

The Power of Ethnography:

A useful approach to researching politics

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Abstract

This article explores and argues the suitability of ethnographic methods, primarily participant observation, in the research of politics, and in the construction of concepts for theory building. The argument is sustained by using a case study of a network of political clientelism and some instances of vote-buying in a native village in Mexico City. The author maintains that long-term participant observation is particularly well suited to discover puzzles and incongruities, which invite abductive reasoning, and allow for unplanned findings and new insights. Issues of legitimacy, moral universes and life-worlds, as well as tacit knowledge, local discourses and silences, are researchable with this methodological approach. The author suggests the study of politics would benefit from more scholars employing these methods.

Keywords

Ethnography, method, politics, participant observation, abductive reasoning, rumor and gossip, tacit knowledge

Introduction

In this article, I argue for the advantages of ethnographic methodologies in the study of politics. My strategy is to use one of my own research experiences to demonstrate the ways in which this approach grants access to information and understandings that are difficult to obtain without ethnographic fieldwork. The case I present consists of a description of a problem-solving clientelist network and some instances of vote- buying in a community in

Mexico.¹ My use of participant observation over time made it clear that the local actors perceived of the two practices as different. Consequently, I argue that the practices should be considered as two different concepts, not one, as is common in much of the literature. My contention is that ethnographic approaches are paramount in order to reach this kind of insight, among other reasons because they enable the researcher to glean the meanings that people attribute to their practices.

How did I discover that people perceived of what I term political clientelism and vote-buying as two different experiences? As this text describes, the process started with the way people talked about them; they spoke a lot about vote-buying, but not at all about clientelism, which did not even have its own term. I noticed that what I term political clientelism was understood as an extension of their communitarian networks; thus, for the community members, it possessed an aura of legitimacy. Vote-buying, on the other hand, did not appear to be embedded in communitarian practices, but was gossiped about as something shameful, not at all legitimate. Ethnographic fieldwork facilitated the finding that legitimacy constitutes a defining difference between them.

My argument builds on two different advantages of ethnographic approaches: they contribute insights and understandings of political processes otherwise not accessible, and they are uniquely suited to the construction and fine-tuning of concepts.

Scholars of politics from various disciplines use ethnographic methods, for instance anthropologists (Gay 1999, Lazar 2004, Nuijten 2003), as well as some sociologists (Auyero 2002) and scholars of development studies (Mosse 2005). In addition, some political scientists have embarked on this path, a practice, which Bayard de Volo and Schatz discuss and recommend (2004). A series of political scientists explore ethnographic methodologies further in a comprehensive and interesting volume edited by Schatz (2009).

¹ Full description and analysis in Hagene (2015).

However, a considerable amount of the scientific literature on political clientelism is produced within mainstream political science, where ethnographic methodology arouses less interest and understanding (Stepputat and Larsen 2015: 10). In the mainstream tradition, the preferred methods are surveys, formal modelling, statistical approaches (Joseph and Auyero 2007: 2), structured interviews (as in Schedler 2004), analyses of public spending and program documents (as in Díaz-Cayeros et al. 2009), and the construction of models and complex algorithms (as in Stokes et al. 2013: 7, 34, and 55). These methods are tailored to deductive uses, and do not contribute towards the construction or modification of concepts.

In this literature it is common not to distinguish between political clientelism and vote-buying (see for example Combes 2011: 29, Díaz-Cayeros et al. 2009, González-Ocantos et al. 2012: 202, Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007: 2, Lawson and Greene 2012: 2, Magaloni et al. 2007: 182, Schedler 2004: 58, Stokes 2005, 2009: 604–7, Stokes et al. 2013: 13–14). The lack of precise concepts prepares the ground for flawed research results, as for instance in Schedler (2004). He clearly does not distinguish between political clientelism and vote-buying, since he uses the two terms interchangeably in his text. He claims as one of his findings (p. 87) that political clientelism is losing legitimacy. His data collection had the form of structured interviews with a large number (79) of questions. However, since the researcher makes no conceptual distinction between the two practices, it is likely that the questions do not distinguish between them either. Interestingly, Schedler wishes to explore the issue of legitimacy, but fails to prepare the tools necessary for discovering a difference between two well-defined practices. Thus, his finding of declining legitimacy could very well concern vote-buying, and not clientelism.

Political clientelism and vote-buying persist in many formally democratic societies. In order to understand this persistence, we need to see the practices from the perspective of the

local actors. I therefore consider it worthwhile to argue for a broader use of an ethnographic approach, which enables researchers to adopt this perspective.

My case is set in a *pueblo originario* (village with Mesoamerican roots) on the outskirts of Mexico City: San Lorenzo Acopilco. I first visited this village in 2001, and have subsequently carried out ethnographic fieldwork there for more than 24 months in the timespan 2003-2016. I have had 12 different visits in the community, staying from one to 32 weeks on each occasion.

