



INTRODUCTION

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

is one thing that we should have learned from the twentieth century, it is that simple solutions, premised on simple narratives of development, rarely work out the way they are intended.

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

In Paraguay, the word *campesino* usually refers to small farmers with or without land, living in the fertile eastern half of the country. They are numerically important, accounting for at least 20 percent of the population, and at least 83 percent of the farms, although they only own about 4 percent of the total cultivated land.³ But the real story of the *campesinado* in Paraguay is about the long struggle of rural people to become involved in national development. People who call themselves *campesino* today implicitly identify with a struggle for land that has been going on unabated since the early 1960s, when a cotton boom made it possible for smallholders to make some money with family labor, enter the market economy, and become full citizens of their nation.⁴ They believed, with rural people all over Latin America, that they and their country could become prosperous if only the vast landholdings of a handful of elites were redistributed to the poor, and if they and their children performed back-breaking work in the cotton fields under the 45°C. They were supported in this belief by an intellectual class that believed rural development would eventually bring about democracy, as well as by an authoritarian government that rarely kept its end of the bargain. But as the Cold War ended, the developmental theories of those in power began to shift.

Ever since Paraguay began its post–Cold War experiment, a protracted transition to democracy that lasted from 1989 to 2008, campesinos’ attempts to participate politically in their country’s development have been regarded by many urban democrats as undermining democracy itself. Campesinos’ supposed illiteracy, economic irrationality, and above all their predilection for populist leaders make them a frightening reminder of what democrats think of as the recent authoritarian past, the very thing that transparency reforms are supposed to eliminate. Perhaps most surprising, though, is the fact that most campesinos I know have reacted to this catch-22 not by resisting the ideas of transparency and bureaucratic reform, but by openly embracing them. Many have adopted the very ideas that implicitly exclude them, have tried to make transparency their own, and to adopt new political practices through which they can insinuate themselves into the nooks and crannies of bureaucratic reform. While these legally minded campesino leaders are rarely successful in accomplishing their political ends, their paradoxical existence as unwanted interlopers in a system based on the idea of openness and inclusion serves as a useful vantage point for reexamining the politics of transparency after the Cold War.

TRANSPARENCY AFTER THE COLD WAR

The idea of transparency as a bureaucratic virtue is not entirely new, but in the 1990s it came to prominence as the central idea in at least two international reform projects, one having to do with governance, the other with economic development. The first had its roots in Western criticisms of propaganda and censorship, and state intelligence-gathering in communist countries during the Cold War. The idea that oppressive states manipulated and withheld information from their citizenry was one of the key ideological weapons of the United States during the Cold War, to the point that censorship came to be seen as equivalent to totalitarianism (see Pietz 1988; Franco 2002).⁵ The implication was that democracy followed naturally from making “more information” available to the public, and that states which curtailed or distorted information were undemocratic.⁶ The arguments made by liberals against propaganda were particularly suggestive, since they implied that public discourse could be divided into two types: that which is transparent, objective, and informative, and that which is deceitful, manipulative, and *political*. By 1989, the belief that government ought to be based on strong democratic institutions open to its citizenry and streamlined in the way it produced and used information had become the

cornerstone of what the World Bank called “good governance” (World Bank 1989; World Bank 1998–1999). This was a stripped-down, procedural model of democracy that was devoid of specific or local content so that it could be patterned into the workings of any state (Diamond 1989). The state became democratic so long as its citizens were adequately informed about their choices, and were free to participate in occasional rituals of choice-making like elections. As such, democracy was in fact formally similar to capitalism—a rule-based playing field on which the rational choices of citizen-consumers equipped with transparent information were to discover and elect optimal governments.

The conceptual similarity between procedural democracy and liberal economics is not coincidental, for transparency’s other life began in a branch of microeconomics known as “economics of information,” based in part on a rejection of Soviet-style control economies. The principal questions of this economics were laid down by Friedrich Hayek (1945) when he argued that state attempts to control information were not only antidemocratic, but also a drag on the economy.⁷ What had begun as a relatively marginal branch of microeconomics during the Cold War came into its own in the 1990s, popularizing the premise that markets cannot achieve efficiency if participants are ill-informed (or asymmetrically informed) about the relative value of the goods that they are buying and selling. Development economists could purportedly find ways of making markets more efficient by improving the availability of information to participants in the market, or by devising end-runs around certain things that were simply unknowable.⁸ In a decade where “information technology” was expanding globally and countries were announcing their entry into the “information age,” the idea that the production and dissemination of information could have such positive effects was appealing to people of all sorts of political persuasions. Indeed, the strongest advocates of the “information-for-development” approach included conservative disciples of Hayek (e.g., North 1990; de Soto 2000) as well as outspoken critics of neoliberalism (e.g., Stiglitz 1998 and 2002).

During this period, information became the grease of both the market economy and democracy. The failure of democracy and of markets in the Third World were both attributed to a lack of transparent information available to the citizenry.⁹ What’s most striking about this as a worldview is the way in which it seemed to elude criticism. Even as neoliberalism came under increasingly harsh condemnation in the late 1990s from people within the development apparatus, the argument that information would solve both political and economic ills of all sorts actually increased its influence after hard-edged neoliber-

eralism waned. Explicitly turning away from state-slashing austerity projects, the World Bank suggested in its 1999 World Development Report that investing in “information” and solving multifarious “information problems” were the key to guiding the developing world out of poverty (World Bank 1998–1999).¹⁰ Against the grand projects of the Cold War, in which the World Bank financed massive hydroelectric dams and sought to convert global agriculture to new forms of machine- and chemical-intensive production, there’s something almost quaint about the suggestion that what poor people really need is a little more, and a little better, information about their condition.

