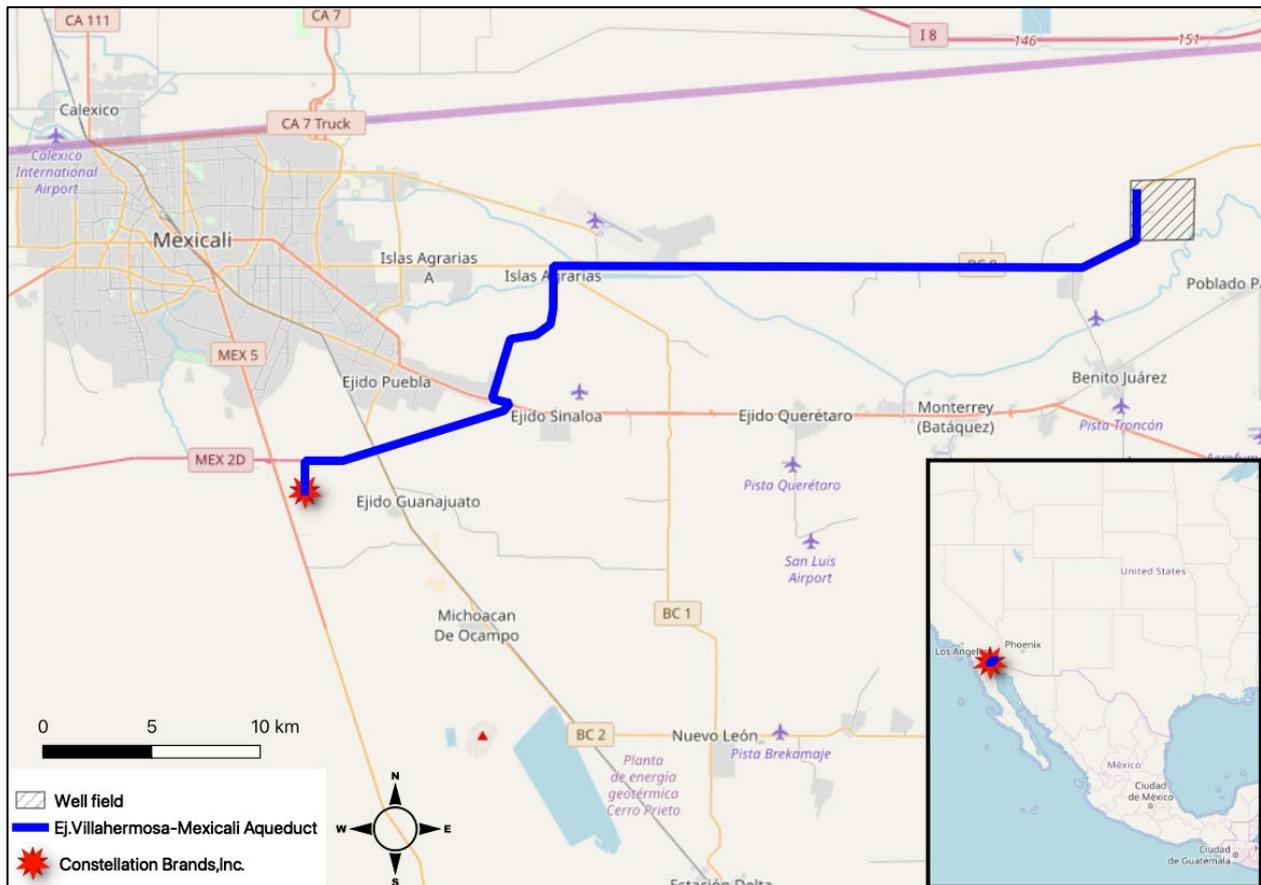
In the context of social movements across Latin America's water sector, class analysis has shown that the two primary groups of protesters include smallholder farmers and industrial labourers. The *Guerra del Agua* (or Water War) that began in late 1999 in Cochabamba, Bolivia, is one of the most widely studied. As explained by Perreault (2006), the movement developed after the state attempted to privatise water. *Campesino* (small farmer) organisations, relying on irrigation water for livelihoods, began to protest the restructuring, and urban migrants who lacked reliable or affordable drinking water service constituted much of the remainder of the movement. As campesino irrigators consolidated their influence, however, they largely obscured the needs of Cochabamba's labour reserve, that is, urban migrants. Ultimately, as argued by Terhorst et al. (2013), the protests did little to affect Bolivia's long-term water governance structure.

The lack of alliances between smallholder farmers and reserve labour in Bolivian movements and elsewhere has been shown to hamper resistance to water privatisation or decentralisation efforts. In a comparative study across Latin America's water sector, Lobina et al. (2011) compare social movements that developed in response to water privatisation in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil; Cochabamba, Bolivia; Columbia; Santiago, Chile; Huancayo, Peru; and Uruguay. They find that the strength and number of alliances among groups in a larger movement is the primary determinant of successful resistance against privatisation, though their study did not address how effective alliance formation occurs.

In Mexico, in an analysis of the case at hand (Figure 1), Gallardo Tapia (2020) shows that the social movement in Mexicali, and its ensuing protests, arose with the convergence of a number of environmental, social and economic factors. Many of these factors were a result of actions taken by Constellation Brands Inc. in the establishment of its new beverage manufacturing facility, which produced conditions of water stress and extraordinary drought. Gallardo Tapia also found that "political – economic alliances between stakeholders" were a key factor in the ability of the movement to end construction of the beverage production facility. Cortez Lara (2019, 2020) similarly shows that a lack of transparency and public participation in decision-making around Constellation Brands water use gave rise to protest groups. He shows that the different groups acted as a unified front on the basis of their general agreement that the "plant would not generate significant social and economic benefits, but it would adversely affect the region's environment and water availability" (Cortez Lara, 2020: 8).

This study takes as its starting point the work done by Gallardo Tapia (2020) and Cortez Lara (2019, 2020) on the Mexicali protests. It builds from there to show that Colorado River water governance in the Mexicali Valley has long been a space of class-based organisation and resistance, given its history of communal smallholder farming and industrial labour. We historicise this recent social movement – the Defense of Water – and ground it in these histories of class politics in order to show how the threat to water presented by the Constellations Brands facility impacts upon a diversity of class interests. This motivates communal farmers and industrial labour groups to form alliances to meet their goals. In this sense, the Defense of Water was not 'empty' when it erupted; rather, it presupposed and represented a century of class politics that allowed seemingly disparate groups to see their common interests and to build alliances within them. This longue durée perspective of alliance formation allows us to begin to view social movements in the Mexicali Valley as historically contingent processes, and not discrete events as they are often viewed in social movement research in Latin America (Munck, 2020).