A methodological reflection

In this section, I reflect on some characteristics of ethnographic approaches in general, and some of the concrete uses I have made of them in my research on political clientelism and vote-buying in Acopilco. I also include a note about theories on concept building.

What, then, do I mean by “ethnographic approach”? It comprises both fieldwork methods, a theory-guided analysis of the collected data, and a way of writing. The fieldwork method par excellence associated with ethnography, of course, is participant observation, described as immersion (Schatz 2009: 5-10), the extended involvement in the social life of the subjects in the community under study (Bryman 2004: 291) in specific social situations. According to Burawoy (1991: 291), ‘the ethnographer confronts participants in their corporeal reality, in their concrete existence, in *their* time and space’. At the same time, the approach concerns the first-hand experience of the researcher herself; by living in the community under study, she learns about some of the implications of living there. Field notes from this kind of fieldwork also may include the ways in which the researcher experiences having her taken-for-granted views, assumptions and pre-understandings challenged.

A huge advantage of participant observation is to produce empirical data, which would not otherwise be accessible for scientific analysis (Stepputat and Larsen 2015: 6). Below, I include some reflections on practical activities this method could imply. Charmaz (2006: 21)

suggests combining participant observation with a series of other field techniques, such as the use of data from documents, diagrams, maps, photographs, and formal interviews and questionnaires.

Along with the fieldwork “immersion“ goes an “ethnographic sensibility” (Schatz 2009: 5, Stepputat and Larsen 2015: 11), useful for gleaning the subjects’ understanding of their experience, the meanings that people attribute to their actions in the social world (Wilson and Chaddah 2010: 549). This sensibility entails a way of knowing, an effort to understand others, which can only be achieved through the engagement of the researcher with the people she tries to understand (van Hulst et al. 2015: 1). The ethnographer thus moves back and forth between data collection and analysis, similar to the reiterative process that, following Charmaz (2006: 24), transpires in grounded theory. Although ethnographic methods are not mandatory in grounded theory, they certainly constitute a suitable tool for carrying out research within this theoretical orientation. Here, concepts are understood to be the naming of social patterns, which emerge from research data (Glaser 2002: 24). This would constitute a theory-guided analysis, while we may also use and analyze ethnography in a series of other theoretical contexts.

Ethnography also entails a style of writing (Spitulnik and Peterson 2012: 267), using narratives, descriptions and quotes from the collected material, combined with analyses of the data. Furthermore, the writing takes place in close interaction with data collection and analysis, featuring what is termed “thick description”; Geertz (1993: 9-10) goes as far as to say ‘... ethnography is thick description’. This term implies that the descriptions given concern not only the actors and the actions, but also convey the meanings that the actions imply in the community of the actors. The task for the ethnographer, then, is to grasp these actions and meanings, and to render them in the text.

The interaction of ethnography with theory can take many forms, and the case I present gives examples of several forms. One is the deductive use: previously existing hypotheses constitute a point of departure in the analysis of data, as they do in my case of political clientelism. Another form is the inductive use of ethnographic material, formulating concepts from specific empirical data. In my case, a central point is that the concepts constructed should not be in conflict with the notions of the actors we study; considering that the actors conceive of one practice – political clientelism- as legitimate, while seeing the other -vote-buying- as illegitimate, I take this to constitute an argument against conflating the two practices into one concept. Finally, there is the use of abductive reasoning, which is particularly suited to create new knowledge. This may start with a tension, something that attracts attention to events or behavior that do not make sense; the researcher then tries to find a context within which the puzzle would give meaning (van Hulst et al. 2015: 1). We may trace an inspiration back to Plato in the famous Menon’s paradox, described in Plato’s *Menon*: ‘How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? (...) If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?’ (Laursen 2010).² I suggest participant observation provides both suggestions of what to look for, and material to provide educated guesses concerning the answers, thus producing new knowledge.

Ethnographic methodologies allow and encourage the unplanned and unexpected discovery of phenomena in the field, which is what happened when I stumbled across a clientelist network during ethnographic fieldwork around election time. It was my acquaintance with the literature on political clientelism, combined with ethnographic methods that alerted me, since I had not set out to study clientelism. My curiosity was aroused by the incongruence between the massive talk about vote-buying, in which apparently nobody was involved, while the completely open practice of political clientelism did not give rise to

² Schwartz-Shea and Yanov (2012: 27) attribute the original articulation of the abductive approach to Peirce (see for example Peirce 1940).

gossip, or even a specific term. My ethnographic fieldwork gave rise to a substantial refinement of the concepts and theories involved in the case (see Hagene 2015).

The methods I use in the case comprise participant observation in combination with informal conversation, semi-structured interviews, and scrutiny of documents and electoral statistics.

Let me point out the immense importance of living in the community under study.