If development models depend so crucially on this thing called “information,” it’s worth stepping back and asking what exactly it is. In formal economic models, information is always a kind of pared-down communication, broken down into “signals” with a set value based on the number of different forms a given signal can take—in other words, it is measured as a proportion between actual signals one delivers and the possible signals one might deliver.¹¹ But in everyday language information is described as a static thing that, even though one cannot touch it, is “contained” in documents and in people’s minds. It is an object which circulates in economic systems, a kind of knowledge which economic actors can seek and use, which they can possess, store, share, or hide. That is, information is an object in itself, abstractable in principle from the context in which it is created or interpreted, possessed or lacking; it is knowledge in commodity form, a special kind of object which improves decision-making by helping people to become aware of things beyond a given context. For the most part, information is apprehended discursively, but it is a form of discourse that is overwhelmingly representational. It is not meant to be poetic, to evoke or to stir; it is meant to refer to something in the world, and it is meant to do so truthfully. In a world of confusion and uncertainty, where a rational actor may find it difficult to make decisions, information is certainty itself.¹² In other words, information’s value is not intrinsic, but emerges only to the extent that it grants access to something real. The common economic definition of information as “knowledge about values which are important to decision-making” (Rasmusen 1989) says it all—it is the values, which preexist information, that are of interest; information is merely a representation of those values.

Language, of course, does many things other than represent. But it is a peculiar feature of developmental rationality in the twentieth century that the representational qualities of language tends to eclipse other understandings of what language does (Silverstein 2001 [1981]; Crapanzano 1981). Following

Webb Keane (2001), one might say that development discourse is spoken according to a particular “semiotic ideology,” the belief that language can, or ought ideally, to work this way. The rise of representationalist ways of thinking can be traced to the Enlightenment, when the work of the mind came to be thought of as separate from the world itself (Foucault 1966; Foucault 1970; Rorty 1979; Hacking 1983). Representationalist governance models matured in the colonial period, an era that ushered in the enduring fascination with mapping (and geometrical space in general), cataloging, registering, building encyclopedias—all in the hopes of building complete representations of the world. As Timothy Mitchell describes these representational practices, they “set up in the social architecture and lived experience of the world what seems an absolute distinction between image (or meaning, or structure) and reality, and thus a distinctive imagination of the real” (2000, 17).

At its height, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, British colonial administrators believed that it was possible, at least in principle, to create exhaustive representations of the territories and the peoples they were attempting to rule (see Richards 1992; Mitchell 2002). The entire spectrum of Cold War authoritarian regimes, from the Stalinist Soviet Union to anticommunist Paraguay, exhibited some of the same hubris, a belief that given enough information about the objects of governance, they could run the economy better from a central location. Indeed, part of what ended the Cold War, and made Hayek so prescient in retrospect, was a breakdown in the belief in centralized planning and the aspiration to total knowledge. But if the hubris of complete information control was ultimately abandoned, what remained was a basic semiotic ideology about how communication could ideally work. Transparent representations, too complicated to be known by a central command, merely needed to be dispersed through the whole signaling apparatus that was democratic, market-based society.¹³

If authoritarianism was built on the state’s control of information, then democracy is to be built by giving citizens access to, and indeed control over and responsibility for, all information. This ultimately is what a transparent society is supposed to look like: all state knowledge is public knowledge, and citizens can therefore “see” what goes on in government and in the economy, not directly, but by receiving information about it. Transparency is information so complete that it seems unmediated; it is an access to the real through a medium so perfect as to disappear from the scene it is describing (cf. Morris 2001). This can never be realized, but remains always the ideal: a world of perfect in-

formation in which citizens and entrepreneurs can make fully informed decisions about how to organize their society. Capable at last of choosing rationally among political and market options, governments will be held accountable, corruption will decrease accordingly, and markets will become more efficient, leading to better growth, and hoisting developing countries out of poverty.

It is not hard to critique the utopian assumptions of the transparency project, but that ultimately is not the point of this book.¹⁴ My aim is not to critique representational logic, but to treat it as a social fact (cf. Rabinow 1986), as part of the way much of the world now accounts for the real, builds social relationships and institutions, and dreams about the possible. For example, many of the representations described in this book are maps, and maps—even inaccurate, contestable, illegible, distractingly ornate, or dated maps—invite and enable people to do things that they couldn't do otherwise. In rural Paraguay they make a huge difference to how neighbors argue about who owns what piece of land. A map makes it possible to enroll technologies and authorities in support of argument, actors and things that wouldn't otherwise be involved. People without property maps may resort to local knowledge and neighborhood allies to resolve disputes, or if there are hand-written documents, to lawyers who can interpret them. But when a map is added to the relationship, so, too, are surveyors, cadastral agents, and potentially a whole host of public and private technicians, complex technical devices, laws and forms of inscription, development experts, even foreign satellites on which the mapping depends. Though cadastral maps are supposed to make property relations more transparent in the case of conflicts and to make it easier for judges and lawyers to interpret at a distance, their more obvious effect is to dramatically complicate and expand the networks of actors involved in land disputes. Information may not do quite what it is supposed to do in such a case, but it certainly does *something*. As this book shows, the practices of representation that go into creating transparency are saturated at every turn with precisely that aspect of social life that they are meant to get rid of: politics. Indeed, far from stabilizing information, these larger technical networks create new spaces for disagreement and contestation.