Figure 1. The Constellation Brands, Inc. facility at Mexicali, and the location of the proposed 47 km aqueduct designed to provide the facility with groundwater transferred from agriculture.



Source: OpenStreetMap (2022).

In this article, we support this thesis by first describing our research approach. We then analyse the history of class politics in the Mexicali Valley; in the process, we explain the role of this history in producing the diverse class interests – divided between communal smallholder farmers and industrial labour – that were threatened by the Constellation Brands facility and which led to alliance formation within the recent social movement referred to as the Defense of Water. We conclude with an attempt to answer a more contemporary and pragmatic question about the social movement; that is, in what unique way did this particular beverage production facility threaten local interests such that a unified social movement was generated (compared to the lack of resistance to any of the approximately 180 other *maquila* plants that have been constructed in the Mexicali Valley)?²

² A *maquila* plant is a tariff-free manufacturing facility in Mexico, typically near the US–Mexico border. The definition of maquila used by Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography refers to it as “an economic unit that combines actions and resources under the control of a sole owner or controlling entity, to perform mainly activities for the transformation, production, assembly or processing of one or more products, in whole or in part” (INEGI, 2015). See James (2019) for a recent count of maquiladoras in the Mexicali Valley.

RESEARCH APPROACH

We sought to determine how class politics were supported and carried out by a range of actors within the Defense of Water movement. To do this, we conducted fieldwork across the Mexicali Valley from May through August of 2018. During this time, researchers resided with social movement leaders and conducted interviews. Interview and participant-observation data were collected and recorded in field notebooks and in audiovisual recordings (see Spradley, 2016). Additional interviews were conducted remotely and archival research was conducted through 2022.

In total, 25 formal interviews with different social movement leaders were conducted. Interviewees were identified through a chain-referral sampling process, which was chosen for its ability to minimise bias while maintaining privacy when researching sensitive topics and hidden populations (Penrod et al., 2003); this was a concern in our context, given the responses of the Mexican state and Constellation Brands contractors to the social movement.³

Interviews were semi-structured and included open-ended questions about personal experiences with the recent protests, interviewees' perspectives on their challenges, the history of water governance in the study area, and the interconnections between groups' positions in different economic sectors. If consent to do so was given by the interviewee, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Fieldwork also included attendance at a total of nine protests and assemblies. The design of interview questions and the transcription of interviews sought to produce a grounded theory that explains the role of water in the social movement (see Corbin and Strauss, 2008). NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software was used to code the transcribed interviews.

Our archival research was conducted in collecting institutions that included the Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, the Latin American Collections, and the Map and Geographic Information Center (MAGIC), all of which are at the University of New Mexico. We sought to construct a history of resistance in Colorado River water governance in the Mexicali Valley. Evidence from archives included newspapers, environmental impact statements, water management reports, and Mexico – US treaties. This data was also used to triangulate findings from protest leader interviews and assemblies.

RESULTS: FOUNDATIONS OF CLASS POLITICS IN THE MEXICALI VALLEY

El Asalto a las Tierras

Abundant, verdant vegetation is not a native feature of the Mexicali Valley. Prior to the 1900s, due to the Colorado River's extensive seasonal flooding (Garcia-Acevedo, 2001), permanent agriculture was not established or maintained by the Indigenous inhabitants of the valley, namely the Cucapá, Kiliwa, Pai Pai, and Kumiai (Luna-Peña, 2015). At the turn of the century, however, entrepreneurs from Los Angeles, California, purchased 340,000 hectares (ha) of land in the valley in order to establish what would become the world's largest cotton-farming operation (Kerig, 2001). This was the beginning of the Colorado River Land Company's efforts to convert the entire valley to industrial agriculture using reliable water delivery from the Colorado River (Sánchez Ogás, 2017).

Throughout the early 1900s, the Colorado River Land Company focused on securing additional lands in Mexico, developing trade networks between Mexico and the United States, and securing labour; all this was accomplished with support from then President Porfirio Díaz (Sánchez Ogás, 2017). The Porfirio Díaz regime, which lasted from 1876 to 1911, was a period of strong centralised government control of

³ Mexico's Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (National Human Rights Commission, or CNDH) conducted a formal investigation of Constellation Brands after allegations were made of company-sponsored violence against protesters. The authors attended closed-door CNDH interviews of citizens who described how they were systematically targeted and subjected to physical violence by Constellation Brands security contractors.

the Mexican economy. During this period, economic growth was considerable, though unequal (Aguirre Bernal, 1995; Estrella, 1982).

In the decade leading up to the revolution, the Porfirio Diaz regime began selling large swaths of land to internationally owned companies in order to promote foreign direct investment (FDI) (Schmidt, 2010). This allowed the Colorado River Land Company to purchase nearly the entire valley from the Mexican government in 1901 (Sánchez Ogás, 2017). The scale of this project made the company the primary employer in the valley, which until then had had a small population. Chinese immigrants arriving in southern California were enticed to Mexicali to work for the company and construct kilometers of irrigation canals (Kerig, 2001).

This early period of industrial farming largely determined how land and water in the Mexicali Valley would be used throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries, and most of the irrigation canals created by the Colorado River Land Company continue to be used to deliver water to crops. Cotton, the company's primary export crop, is still one of the most widely cultivated crops in the valley, along with wheat and alfalfa. The style of farming that exists in the valley today reflects the company's use of early industrial agricultural technologies. Tractors, fertilisers, and large plots of land partitioned to take advantage of economies of scale all characterise the current Mexicali landscape and date back to their development during that period (Brun et al., 2010).

Even though much of the Colorado River Land Company's legacy can be seen in the Mexicali landscape, their control over it proved fickle. Gradually, during their 36-year tenure, mestizo Mexicans began settling in the area and working for the company (Kerig, 2001). A volatile situation arose out of growing discontent about wages, racial tensions between mestizos and Asian workers, and land reform movements elsewhere in the country stemming from the Mexican Revolution of 1910. This ultimately led to the company's loss of control of the valley in 1937 (Garduño, 2004).

That same year, the agrarian structure of the valley was radically changed when groups of mestizo Mexicans from various regions of Mexico forcefully appropriated lands operated by the Colorado River Land Company. They were backed by then President Cárdenas as he worked to implement the class politics of the Mexican Revolution (Sánchez Ogás, 2017). While the relationship between the newly elected Cárdenas administration and valley residents was fraught (see Dwyer, 2008), Cárdenas ultimately supported mestizo residents. The result was the creation of communal agricultural lands, or *ejidos*, in the valley (Sánchez Ogás, 2017). This land seizure was known as *El Asalto a las Tierras*. As occurred with other seizures of the land of foreign owned companies in Mexico during this era, people from various parts of Mexico migrated to Mexicali to take part in the repartitioning of land into communal agriculture (Kerig, 2001). These *ejidatarios* (communal landholders) were encouraged by the Cárdenas administration to act and organise collectively in order to further expand cultivation by developing irrigation infrastructure. In 1937, these reforms resulted in the transfer of 170,880 ha of the Mexicali Valley from the Colorado River Land Company and the formation of 38 ejido endowments.

Agriculture in the Mexicali Valley depended on reliable water delivery from the Colorado River. As agriculture expanded throughout the Colorado River basin in the United States from 1900 into the 1940s, water availability in Mexicali became increasingly limited and its reliability was more and more called into question. In 1942, the United States finished the construction of the All-American Canal, which transported Colorado River water that had been destined for the Mexicali Valley, to the Imperial Valley instead. This led to an agrarian crisis across the Mexicali Valley as water shortages forced farmers to fallow their fields. Two years later, Mexico and the United States ratified the Mexican Water Treaty of 1944. This treaty guaranteed the Mexicali Valley 1.5 million-acre feet (1850 million cubic metres) of Colorado River water per year, which was less than what was being used by farmers at the time. World War II was, in part, an impetus for the treaty, as the United States requested Mexico's geopolitical support in return for the allocation of Colorado River water.

The salinity crisis

Beginning in the late 1930s, farmers in Arizona's Yuma Valley, just across the border from Mexicali, were experiencing decreased crop yields due to increasing salinity in near-surface ground water. Irrigation water from the Colorado River that was applied to farm fields in the US portion of the Colorado River basin collected naturally occurring salts from the soil before flowing back into the river. This process, repeated numerous times along the length of the river, resulted in decreased crop yields and increased salt deposits throughout the Yuma Valley in the US as farmers applied the salty water to their fields. In response, as described by Cortez Lara and Garcia-Acevedo (2000) in 1961, the United States Bureau of Reclamation and the Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District began pumping the highly saline groundwater from the Yuma Valley and replacing it with Colorado River water. They discarded the salty groundwater above the Morelos Dam, from where ejidatarios in the Mexicali Valley receive their irrigation water. Almost immediately, salt content in Mexicali Valley irrigation water went from 840 parts per million (ppm) to 1500 ppm (Mumme, 2017).

In response to the increased salinity, ejidatarios began repeated protests in which they marched through Mexicali and gathered in the plaza between the Palacio de Gobierno and the United States Consulate. Protesters demanded that the Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District stop pumping brackish water into the Colorado River. The first response by the Mexican government, under pressure from protesters, was to issue memorandums through the International Boundary and Waters Commission (la Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas, or CILA) – a binational institution that administers the use of water from the various rivers that cross the Mexico – United States border. Shortly after the protests began, Mexico's ambassador to the United States conveyed a formal diplomatic protest demanding that the United States reduce the salt content in the Colorado River.

A compromise was reached in 1965. It was not until 1973, however, that a permanent agreement was reached to keep saline water from Wellton-Mohawk out of Mexicali's irrigation water; this agreement took the form of the CILA's Minute 242. Throughout the 12 years in which Mexicali farmers were forced to use salty water, social and political tensions that had arisen during El Asalto a las Tierras were exacerbated and small farmers questioned the role of their government. According to Reid (2017), the crisis helped radicalise ejidatarios as they pushed the Mexican government to follow through on its revolutionary promises of total agrarian reform and opposition to the influence of private landowners and the United States.

The radicalised ejidatarios from Mexicali joined a national opposition movement that emerged simultaneously with the problem of salinity and was embodied by the National Liberation Movement (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional, or MLN). This national movement – drawing inspiration from the recent Cuban Revolution – challenged the political dominance of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI), Mexico's de facto ruling party since 1929. Cuba's rapid reforms and fierce ideological commitment was compared to the many failed promises of Mexico's own Constitution; in this way, the MLN exposed the ruling party's lack of revolutionary credibility and challenged its ruling legitimacy.

The swiftness of the MLN's rise and its wide appeal threatened the strength of the regime (Arguedas, 1977). The salinity issue contributed to the situation in two ways (Reid, 2017). First, the Mexicali ejidatarios who rallied against the salinity proved to be one of the most cohesive of the many leftist groups forming the MLN and they thus gave the national group organisational strength. Second, the salinity provided a unifying cause to disaffected Mexicans outside of the Mexicali Valley because it symbolised the PRI's shortcomings: the abandonment of ejidatarios, a weak stance towards the United States, and the surrender of Mexican sovereignty. The salt from Wellton-Mohawk thus helped to support a nationwide challenge to Mexico's post-revolutionary political regime. In 1973, in a successful attempt to defuse the leftist challenge to the PRI, the party sided with ejido protesters in Mexicali in pressuring the United States to reduce salt loads in Colorado River water.

Water decentralisation, economic liberalisation, and the evolution of precarity among industrial labourers

Industry in the Mexicali Valley developed as the Mexican government attempted to attract FDI that would employ the surplus labour that had resulted from the end of the Bracero Program in 1964. Initially established by a US executive order in 1942, the Bracero Program consisted of diplomatic accords between Mexico and the United States that allowed Mexicans to work legally in US agriculture on short-term contracts. The *maquiladora* export industry was announced in 1965 and established maquila plants in Mexicali and other boarder cities in the form of industrial parks. Following the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s, the Mexican government enacted sweeping economic reforms across the Mexicali Valley that allowed the maquiladora industry to expand.

When President Salinas took office in 1988, he began to decentralise Mexico's land and water sectors. Before he was elected, Mexico's water management was highly centralised and was overseen by the Secretary of Water Resources in Mexico City. The central government was responsible for water management at state and municipal levels, and within irrigation districts (Assetto et al., 2003). In February 1989, the National Water Commission (CONAGUA) was established at the federal level; it was tasked with assuming an oversight role and decentralising water-related operations and decision-making to municipal, state and irrigation district levels, while retaining some key functions. The passage of the National Water Law in 1992 involved important changes, including the introduction and maintenance of a public registry of water rights, the creation and management of markets for transferring water, the elimination of water subsidies, the transference of irrigation district management to user associations, and allowing private sector management of water services (Wilder, 2010).