A common critique of development in the post-Cold War era is that it is depoliticizing. In a long line of work inspired by Michel Foucault's governmentality lectures (1991), scholars have claimed that the underlying strategy of governance and development is to take political problems and render them technical and bureaucratic.¹⁵ At their simplest, such arguments appear to recapitulate Weber's (1946) old dictum that in modern states bureaucracy becomes

an iron cage bereft of human creativity or diversity (see Graeber 2006). But as Tania Li (1999; 2007) has argued, such statements tend to overstate the degree to which developmental projects play out the way they are intended, and everything about the field of these projects remains politicized. I build on this argument by examining a particular aspect of the governmental apparatus—its use of information to promote democracy and economic growth—and suggest that the project has two rather unexpected consequences. First, it creates two classes of citizens: those who are appropriately rational actors in a world of representations, and those who are not. In other words, those who are able to speak in the language of transparency and who are therefore capable of full participation, and those who cannot and can therefore only be governed. This is one of the defining features of campesino life in post-Cold War Paraguay—that no matter how hard campesinos try to become democratic citizens, they are necessarily considered incapable of it. In the post-Cold War era, campesino marginality is justified less in the straightforwardly racial, cultural, and class terms than they used to be, and more in terms of their inability to participate in the information age. Second, though, the relative instability of information leaves immense amounts of room for the politics which it is meant to exclude. Politics may be partially displaced by transparency, from the cotton field and the mayor's living room to the hallways of the public registry in the capital, but it is not diminished.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the politics of transparency is how focused it is on documents. Documents are peculiar sorts of objects which are supposed to contain and organize information. But documents are also bundles of paper (or, increasingly, digital files accessed through expensive, networked computers) whose obdurate materiality undermines the desire for interpretive stability, for transparency. As a burgeoning literature in the anthropology of documents has shown, the meanings made possible by documents are not merely representational, but aesthetic, indexical, and material as well.¹⁶ Documents are always encountered by particular people in particular contexts, and their interpretation is never separable from the contingencies of the encounter. It is via documents that information necessarily comes to be bundled in particular ways, to circulate in particular areas, to be vulnerable to natural disasters and human deception. Most important, it is in the variable interpretive encounters that people create the information that documents supposedly contain.¹⁷ Documents are therefore the place where abstracted representations meet actual, messy contexts, inciting confusion and competing interpretations.

Insofar as they believe information can and should be stable, then, the dream of the transparency reformers is always at some level that documents would just disappear. But the impossibility of this gives rise to bureaucracy's most annoying problem: documents can only ever be fixed by creating more documents, through audits, investigations, and reports.¹⁸

It is both the underlying exclusivity of the transparency project and the unruliness of documents that give rise to what I call "guerrilla auditing." Guerrilla auditing is the practice of trying to participate in the open flow of government information while being considered a threat to transparency. Very few informational practices actually resemble the idealized version ascribed to them in post-Cold War development practice, but the promise of transparency is more easily achieved when those engaging in information practices are not already marked as ill-suited for the rational space of the public sphere. When guerrilla auditors encounter documents, they unleash undisciplined interpretations and hence novel possibilities into the situations that the documents purport to describe. Moreover, they make obvious that the many different sorts of people who come into contact with the documents, from bureaucrats and lawyers to international reformers and anthropologists, all come to them with very different desires, politics, frames of indexical reference, and habits of interpretation. In these encounters, the proper relationship between representation and reality therefore becomes a terrain of struggle in the sense meant by William Roseberry (1996), the very language in which political projects are articulated and compete with each other.

PARAGUAY'S INFORMATION AGE

The full course of the argument I have just summarized will emerge slowly from a historical and ethnographic description of Paraguayan politics. For those who don't know much about this little country, it bears explaining why the promise of transparency after 1989 was particularly resonant in Paraguay. Until 1989, Paraguay was internationally renowned primarily for the brutality of its secret police, the corruption of its elites, its black market, and the generalized anonymity which attracted all manner of unpleasant characters, from Nazis and fascists to international thieves, exiled dictators, and cult leaders.¹⁹ The country's most accomplished literary figure, Augusto Roa Bastos, had written from exile that "Paraguay is an island surrounded by land," a line that caught on internationally, both among the Paraguayan exile community and among foreigners seeking to understand Paraguay's peculiarity.²⁰ The popularity of the

metaphor showed that Paraguay's isolation had become an existential problem for a certain sector of the population. The image evokes an obscure country yearning for connection. And it is this yearning, for modernity, democracy, and cosmopolitanism, that became one of the defining features of Paraguayan life, particularly in Asunción, after 1989. The post-Cold War world was awash in stories of poverty caused by corruption, crony capitalism, and bureaucratic irregularity, which for many Paraguayans seemed to describe their country's pathology particularly well. In this, the recognition of its universal ailment, Paraguay found its connection to the rest of the world.

Many urban Paraguayans felt that their isolation was economic, cultural, and political. The first problem was a geographical location that conspired to keep it impoverished.²¹ It is a small country, with scarcely six million inhabitants as of the last census, and in the late 1990s, over 50 percent of Paraguayans lived outside of major cities, giving it one of the most rural populations in the Western Hemisphere. Paraguay is divided in two parts: 60 percent of the land, from the west bank of the Paraguay River to the border with Bolivia, is desert, and has always been somewhat outside of the national project.²² What most Paraguayans consider to be the true Paraguay is the eastern half of the country, which comprises extremely fertile land, excellent waterways, and the mestizo population that is iconic of national history. But on the eastern side Paraguay is cut off from the ocean by much larger and more prosperous countries, Argentina and Brazil, which have long seen Paraguay as a backwater and a nuisance. Paraguayans have always felt that their relationship to the rest of the world has been mediated by these giant neighbors, against both of which they fought a famously bloody war in the nineteenth century.²³ Moreover, Paraguay has never had particularly lucrative natural resources, other than those relating to agriculture, nor much of a manufacturing industry. Cold War development schemes largely focused on the production of cash crops, like cotton and tobacco, across the eastern half of the country; these schemes were initially lucrative but quickly became state burdens. In such an economic context, the post-Cold War idea that one might promote economic growth simply by improving information management seemed enormously promising.

A second aspect of the Paraguayan experience which made transparency compelling was the country's linguistic distinctiveness, which caused it to be stigmatized in the rest of Latin America. Paraguay is the only country in the hemisphere in which a majority of the population speaks a single indigenous language, Guaraní, even though they do not politically identify as indigenous.

However, most Paraguayans are to some degree bilingual, in both the indigenous language and in Spanish. In her analysis of Paraguayan bilingualism, Joan Rubin (1968) argued that Spanish and Guaraní have a hierarchical, or “diglossic,” relationship.²⁴ Rubin found that Paraguayans regard Spanish as more formal, prestigious, and rational, and they associate it both with the written form and with urban public spaces. Guaraní, on the other hand, is considered more intimate, vulgar, poetic, oral, and rural. Bilingual Paraguayans address their familiars in Guaraní, but strangers in Spanish. Or, as was often explained to me, Paraguayans regard Guaraní as better for matters of the heart or gut, Spanish as better for matters of the head. Not surprisingly, the differences are also strongly class-based, with elite and middle-class Paraguayans much more likely to speak Spanish as a first language (until recently many such children were forbidden to speak Guaraní at home), while the rural poor encountered Spanish only through schooling (and, more recently, television). In Paraguay this leads to a peculiar linguistic politics: almost all formal state business is conducted and all documents are written in Spanish, a language which the majority find cold, distancing, and snobbish. But most of the hand-shaking, speech-making, and sentimental appeals that make up the bulk of politics are done in Guaraní, a language which much of the elite find lacking in the qualities necessary for rationality and accountability. In other words, Guaraní, the language of choice for a majority of the rural poor, is almost by definition nontransparent to those who now consider themselves to be the managers of Paraguay’s new democracy. All liberal democracies are dogged by middle-class fears about the inscrutability of the masses, but in Paraguay the Spanish-speaking elite can actually point to a language to justify this fear.²⁵

By far the most important impetus for embracing transparency was the country’s historical inability to foster democratic government. In 1989, Paraguay was still ruled by one of the continent’s longest-lasting dictators, General Alfredo Stroessner, who had held power since 1954. Internally, Stroessner was immensely powerful, having gained the allegiance of most Paraguayans by collapsing the distinction between the state and his Colorado Party through a huge and increasingly complex system of patronage. Stroessner had a well-deserved reputation for brutality, human-rights abuses, and generally arbitrary ways of governing, but he was supported by the United States through most of his rule for his staunch anticommunist stance (Grow 1981). It is no coincidence, then, that Stroessner saw his support wane through the 1980s, and that he was eventually deposed, as part of a global transition in 1989. The relatively

bloodless coup was carried out by Colorado Party insiders, and thus the transition to democracy began with Stroessner's party still in power. The new president, General Andrés Rodríguez, promised to hold free elections in 1992, but whether he would accept electoral defeat remained in doubt. The idea that the coup was the first step toward democracy was therefore pushed most strongly by others: middle-class students and professionals in Asunción, activists, left-wing priests and community organizers in the countryside, and the ex-pats who flooded back into the country in the hopes of rebuilding it. To these people the fact that the Colorado Party retained power was less important than the procedural framework that was being built, a framework for good governance and information distribution which would set the foundations for democracy in the years ahead.

A kind of national euphoria greeted the transitional moment, and especially during the first three years after the coup, rapid political changes and a boom in foreign investment transformed Asunción. A broad coalition opposing the Colorado Party seemed set to create a new country, centered on a new social democratic party called Encuentro Nacional. But the coalition was short-lived, undermined by defeat in the national elections (1993) and the slow fading of the economic miracle. A central argument of this book is that the transition years created two kinds of political subjects in Paraguay, who began as allies in opposition to the Colorado Party, but soon diverged and came to constitute each other as opposites in their aspirations for a national future. The first group were campesinos who found themselves increasingly shut out of the democratic project, and the second, which I call "new democrats," were those who increasingly saw themselves as the sole leaders of the transition. These two groups did not exhaust the identities that one could assume in post-Cold War Paraguay, nor did they form any sort of majority. But they were the two groups that, outside of Colorado *oficialismo*, were most active in the political landscape of the transition. In chapter 1 I explore the history of this divergence in some detail, but here let me sketch their relationship.