In that same year, a reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution was approved; it granted ejidatarios the ability to gain title to their farm parcel and to rent or sell that parcel (Cornelius, 1992). This reform included the legalisation of permits for extracting and leasing water from aquifers underneath a property (Bray, 2013; Emanuel, 2012; Jones and Ward, 1998). While water remained a public resource, transferable water-use concessions could now be granted to individuals and incorporated firms for up to 50 years. This resulted in expansion of the maquila industry because plants could benefit from the newly decentralised water economy (Eaton, 1997). Maquila plants regularly purchase water-use concessions from surrounding farms, which has eliminated agriculture in and around many industrial areas (Strömberg, 2002). This period of maquila industry expansion continued following the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993; in addition, the devaluation of the peso in 1994 and the adoption of the just-in-time manufacturing model further expanded the industry (Bendesky, 2004).

Today, there are more than 5000 maquila plants in Mexico, and 180 of them are located in the Mexicali Valley (INEGI, 2017b). The economic slowdown of 2007/2008, however, as explained by Osorio Novela et al. (2020), resulted in widespread layoffs and the placing of increased productivity demands on employed workers. Employees' wages have decreased further since 2007 while corporate earnings have increased. In 2009, wages were equivalent to 52% of corporate income, and in 2016, wages were equivalent to only 28% of corporate earnings.

This reduction in employees' wages has been exacerbated by a lack of permanency in the maquila labour market in Mexicali. As explained by Wilson (2020), while Mexico has strict labour laws in terms of medical benefits and pensions, the maquila industry in the valley has worked over the past 10 years to institutionalise temporary employment in order to shirk their obligations. Standard practice among maquila plants today is to hire workers for up to six months and then fire them before they become eligible for legislated labour benefits. Plants lay off workers before benefits become due and rehire based on demand. This steady stream of reserve labour is provided by a proliferation of staffing agencies in the valley that supply workers on a month-to-month basis. This labour precarity allows maquila plants to

rapidly respond to changes in global demand for their products (Sachetto and Cecchi, 2016), but it has greatly reduced quality of life among industrial workers in the Mexicali Valley (Wilson, 2020).

Lining the All-American Canal

Following from the Salinas reforms, 'professionalised' water districts began to replace decision-making about water among ejidos. This rendered water allocation a technical problem rather than – as it had been previously – a political process (Cortez Lara, 2014). In addition, there was a growing consensus among farmers and governmental water agencies that groundwater overexploitation was increasingly a problem across the Mexicali Valley (Cortez Lara, 2019). This became clear in 2003, when the Imperial Irrigation District in Southern California elected to build a cement-lined canal to deliver Colorado River water more effectively to farmers in the US Imperial Valley and reduce seepage into groundwater (Figure 2). According to the US Bureau of Reclamation, the original unlined canal had been contributing an estimated 70,000 acre feet (about 86 million Mm³) of water per year to the aquifer due to seepage. Construction began in 2003 and was completed in 2009; it was done without consultation or thought about its impacts on Mexican water users (Cortez Lara and Garcia-Acevedo, 2000).

Figure 2. Lined All-American Canal, Colorado River, and agriculture in the Mexicali Valley.



Source: OpenStreetMap (2022).

Ultimately, the All-American Canal project diminished ground water recharge across the Mexicali Valley (Navarro, 1998). This reduction in groundwater availability disproportionately impacted the valley’s ejidos, given that they use approximately 1200 million cubic metres (Mm³) of the total 2300 Mm³ of water

used in the valley each year (Rubio-Velazquez, 2020). Communal farm water users are also subjected to more oversight by the government, water user associations, and the Irrigation Society than are private water users, and the latter can more easily drill additional deeper wells than can ejidatarios (Cortez Lara, 2019).

Today, agriculture in the Mexicali Valley is divided between private landowners and ejidos. The valley, with just over 230,000 ha of arable land, has a unique distribution relative to Mexico as a whole in that the valley has more ejidos than other municipalities; they cover 57% of arable land compared to the national average of 45% (INEGI, 2017a). The average size of both ejido and private properties is 20 ha (Collins, 2004: 239); however, 30 private farms, cultivating up to 3000 ha each, dominate the region in terms of value of production (Brun et al., 2010). Ejidatarios are more likely to grow wheat or alfalfa due to its lower input costs and ease of market access; larger farms, on the other hand, produce high value vegetables for Mexican and US markets because they can take advantage of economies of scale to afford higher distribution costs (ibid). Larger private farms also have more capacity than do ejidos, both financially and institutionally, to access dwindling groundwater in the valley (Cortez Lara, 2019).

The defense of water

On 16 January 2018, at Rancho Mena outside of the city of Mexicali, around 40 protesters and police clashed violently at the construction site of a water pipeline (the *Acueducto Ej. Villahermosa*) that was being built for the new Constellation Brands beverage manufacturing facility (Figure 1). Protesters threw rocks and other objects at police, who attempted to remove the protesters from the area. These early protesters represented two different organisations: Mexicali Resiste,⁴ an anti-corruption and labour rights coalition, and Comité en Defensa del Agua,⁵ an organisation of ejido leaders and ejidatarios. This event was a continuation of a series of protests that began in 2015 in Mexicali and in other cities across northern Mexico, from which both Mexicali Resiste and Comité en Defensa del Agua emerged.

Social unrest in the Mexicali Valley began in 2015 with the *gasolinazo* protests (Stargardter et al., 2016), and was exacerbated by a proposed water privatisation law. The new law consisted of a change to Mexico's General Water Act, seeking to further decentralise components of Mexico's water supply. According to the proposed change, the National Water Commission was allowed to grant full or partial concessions to private entities to operate, conserve, maintain, rehabilitate, modernise, or expand water infrastructure built by the federal government. Unrest grew in 2017, coinciding with the construction of

⁴ Mexicali Resiste is an urban activist collective that formed out of the *gasolinazo* protests (<https://mexicaliresiste.org>). The collective is made up of Mexicali city residents including industrial labourers, students and retired people from the working classes. They operate several social media sites, produce weekly news videos, and have biweekly assemblies and weekly protests. Their website catalogues videos of protests and includes a Constellation Brands environmental impact statement, protest graphics, timelines and analyses of events. Throughout the city, one can see large murals of Marx and Zapata saying, "*No se vende el agua, Mexicali Resiste.*" Weekly activities draw around 20 to 60 participants, but some protests have mobilised hundreds. When asked about their goals, members of the leadership responded that they were primarily resisting Constellation Brands and the privatisation of water. Leaders said also that they had ambitions to join with other like-minded groups to resist global capitalism and neoliberalism. Members also talked about diverse topics including water, transparency, anti-corruption, labour dignity, border inequality, energy price concerns, and cultural changes.