Sociologically speaking, new democrats were primarily students and urban professionals tired of the old regime. Most were from relatively elite families in Asunción and were therefore tied in social and familial respects with members of the regime. They shared experiences like attending the Jesuit high school Cristo Rey (often a target of Stroessner's repression) and working as independent scholars, development experts, and artists. A large number had been exiled in successive waves of repression and had returned to Paraguay with a

vision of the country that was a product of earlier decades and of a militancy centered on literature, art, and the writing of manifestos. As time went on, this group became far more diverse, joined by ranks of students who were less politically inclined but attracted by the vision of modernity and openness which democracy offered them, and by the business elite that had prospered under Stroessner but now wished to reform their images as supporters of democracy and the new formal economy. The exiles and romantics who yearned for a more socially conscious vision of Paraguay eventually staffed the huge NGO sector that erupted in Asunción in the years after the coup, working as consultants for international agencies. The rest became its professionals, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, journalists, and entertainers. By the time I did the research for this book, they were less a specific group of people than an identity one could assume, a location from which most of Asunción's middle class and a growing number of rural entrepreneurs thought about the future of their country, aspiring, sometimes despairingly, toward an increasingly far-away democracy.

The specific hope that greater transparency, bureaucratic openness, and elections would eventually lead to a transfer of power was not to be realized for almost two decades. Much to the frustration of new democrats, Colorado candidates won the first three national elections after the transition, even though these elections were seen by the international community as basically fair.²⁶ But even as the dictator's party stayed in power, the 1990s was a decade of continuous reform in Asunción, of proliferation of information-producing and auditing agencies in Paraguay's capital, from the inauguration of the auditor general's position in the new constitution, to the establishment of a Transparency International office. The national press exploded under its new freedom, reporting daily on corruption scandals at the highest levels of government. Democracy also seemed to bring with it deepening recession and increasing claims by international agencies and Asunción professionals alike that corruption was the primary culprit, and a transparent free market its cure.

But as the transition failed to deliver its promised fruits—new freedoms, new governors, new international respect, new prosperity—those who still invested their political desires in the idea of transparency felt all the more threatened by the various internal forces that kept bringing populist strongmen to power. The fear extended to campesinos, the rural masses who couldn't quite be trusted to participate in rational government, who kept electing the Colorados, and who kept engaging in land invasions and demanding agricultural subsidies out of step with the ideals of the free market. Campesinos had always provided iconic

images for a romantic vision of the Paraguayan nation, and as such served as necessary allies to the new democrats. But now they started to look to urbanites like culturally intransigent holdovers from the Cold War, dark, particular, affective, inscrutable, and unreasonable. In short, in this period campesinos came to represent the anachronistic underbelly of a new Paraguayan society, forever impeding the full transition to democracy.

The threat that campesinos pose has been called many things, but perhaps the most convenient term, the one most ripe with liberal ambivalence, is “populism,” that aberrant form of politics that seems to threaten democracy everywhere (Panizza 2005; Arditì 2005; Žižek 2006). In Latin America, populism was once considered a “stage” of economic development which preceded liberal democracy (e.g., Germani 1968), but it has continued to resurface since the end of the Cold War as a potential harbinger of transitional failure (Weyland 2003; Demmers et al. 2001). For if liberalism is defined by its basis in the political rationality of individuals, of transparent language and clear rules, then populism is defined by its basis in the irrationality of crowds and leaders who stand outside the law. The defining and most recognizable feature of populism is its use of the category “the people” against elites and institutions (see Laclau 2005). This was precisely the sort of appeal that made Stroessner successful. Focusing his legislative energy on land reform in a country still predominantly rural, he built massive popular support for his regime by promising riches to the rural masses, *el pueblo Paraguayo*, “the Paraguayan people,” a category which connoted rurality, poverty, and Guaraní, and by vowing to protect them against the theft of resources by the landed elite. After the coup, campesino leaders and their supporters continued to promote this vision of the campesinado not only as the marker of a national romantic past, but as the very future of the nation. And it was this very pueblo, remaining after Stroessner was gone in the songs and slogans of the campesino movement, that many new democrats feared in the transition years as the unpredictable fount of political irrationality. As a remainder, *el pueblo* suggested that campesinos were pathologically nontransparent, for they seemed to move as a mass rather than as individuals, and as such threatened to bring back tyranny and isolation.