⁵ Comité en Defensa del Agua also formed during the *gasolinazo* protests but is represented by a more rural population consisting largely of ejido members. Actors from the group have systematically collected documents about Constellation Brands in order to develop a court case against them. Members participate in rallies, frequent leadership meetings, and agreement documents. A leader of this group has gathered written support from two-thirds of the ejido leaders in the valley to resist construction of the facility. At a meeting of ejido leaders, Comité en Defensa del Agua participants reported that they had initially formed to resist Constellation Brands, but that this had led to the group having other discussions. Other actions have been directed towards anti-corruption campaigns. Some of the members participate in an initiative called *Mujeres Sostenibles*, which works on creating a rural market for women to sell local produce and goods. One of the members is running a campaign to gain a Baja California senate seat.

the Constellation Brands facility. Residents participated in protests in large numbers, at times in crowds of up to 30,000 people.⁶ Many demands were expressed at the early protests, but most were focused on either labour struggles (for example, rising gasoline prices, current labour conditions, United States influence on regional development) or water decentralisation. One of the most salient issues that seemingly united the different demands and groups, however, was opposition to water transfers to Constellation Brands and the allocation of state funding to the construction of the new aqueduct to transport water to the facility.

The violent protest at Rancho Mena in January of 2018 was just one of many protests that have occurred since 2015 within the Defense of Water movement. As such, other groups, in addition to Mexicali Resiste and Comité en Defensa del Agua, have formed or remobilised to join the movement; they include the Resistencia Civil Pacifica de Baja California,⁷ Agua Para Tod@s,⁸ Rebelión Organicemos la Lucha,⁹ and Nueva Constituyente Ciudadana-Popular.¹⁰ The Comité en Defensa del Agua formed alliances with Mexicali Resiste and the other groups, but each maintained that they were a different organisation with distinct goals. Protesters representing these diverse groups have collaborated to occupy construction equipment, block roads and highways, lead town-to-town marches, and hold public forums to discuss grievances. As of early 2020, protesters permanently occupied encampments outside of the capital building in Mexicali and of the Constellation Brands facility. As documented in interviews and by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission, movement leaders have been arrested and imprisoned by state police and physically assaulted by Constellation Brands contractors as they have pursued these strategies.

Even as protesters have endured violence, they have advanced their goals in the valley. Responding to the protests, in July 2017 the Baja California state government, led by then Governor Francisco Vega, rescinded state funding for the aqueduct that the state had promised to build for Constellation Brands. It was then forced to use private funds to construct the aqueduct, to purchase transferable water-use concessions from farmers, and to construct three large wells outside of the city (Figure 1). Finally, on 21

⁶ Protests were reported on by international news outlets including:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/04/mexico-water-brewery-mexicali-constellation-brands>, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/03/26/596448290/as-big-beer-moves-in-activists-in-mexicali-fight-to-keep-their-water>, and <https://www.telesurenglish.net/analysis/Mexicali-Resiste-boycotts-Constellation-Brands-Grupo-Modelo-20180213-0009.html>

⁷ Resistencia Civil Pacifica de Baja California is a group that includes people from the major cities of Baja California. As a labour-based organisation, it includes industrial, construction and agricultural workers. The group's original reason for organising had been the gasolinazo protests; it subsequently began to focus on the privatisation of the municipal water supply which was allowing the Constellation Brands brewery to purchase water from the city. Members of the group have occupied an encampment outside of the Constellation Brands construction site; they also occupied and obstructed construction equipment, led long marches, and participated in protests. One of the group's leaders stated that the group focuses on rising gasoline and toll road prices because it disproportionately impacts working people.

⁸ Agua para Tod@s is a campaign that seeks inclusive water governance in Mexico. It advocates for citizen participation in decision-making on water and sanitation systems, as proposed by the Citizen Initiative for the General Water Law and in compliance with Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution that states, "any person has the right of access, provision and drainage of water for personal and domestic consumption in a sufficient, healthy, acceptable and affordable manner. The State will guarantee such right and the law will define the bases, subsidies and modality for the equitable and sustainable access and use of the freshwater resources, establishing the participation of the Federation, local governments and municipalities, as well as the participation of the citizens for the achievement of such purposes." (<https://aguaparatodos.org.mx>).

⁹ Rebelión Organicemos la Lucha is primarily comprised of young people. Among their stated issues is the right of peasant and Indigenous groups to organise in self-defence to protect themselves from the government and drug traffickers. They also defend the right to public education and water, demand freedom for political prisoners and victims of the government, and oppose high gasoline prices.

¹⁰ Nueva Constituyente Ciudadana-Popular (NCCP) seeks to undo the advancements of neoliberal governments into the Mexican social order, arguing that these meet the needs and demands of large companies and corporate groups. As a labour organisation, the NCCP focuses on the role that free trade agreements, especially NAFTA, have played in forcing the subordination of Mexican labour to the United States.

March 2020, the city of Mexicali held a weekend plebiscite in which 76.1% of voters cast ballots against the continued construction of the US\$1.4 billion Constellation Brands facility. This vote forced President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to cancel the company's construction permits and water concessions in Baja California. It was under the banner of the Defense of Water that groups of communal farmers and industrial workers were able to bring about these changes (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Posters and banners produced by different groups in Mexicali since 2016; they portray the larger movement's common idiom, La Defensa Del Agua (Defense of Water).



Source: Photos by authors and courtesy of Mexicali Resiste (2021).

Interviewees from all groups represented in this study advanced their opinions that Constellation Brands was bad for labour. They consistently shared the perspective that they must 'defend' their water supply because it was being stolen. When asked about the importance of Colorado River water, however, different groups focused on different aspects. Among ejidatarios, most argued that Constellation Brands would cause increased water scarcity that could threaten agricultural users' supplies. As explained by an interviewee who represented Comité en Defensa del Agua,

[Water is] important because we are producing food. And it is not fair, right – that because of water scarcity we stop producing food and supporting our families? We live from agriculture. Agriculture is our culture. We do not live from beer [the beverage to be produced by Constellation Brands]. If we produce beer and not food, we will not live (Interviewee #12, June 2018).

While most ejidatarios interviewed do not grow food that is directly consumed in the valley, this interviewee was speaking to the importance of the agrarian sector in northern Mexico. Another interviewee who also represented Comité en Defensa del Agua argued that Constellation Brands was stealing the entire valley's groundwater supply. They stated that,

If the brewery operates, it will need water apart from that provided by the City of Mexicali. So, they are thought to have drilled between 14 and 18 deep wells, very deep wells, to extract water with better minerals. And by drilling a large number of deep wells, in a few years they will leave us without water in the aquifer. So? What will happen to agriculture? (Interviewee #8, June 2018).