GUERRILLA AUDITORS

To understand why this historical situation would give rise to guerrilla auditing, one needs to go to the countryside. I first encountered these activists when I was invited to visit a campesino camp in a settlement called Tekojoja in



MAP 1. Map of Eastern Paraguay.

the eastern department of Caaguazú. The camp had been built by almost fifty families who had been evicted from their land in the settlement by police paid by larger, richer soybean farmers from a nearby community. The camp was a brutal place to be living, as residents had to huddle against the cold in tarp shelters that the wind was blowing to tatters. The campesinos introduced me to their “kitchen,” a single massive pot full of cold rice that had been donated by a friendly neighbor, and showed me where a grove of orange trees had stood until the previous day, when rival farmers had uprooted and dragged away the fruit trees to try to starve them out. They told me about how their gardens had been ploughed, and how much time and money they had put into them before they were destroyed. There was a surprising amount of laughter that day, but it was mostly laughter at what they considered the extremity of their misfortune, as when they told me how quickly they had all contracted diarrhea after moving into the camp, or when they recounted how one friend had been beaten and dragged away by police earlier that morning when he’d been caught stepping back onto the ground from which they had been evicted the week before.

I spent that night in the house of one of the movement’s leaders, Jorge Galeano. Jorge was not a squatter himself, nor was he from Tekojoja, but lived in a relatively nice brick house with a well-painted fence on the outskirts of a nearby town called Vaquería. Most surprising was his tiled front room, very clean, with a computer sitting in the corner and a large cabinet full of books and papers, more reminiscent of the lobby of a law office than a campesino hut. Expecting to spend the night listening to more tales of injustice and violence, I found myself instead sitting on a couch going through documents with Jorge, sifting through hundreds of pages of faded photocopies collected over years, of survey maps, legal decisions, and receipts, which to him revealed all the traces of a corrupt state and of a hypocritical legal system. Jorge was living the politics of transparency, the dream that any citizen could access state records and contest them.

Indeed, Jorge’s story has the beginnings of a development expert’s dream. He and his twin brother, Antonio, were born, in 1960, in the oldest peasant region of the country, just east of Asunción, to a single mother of eight. The family’s primary source of income was collecting and selling coconuts. Jorge, the most precocious of his brothers, moved to Asunción, where he put himself through high school by working nights in an alcohol factory. In the 1980s, both brothers moved to the department of Caaguazú, one of the areas of the country being transformed by the land reform. There they met their wives and became

involved, through their local church, in the youth movement against Stroessner. Jorge quickly rose in the ranks, and by his early twenties he had become influential in a regional campesino development organization and participated in a number of pressure tactics in Caaguazú to try to force the Stroessner government to redistribute land to landless families. After the coup, Jorge became involved in the Encuentro Nacional alongside opposition politicians from Asunción and was elected to the junta of the department of Caaguazú in the first decentralized elections. There he accumulated experience and accolades and made a fairly good salary.

Jorge had embodied this story of success: he was tall, light-skinned, and always well dressed, and his excellent spoken Spanish meant that he could often pass for a middle-class Asunceño. And yet when I met him, Jorge was destitute once more. The nice front room was all that was left of his wealth—the rest of his house was falling apart. Jorge had left the Encuentro partway through his term on junta because he was disappointed with the party, and he had not been re-elected. For several years he ran small business ventures, did NGO contract work, and tried to start projects with Peace Corps volunteers stationed in Vaquería. He had his local enemies, both those who accused him of corruption while managing NGO projects, and those local Colorado politicians he kept criticizing. But his life was quiet and relatively comfortable. His brother Antonio, meanwhile, had been chased out of a land-reform settlement to the north after mouthing off to local members of the Colorado Party, and had moved his family to Vaquería as well. Somewhere along the line, while Jorge was teaching word-processing to young elites in Vaquería, Antonio implored him to start “working for his people” again.

Antonio, of course, had a story all his own. When I met him, I had no idea that he was Jorge’s twin, and wouldn’t even have thought they were related. Antonio had embodied an altogether different experience of the democratic transition. He was smaller in stature, darker, more wiry, with fewer teeth. Until I moved in with him, he rarely spoke Spanish, living his life entirely in Guaraní. He had not finished fourth grade, and although he could read enough to get by, he called himself illiterate. He was campesino through-and-through, he would say, *che campesinoite*,²⁷ which was both a mark of pride and of self-criticism. And yet Antonio rarely worked in the fields either. He, too, was possessed of an immense charisma, inspiring rare trust among campesinos throughout the district where he lived, and soon in me as well. Antonio was not known for his legal abilities (his shortcomings with technical documents were often

repeated to me privately), but rather for being faultlessly selfless in his desire to help others, and fearless in speaking up against injustice. Whereas campesinos would not approach Jorge directly for help any more than they would a Spanish-speaking lawyer (at least until they knew him well), they visited Antonio at all hours of the day or night, for help with land deals, sickness, marital problems, thirst, and death, or simply to report on the movements of soy farmers or the plans of campesinos in nearby communities. He received almost all of them, and regaled them with long speeches and tales to give them the sense that their problems would soon be over.

In 2002, together with a number of their acquaintances from nearby districts, Jorge and Antonio created an organization that they called the *Movimiento Agrario y Popular* (MAP), aimed at pressuring the government to fulfill the promise of land reform and at improving the economic condition of its members. Jorge abandoned his teaching ventures, and Antonio stopped taking odd jobs for the local cooperative, and in Vaquería they jointly ran the organization. As with most such organizations, the primary goal of MAP was to find and secure land for landless youths on the frontier, and the brothers developed a technique for reconciling land reform with transparency by targeting illegally held estates for expropriation (see chapter 2). But above all else they became known in the area as excellent problem-solvers. Communities from all over Caaguazú with particularly complicated legal or bureaucratic problems would show up to seek the brothers' help and advice. Members called Jorge *orecabaju*, our horse, both because they backed him politically and because he was a tireless worker on their behalf; there was no social, legal, or land problem which he would not try to solve. Antonio, on the other hand, was the trusted face of the organization, and his patio the site of frequent impromptu meetings. His closer acquaintances brought him food, which until I moved into his house and started paying rent was the only dependable income that he, his wife, and his four kids lived on.