Interviewees who were directly concerned with the impact of Constellation Brands' water withdrawals on existing supplies in the valley – primarily ejidatarios represented by Comité Ciudadano – often referenced the lining of the All-American Canal as the impetus for the valley's water problems. One interviewee representing Comité en Defensa del Agua stated that, "it is a continuation, just a continuation of what they [the United States] started when they lined the [All-American] canal (...). [T]his is our opportunity to stop them" (Interview #25, February 2020). In interviews, ejidatarios sometimes blamed themselves for failing to organise resistance to the lining of the All-American Canal, often comparing their failures to previous successes they had had. They regularly juxtaposed this failure with their success in ending the salinity crisis, telling stories about marching through the city centre during their successful campaign to pressure President Adolfo López Mateos and his Partido Revolucionario Institucional to negotiate an end to that crisis. As one interviewee representing Comité en Defensa del Agua stated, "We have marched before. [We] came together to march when the United States tried to poison us [during the salinity crisis of 1961]. We defended our water. We did not march when they lined the [All-American] canal. But now we do" (Interviewee #5, June 2018).

Interviewees representing other groups focused more on labour struggles in the context of the relationship between Mexico and the United States than they did on material aspects of water scarcity in the valley. They tended to reference Constellation Brands, but only as an agent of the United States that intended to exploit Mexican labour and resources. A representative of Agua Para Tod@s, for example, was concerned that water use by Constellation Brands would increase water scarcity, which would, in turn, limit demand for industrial labour in the valley. They stated that,

With seven million cubic meters [per year to be used by Constellation Brands, they would] consume 81 percent of the water used by industries in Mexicali. That is, Constellation Brands will have a water use rate per worker that is 168 times higher than the rate of all Mexicali industries combined. Water in other industries gives us jobs. Constellation Brands does not (Interviewee #21, January 2019).

Another interviewee, who represented Constituyente Ciudadana-Popular, described their understanding of why companies from the United States were operating in the valley and the ramifications of these operations on the current condition of industrial labour. According to this interviewee,

They are here for our water and labor. There is no water to buy in the United States, so they take ours. After they take our water, they take our lives. When we have no water to farm, we must work for them for nothing. After they take our water, they take our labor and our lives; water is life (Interviewee #19, January 2019).

Similarly, a representative of Mexicali Resiste argued that,

The PRI and Kiko [referencing Baja Governor Francisco Vega de Lamadrid] work for the United States. The United States tells Kiko to sell them our water and he says yes! Now the corporations control the valley and there is nothing left for the people. Our government works for the United States. That is why I am here. They are selling Mexican water and Mexico to the United States (Interviewee #2, June 2018).

Another representative of Mexicali Resiste described the need to defend their water from the United States more broadly, stating that,

Constellation Brands, Inc. is stealing our water; it is a stick-up! They come here, they give us nothing, they take our water and send it back to the United States. Why would we let this happen when farmers and citizens who are part of our community are running out of water? That is why we are fighting. It is a stick-up! (Interviewee #4, June 2018).

Certain interviewees regarded themselves as specifically fighting for Mexican labour. They perceived the construction of the Constellation Brands facility as neocolonialism – that is, they felt that while Mexico appears to be independent, it is in fact controlled by US economic and political influences (Nkrumah, 1965: 7). They perceived their movement in Mexicali as one part of the legacy of the Mexican Revolution

and, in turn, of the land seizure known as El Asalto a las Tierras. As one representative of Rebelión described it, in a modified reference to Zapata's rallying cry during the Mexican Revolution, "we are carrying out our version of *tierra y libertad – agua, tierra y libertad!*" (Interview #22, August 2019). As seen in Figure 4, the murals, signage and posters used by these organisations directly reflected the grounding of their message in El Asalto a las Tierras, and in the Mexican Revolution more broadly.

Figure 4. Signs and posters produced by Mexicali Resiste and other groups that work to define the recent Defense of Water in the historical context of labour struggles in the Mexicali Valley.



Source: Photos by authors and courtesy of Mexicali Resiste (2021).

Interviewees representing Mexicali Resiste and Rebelión often referenced the neo-Zapatista movement that began in 1994 as the source of additional inspiration for their work in Mexicali, arguing that the neo-Zapatistas were taking a similar grassroots approach. As described by a Mexicali Resiste leader, referencing the Zapitistas, "resistance begins at home" (Interviewee #2, June 2018). When asked about the relationship between Mexicali Resiste and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, EZLN), however, they were quick to point out that little support had been provided by the EZLN beyond organising tools and advice. They went on to elaborate that,

Our movement is grassroots. We talk [with EZLN leadership]. We talk with resistance groups in Palestine; Indigenous groups in the United States. We share ideas. But our movement is grassroots. It must be. [The EZLN] has no resources. We rely only on each other because the fight is ours. All we have is each other (Interviewee #2, June 2018).

Interviewees and organisers at rallies in Mexicali often referenced the grassroots nature of their movement, insisting that they do not need or want involvement from outside organisations. Many specific reasons were provided by interviewees for their resistance to outside involvement, but three key themes emerged in our data. First, as referenced above, few outside organisations had resources that could be provided, or that they were willing to provide, to organisers in Mexicali. Second, outsiders were perceived as being unable to understand the unique historical and cultural underpinnings of the situation in Northern Baja. Last, some organisers alluded to a lack of trust between groups that were organising in

Northern Baja and those elsewhere in Mexico. When asked why these barriers did not limit organisation among local groups, a representative of Resistencia Civil de Baja California said that,

We are one movement with different fronts. We are a hand; each finger has its own mission. We are fingers of a hand that make a fist (referencing the Resistencia Civil logo). We all want different things, but we all know we cannot defend our water without cooperating (...). We do not let our own missions get in our way (Interviewee #14, July 2018).

In an interview with a leader of Mexicali Resiste, they described how the group remained focused on improving working conditions and the quality of life for industrial labourers. They argued that, while water itself was not their focus in Mexicali, it is fundamental to meeting their demands. They stated that, "Water is life in Mexicali. It means territory. If you control water, you control life" (Interviewee #4, June 2018). In another interview, a leader of Comité en Defensa del Agua – the group representing ejidatarios in the valley – also referenced the role of water in allowing them to cooperate with Mexicali Resiste and other groups, even as the material aspects of water scarcity were most important to them. As this interviewee put it,

Right now, we have a lot of problems. Gasoline is too expensive, so it is expensive for us to work the land. But other groups are hurt by expensive gasoline too. It is the same with water. There is a shortage of water so we do not have water in time to irrigate our crops, and if the plant is not watered as it should be at the right time, the roots do not develop as they should. Other groups are worried about a shortage of water for the environment or the city. We are all worried about the same thing for different reasons (Interviewee #3, June 2018).