Jorge, with his brother backing him up, developed a difficult double life. While living in poverty in Vaquería, he increasingly spent his time in Asunción looking for documents, arguing with bureaucrats and technocrats, trying to figure out the paper trails that linked campesino problems into the archives of the state. Colorados and business interests in Vaquería and Caaguazú hated him for his campaigns against local landowners, and tried to brand him as a guerrilla in the local press. Asunción bureaucrats also couldn't stand him, because he refused to play the roll of the demure campesino requesting help. More

often than not, Jorge knew more about the laws and the paperwork than the bureaucrats he encountered, challenging their authority every time he entered an office, producing documents and photocopies of his own that contradicted what they told him to get rid of him. As he became more influential, he began to have run-ins with highly placed technocrats and development experts, who were both intimidated by his abilities and infuriated by the blatantly political tenor of everything he said, as they tried to maintain an image of staid bureaucratic neutrality.

This disapproval of Jorge by elites and bureaucrats is the first thing I mean to evoke with the term “guerrilla auditing.” Jorge and others never tried to do anything illegal. In fact, in the spirit of transparency and accountability, they learned the laws, learned how to read bureaucratic documents, gathered documents from state archives, and compiled records of state misdeeds. Jorge did this entirely within his rights as a citizen under the new democratic constitution of 1992, which he knew better than most state employees. I admit I initially found Jorge’s approach a somewhat tepid, perhaps safe way of dealing with rural poverty. But, in fact, there was nothing at all easy about it. Jorge had many enemies, from local party bosses and petty criminals to high-ranking members of the government and judiciary. These people regularly threatened him, repeatedly had him arrested on false charges, and on at least one occasion attempted to shoot him, but missed their target and instead killed two of his friends. Jorge’s strategy meant that even his supporters didn’t entirely understand what he was up to in the countryside, and often worried that he was not actually working in their interests. For this reason he relied on Antonio to give him his grounding, his base in the countryside.²⁸ Jorge always felt this tension, between the hope invested in him and the suspicion that he might lose touch with campesino reality. Being too close in his comportment to urban professionals, Jorge would not have been entirely trusted if not for the fierce loyalty of his campesino twin.

Despite his unthreatening tactics and the manner in which he moved away from his rural beginnings, many new democrats held Jorge in contempt. He had a few supporters in NGOs and activist circles, but development experts, reformers, political analysts, and television reporters treated him like a thug. He embarrassed and annoyed lawyers, judges, and bureaucrats whose profession it was to manipulate documents, and infuriated elites who imagined themselves to have the advantage when it came to legal argumentation. There was only one real difference between Jorge’s activities and the kind of scrutiny

of public affairs in which new democrats argued all citizens should engage: that his documentary expeditions had an explicit political aim in supporting a sectarian position that new democrats associated with rural populism and authoritarianism. And this is why Jorge's audits were *guerrilla* audits. According to the new democrats, campesino interests were not universal, not unbiased or objective, but sectarian, and immanently violent. If guerrilla auditors saw their actions as a kind of incursion into a world far from their base, new democrats saw that incursion as a threat to the free market and to democracy itself. The blurry line threatened to provincialize new democratic politics, to show them to be interested and political in their own right. In short, new democrats insisted on Jorge's dangerousness so as to maintain the distinction between a universal and a partial public, between the objective reason of liberal democracy and the irrationality of the crowd.

Fortunately, the attempt to exclude from democracy never quite works. Michel de Certeau (1984, 135) once wrote that "reason is written on the nowhere of the paper." Guerrilla auditors know that even if the paper contains a nowhere, the paper itself is always necessarily somewhere, and it is that knowledge that underpins their political project. They seek these papers, trace their paths, and reconstruct the processes through which a small group of people have been able to control most of Paraguay's economy. Unlike new democratic auditors, they do not claim to be disinterested professionals in the service of a universal ideal, but understand themselves as an oppressed majority waging a war of position in the archives.²⁹ Unlike official auditors, they carry out these tasks without subscribing to the representational assumptions of transparency's project. And their view of bureaucracy resembles a war fought with paper, rather than the dispassionate management of information. For that reason, they remain guerrillas in the eyes of political elites, trespassers against civil society, the public sphere, the rule of law, and therefore against the very idea of rational governance.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ENTANGLEMENT

Campesinos and new democrats are characters largely defined by particular kinds of knowledge practices; that is, the primary difference between them is how they claim to know the world. Ethnography is also a knowledge practice, and as such there are conceptual problems that constantly emerge in this sort of analysis. Several exemplary ethnographies of modern knowledge practices have demonstrated that the analysis of such practices runs into a confusion be-

tween form and content.³⁰ In her pathbreaking work on activists who describe what they do through the social-science idiom of “networking,” Annelise Riles (2000, 1) says that such phenomena “resist interpretation . . . because they are all too familiar; they share with our interpretive tools a singular aesthetic and set of practices of representation.” To describe the activity of such people as “creating networks” would not be to interpret at all, but merely to mimic.³¹ I started to feel this same uneasiness early on when, as I attempted to describe what it was to do an ethnography of information-making practices during the transition to democracy, many urban new democrats of my interviewees expressed how happy they were that I would be giving them much-needed information about their society, information which could help them better understand it and thereby improve its chances of becoming more modern and democratic. In other words, they thought that what I was doing was the very thing that I claimed to be studying others doing.