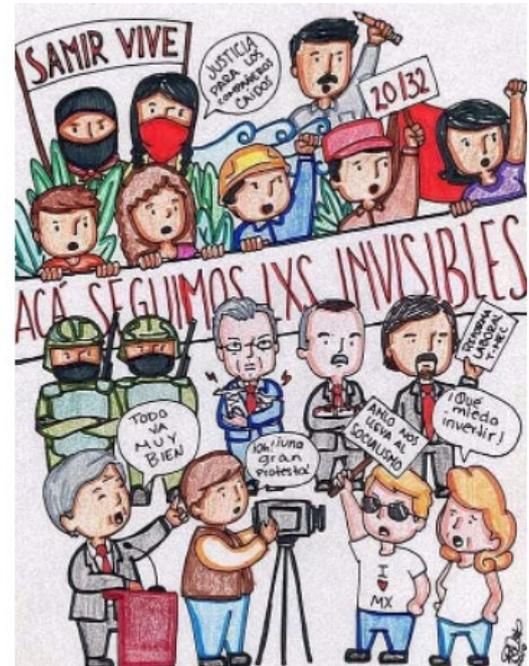
Evidence of this cooperation between farmer and labour groups was found at rallies, marches, encampments, and on written material that was created by different groups and distributed across the region (see Figure 5). That said, it was clear from interviews that this cooperation incorporated multiple perspectives on water, demands, and types of resistance. Mexicali Resiste, for example, openly protested the neocolonial nature of Constellation Brands, regularly referencing Zapata, Che and Marx in speeches and written materials. These foundations, in turn, led Mexicali Resiste to rely heavily on social disruption, which was a very different strategy from those used by Comité en Defensa del Agua and other groups. Comité en Defensa del Agua lobbied decisionmakers to protect the region's water sources for agriculture use. They also worked within Mexico's court system to build a case to expose the illegality of Constellation Brands operations in Mexicali.

DISCUSSION

The *longue durée* of class politics in the Mexicali Valley

Class politics in the Mexicali Valley was born from United States industrial development and actions on the Colorado River that increased the precarity of the working classes. In the foundations of each of the class-based political movements described above, the working classes in the valley perceived the United States as limiting access to economic stability and life chances, even if the actors in each case differed. In the case of El Asalto a las Tierras, it was the Colorado River Land Company; in the salinity crisis, it was the Wellton-Mohawk Irrigation and Drainage District; in the case of the maquila plants it was the staffing agencies; in the lining of the All-American Canal the actor was the Imperial Irrigation District; and in the Defense of Water campaign it was Constellation Brands that was undermining economic stability and livelihoods. The foundation of each of these movements included visible and sometimes violent actions on behalf of either industrial labourers or communal farmers, but an examination of the ways in which each built upon its historical foundations is key to explaining how the Defense of Water was able to grow and meet its goals.

Figure 5. Defense of Water posters promoting marches and assemblies in which various organisations are represented, who also contribute to organising efforts.



Source: Photos courtesy of Mexicali Resiste (2021).

The development of social movements is almost always the result of a complex interplay of factors; these can include context, crisis, mobilisation, and interpersonal relationships. As described by Fuchs (2006), however, a dominant theme in social movements is the need to build across the actors and institutions that reinforce one another. In the Mexicali Valley, our analysis shows that this is an historically contingent process. El Asalto a las Tierras began with discontent among the Colorado River Land Company’s workers about wages; ultimately, however, it was in the context of the Mexican Revolution that support was provided. The federal government seized the company’s landholdings by force and divided it among ejidos. This established a class of communal farmers while simultaneously subjugating a class of "traditional peasants" as reserve labour (Dwyer, 2008: 71).

Having been founded in El Asalto a las Tierras, the collective structure of ejidos led to the unified mobilisation of farmers during the salinity crisis. As an organised class, ejidatarios aligned with the National Liberation Movement to challenge the political dominance of the PRI, and they were able to then pressure the Mexican government to negotiate with the United States. This resulted, in 1973, in the adoption of Minute No. 242: Permanent and Definitive Solution to the International Problem of the Salinity of the Colorado River.

Beginning in the 1990s, the rapid decentralisation of Mexico's land and water governance and its ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement presented new challenges for communal farmers and industrial labourers in the Mexicali Valley. Capital in both the agricultural and industrial sectors was able to operate more freely, which polarised income distribution, reduced working class wages, and increased worker precarity (Laurell, 2015). It also initially limited the ability of the working classes to organise around resources like water; this was manifested in the ejidatarios unsuccessful resistance to the lining of the All-American Canal (Cortez Lara, 2014). Since 2008, however, massive social movements have formed across Mexico which have the goal of resisting the continued efforts to liberalise the economy and even of reversing the economic devastation caused by decentralisation and liberalisation (Laurell, 2015). The Defense of Water is a part of this larger trend.

The longue durée of alliance formation among working classes in the Defense of Water

Our results document the development of alliances among communal farmers and industrial labour groups in the Defense of Water in Mexicali. The development of these varied groups can be at least partly explained by their emergence during the gasolinazo protests, a period of broader civil unrest across northern Mexico (Stargardt et al., 2016). In 2016, the Mexican government formally announced that gasoline prices would rise by up to 20% as the Peña Nieto administration worked to privatise Mexico's oil industry and eliminate subsidies. During this time, the peso was weakening, the Trump administration in the United States was pursuing a platform built on economic protectionism, and the Mexican drug war continued to ravage communities in northern Mexico. Each of these increased the precarity of the working classes and limited the life chances of its members, further exacerbating the process that had begun in the 1990s.

Protest marches were held in cities across northern Mexico as working classes expressed frustration with these issues. In Mexicali, the Resistencia Civil de Baja California and Mexicali Resiste came to organise many of the events associated with the gasolinazo protests. As the movement faded across other northern Mexican cities like Tijuana and Nogales, it continued in Mexicali as the Constellation Brands facility came to embody this frustration through the organisational efforts of the Comité en Defensa del Agua.

The Comité en Defensa del Agua was born from ejido leaders who were concerned about the transfer of water concessions in the valley from communal farms to larger farms and the industrial sector through the newly proposed water legislation. In our results, it was clear that their concerns stemmed from the history of water decentralisation in the valley and from frustration at their failure to resist the lining of the All-American Canal. They viewed Constellation Brands as another US-based threat to their livelihoods. The Comité en Defensa del Agua grew as more farmers engaged in discussions with its leaders and, in some cases, with representatives of Constellation Brands seeking transfers of water.

The original goal of Comité en Defensa del Agua was to work within northern Mexico's judicial and political system to reform water governance to protect ejido interests, although their pursuit of this goal was occurring within the larger context of civil unrest across northern Mexico. Because Comité en Defensa del Agua had already constructed a network of people working to resist efforts to transfer water-use concessions – that is, an infrastructure of dissent – the Resistencia Civil de Baja California, Mexicali Resiste, and others were able to quickly shift their focus from the gasolinazo protests to the construction of the Constellation Brands facility, which was clear and present in Mexicali.

As we have seen, the gasolinazo protests were responsible for the mobilisation of numerous labour groups, including Mexicali Resiste, Resistencia Civil de Baja California, Agua Para Tod@s, Rebelión Organicemos la Lucha, and Constituyente Ciudadana-Popular; however, this does not explain their interest in water decentralisation or, in turn, in the alliances between these labour groups and communal farmers in the Defense of Water. As alluded to in the introduction, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) develop the notion of articulation to explain alliance formation within social movements. They define it as,

any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified (...). The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social [milieu] (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105, 113).

As described by DeLuca (1999), articulation has two processes: speaking for the elements, and linking them. Though elements exist prior to articulation, the act of linking modifies their character such that they can be understood and used – that is, spoken – across groups. In short, articulating these elements can be understood as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity by arresting the flow of differences and constructing a centre (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 112).

We build from this theory of alliance formation but argue that a *longue durée* class analysis is required to explain articulation in the case of Defense of Water, as each of the pre-existing elements was defined in the course of class struggles over the unique roles of water in Mexicali. Successful articulation of the elements in the case of unification under the Defense of Water banner was determined by the foundation of the five class-based political movements: El Asalto, the salinity crisis, water decentralisation and economic liberalisation, the lining of the All-American Canal, and the Defense of Water itself. Each of these resonated with either industrial labour or communal agriculture, and each of them partially fixed 'water' as relevant to the interests of those groups. Our results show that there was widespread acknowledgement that Mexicali's water needed to be defended; that is to say, a 'centre' of the movement was born around the idea of defence that, in turn, linked the varied class interests.

In the agrarian sector, represented largely by Comité en Defensa del Agua, leaders mobilised ejidatarios by associating 'water' with the material reality of scarcity that had plagued them since the salinity crisis. Interviewees regularly referenced both the salinity crisis and the lining of the All-American Canal as being evidence of a larger trend by the United States to shirk its water-delivery responsibilities to the valley as defined by the Mexican Water Treaty of 1944. In interviews, farmers alluded to their perception that they were mobilising to defend water in order to maintain their livelihoods and way of life. In this way, farmers conceptualise water differently from other groups in the movement, but agree that it must be defended.

Mexicali Resiste, Rebelión and, arguably, Resistencia Civil de Baja California were less interested in the material aspects of water, rather portraying it as a measure of Mexican sovereignty from the United States. In this portrayal, the United States has forced the ongoing exploitation of Mexican labour and the Mexican government is unable or unwilling to act to mitigate this process, and citizens of the valley must therefore reclaim the power to defend Mexican labour. In this narrative, the material aspects of water are less important than their ownership by Constellation Brands. Leaders likened the current situation directly to El Asalto a las Tierras, which resonated with workers in the valley. Interviews provide clear evidence that leaders actively worked to mobilise participation in the Defense of Water by linking it to labour struggles during El Asalto a las Tierras (see also Figure 3). The Zapatista and Guevarist imagery became fused with the place-based Defense of Water imagery. This is reflected in interviews as well as in the posters and banners shown in Figure 3 and in aspects of the combined narrative such as, for example, "*agua, tierra y libertad*". All of this serves as evidence of the link that greatly expanded the breadth of the movement beyond the agrarian sector.

Defense of Water was thus born through representing the class interests of both industrial labour and communal agriculture. It allowed groups from different sectors with different interests to become "fingers of a hand that make a fist" (Interviewee #14, July 2018). In this way, Colorado River water in the Mexicali Valley may be understood as representing the diverse class politics within the movement. These politics were developed through the historical foundations of class struggles in the valley, with each representing a nodal point that has partially fixed the meaning and character of water. All groups were able to agree because Colorado River water reflected their class interests in that water must be defended. As such, an "infrastructure of dissent" was constructed and maintained, to the point where the movement was ultimately successful in forcing the cancelation of the Constellation Brands construction permits.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, why was a broad, unified movement mobilised to resist the construction of a single beverage production facility, when no similarly successful resistance was mounted to the other approximately 180 maquila plants that have been constructed in the Mexicali Valley? Numerous other protests have been mobilised to resist the construction of US-owned manufacturing facilities in northern Mexico, but few achieved the scope and scale needed to resist their construction. In reflecting on our results, it appears that the answer to this question is twofold.

First, it is crucial to understand the timing of the construction of the Constellation Brands facility. Numerous resistance groups had been mobilised across the Mexicali Valley during the gasolinazo protests, with the aim of addressing broader discontent across northern Mexico. This was occurring in the wake of the mass mobilisations that occurred across Mexico to resist the ongoing economic liberalisation (Laurell, 2015). At the same time, ejido leaders were increasingly concerned about reports of large water transfers from farms to the new beverage manufacturing facility. Strong leadership from ejidatarios resulted in mobilisation within the agrarian sector and calls to limit additional water transfers. This mobilisation by Comité en Defensa del Agua was spurred, in part, by the resentment felt by farmers towards the lining of the All-American Canal.

Second, Colorado River water holds a privileged status among natural resources in the Mexicali Valley, in part because the valley owes its existence to this water. As such, a century of class struggle against the United States over the river has also been a century of struggle for the valley's existence. The agrarian sector feels this struggle directly, but industrial labour that was mobilised during the gasolinazo protests also understands Colorado River water as a Mexican resource that should be allocated to support their interests. Constellation Brands, seemingly blind to these historical foundations, attempted to exploit a resource that is intrinsic to class politics in the valley. As the gasolinazo protests subsided, mobilised groups outside of the agrarian sector – seeing Constellation Brands as the most recent manifestation of US neocolonialism – were able to easily remobilise under the banner of Defense of Water. Under this banner, these groups were able to form alliances with communal farmers to produce a broader movement, one that was powerful enough to advance their shared class interests.

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