This apparent parallelism between what I was doing and what new democrats do all the time often made it difficult to see new democrats as a group apart—they were, as much to me as to themselves, transparent. Similarly, and even more troublingly, both they and I were in the habit of understanding campesinos as a distinct, named cultural object. Indeed, as I will show in chapter 1, rural ethnography and the cultural description of campesinos were always part of the transition project. In other words, the very project of describing how campesinos were marginalized by the culture of transparency participated in the culture of transparency, and therefore in the marginalization itself.

These realizations caused me to change my research in two ways. The first was to name “new democrats,” that is, to create a social object which would give the analysis a kind of symmetry which it does not normally have in conversations in Paraguay. New democrats are, in this book, always an analytic interruption in an ethnographic quandary. The second was to try, as well as I could, to adopt Jorge’s own research method. Graduate school had primed me very well to look for information before I settled in Paraguay, but it had not prepared me to deal with *documents*. More concretely, it had not prepared me to entangle myself in the infinite interpretive possibilities of a state archive, or even of a small conflict-ridden community, and to cull from those entanglements the details I needed for a provisional account, a useful story.³²

My apprenticeship reached a crucial turning point in June 2005, seven months after I moved in with Antonio, when I experienced firsthand the effects of being a guerrilla in Paraguay. The event, which occurred in Tekojoja, near

the squatter camp I had first visited in 2003, involved another police raid on the community, during which soy farmers destroyed campesino crops and houses. That day ended with a drive-by shooting that killed two people and severely wounded another. Having been asked by acquaintances to photograph the raid, I took pictures from behind a thin orange tree, where, I am told, I cowered rather ludicrously. For better or worse, my ambiguous position in that event temporarily elevated campesino politics to acceptable, national public debate. The first reports about the incident to hit the pages of the national newspaper suggested, despite campesino testimony to the contrary, that campesinos had ambushed soy farmers on a country road and that in the ensuing confrontation two campesinos had been killed, perhaps even shot accidentally by their own idiotic friends. The following day I made my own testimony and pictures available to a rival newspaper, demonstrating that campesinos had been unarmed when they were fired on.³³ It was not until the appearance of my account, which was more transparent to reporters and local prosecutors than the words of campesinos, that the public story changed.

Two things came of this event which are central to this book. The first was that I experienced a fleeting episode of what campesinos call *realidad*, a reality that for campesinos is felt in the body rather than in the transparency-seeking gaze of the new democrat. For me, *realidad* emerged in bad dreams, in occasional bouts of anger, in skittishness around firecrackers, and in a painful cyst that developed in the back of my throat. I still cannot describe it beyond that, because it is the sort of thing that resists representation or my own powers of evocation, but I was glad when it went away and I could get back to reading and writing. The second, which follows on the first, is that I became implicated in the guerrilla auditors' project in a way that I could not have foreseen. By that I mean simply that I began to produce documents that didn't obey the documentary divide that separated campesinos from the public sphere. I don't claim that any of the articles, pictures, or testimonials I produced had any significant impact on the course of campesino politics, nor am I claiming that this was either good or bad, although I was overwhelmed at the time by the feeling that events had made common research-ethics guidelines largely meaningless. I just mean this as a general statement about how my account is situated, because I consider this book one of any number of documents, few of them authored by me, that emanates from my presence in that orange grove on that cold June afternoon.

I had always seen my relationship to campesinos I met as one of vague solidarity, and I still do. But I think entanglement is a better way of understanding

it now, an entanglement made as much by circumstance as by political predilection.³⁴ My presence in Tekojoja shaped everything about this text. It immediately became impossible for me to speak to many people in the district where I lived, or even to contemplate visiting certain areas, and it changed the ethical and political contours of what I was doing in ways that were out of my control. It destroyed some friendships and strained others. But it also opened up new friendships, conversations, and projects that constituted the rest of my research. Finally, the fact that my name and those of some people I mention in this text are publicly recognized in Paraguay as a result of that event will inevitably shape the way this document is read, where it circulates, and how people engage it.

My circumstantial affinity with certain campesinos should not be mistaken for a celebration of their politics. I don't claim to speak for or to defend campesino projects any more than I intend to repudiate democracy with my critique of certain democratic projects. I'm fully aware, for example, that the very word *campesino* is freighted with a violent, racist, and patriarchal history of its own. This is a problem with any category, including anthropology. I do not dwell there, because those vectors of violence were not the ones that presented themselves to me. This makes my ethnography every bit as partial as Jorge's readings of the land registry. I suspect it will disappoint most new democrats, who will easily find incompleteness, obvious partiality, if not serious representational flaws. It will not provide the kind of information that many people wanted of me.³⁵ But in the spirit of a guerrilla audit, it's a good enough starting point for an incursion into the discussion of democracy, the changing place of the rural, and the politics of transparency after the Cold War.