When I first arrived in the village, I noticed that socio-religious practices mobilized large numbers of villagers on a continuous and highly visible scale. I started participating in these activities, which also made me a well-known figure among large numbers of villagers. I took to long morning walks, which turned out to be a pleasant way to get acquainted with other morning-walkers, to have informal conversations, and get updates on the latest gossip. I could also observe a variety of housing conditions, spot calls for meetings at the village *zócalo* (central square), and experience the mass of stray dogs that caused many women to bring broomsticks along on their walks. These walks furthermore allowed me to witness the numerous religious *ermitas* (shrines) at different points in the village, and women queuing up with their buckets for water distributed from *pipas* (transportable water-tanks) in the dry season.

My repeated stays made it possible to piece together fragments of information registered on different occasions concerning the problem-solving clientelist network described in this text. Since I met the operator of this network, let us call him Juan, already in 2005, I could strike up a conversation with him outside the polling station on Election Day in 2006. That is how I noticed his monitoring activity. Other events followed in 2011 and 2012, and are discussed in the case ethnography. The story ends with Juan being employed by the new Delegation Chief (a delegation is similar to a municipality in Mexico outside the Federal District) in December 2012.

My aim was to capture the political process as it evolved, and as it was perceived from the perspective of the clients (Auyero 2002: 40) and the broker. As I discussed above, this implies both knowledge about their actions and the meanings that people attach to them (Auyero 2006: 258), as well as the relationships which evolve between the actors (Auyero 2011: 109). These meanings lie in ‘relationships as they are *lived* and not simply in the structural and systematic properties that analysis may reveal them to have’ (Jackson 1996: 26). The relationships furthermore tend to forge obligations (Bolton 2011). Issues of moral universes, forms of rationality, legitimacy and meanings can hardly be calculated or discovered by means of ‘the superficiality of surveys’ (Auyero 2011: 107), other quantitative methods, or even interviews. An invaluable advantage of participant observation is that it provides insight into such questions, while also producing data about issues that are implicit and taken for granted in the researched community.

To observe what people do often tells a different story from what they say. What people talk about, the terms they use, and what they are silent about are all important, and only available through participant observation. Some of the knowledge emerging from ethnographic fieldwork is of the kind that informants take for granted; it is unarticulated and “goes without saying”. Sometimes it does not even have a term that distinguishes it from other practices, as is the case with clientelism in my case-community. Instead of clientelism some villagers would talk about “helping each other” or “helping people”, and one broker used the term “social work” (Hagene 2015: 148); these terms obviously also cover practices with no particular bearing on political clientelism. One local politician, furthermore, spoke of “a structure” (Hagene 2015: 154), referring to a clientelist network. This kind of insight, obtained by access to some of the villagers’ tacit knowledge, is hardly possible by any other method than participant observation.

The ethnographic approach opens up for an epistemological position, which privileges ‘the knowledge with which people live rather than the knowledge with which Western intellectuals make sense of life’ (Jackson 1996: 4). Phenomenology, the scientific study of experience, places these forms of knowledge on an equal footing, and I draw on both traditions in this study. My long-term involvement in the villagers’ lives contributes insight into their experiences and ways of making sense of what was going on. My findings, also those concerning the concepts, are the result of the villagers granting me access to many of their activities, evaluations and conversations, thus collaborating, in the terms of Marcus (2008: 7) and Burawoy (1991: 291). This collaboration extended to sharing rumor and gossip with me, which granted invaluable insights.

I thus strive to build concepts, which capture the notions of those whose behavior I study, what would normally be termed emic concepts (Lett 1990: 130). The term “vote-buying” can be regarded as an emic concept, since it is a term the villagers use in everyday speech, as well as a concept used by researchers. “Political clientelism”, on the other hand, is not a term used by the villagers, and the terms they use for this practice are equally used for practices (helping each other, social work) with no bearing on politics. It is difficult to form an emic concept for this practice, thus I settle for building a concept, which does not contradict the notions of the subjects. The term “political clientelism” is constructed by scholars to cover certain political practices. The question is which practices should be included in this concept. My position is to count in only what emerges from the data, see Table 1 (Below).

I will end this section with a reflection on theories about the building of concepts. In accordance with the tenets of grounded theory, concepts are generated from empirical data rather than from existing literature (Hallberg 2010: 5387). It is precisely from my ethnographic data that I end up with two different concepts for political clientelism and vote-

buying. Hilgers (2011: 569) is concerned about the ways in which conceptual stretching may cause these concepts to lose both their descriptive and their analytical powers. Following Sartori (1970), she recommends an approach, which dedicates a primary category for higher levels of abstraction, while secondary categories add further elements that are present in particular cases. I do sympathize with Sartori's approach (1970: 1033), but he assumes concepts to predate research data. Scholars from the field of grounded theory, for instance Corbin and Strauss (2008), coincide with Sartori concerning the importance of operating with different levels of analysis and abstraction. However, they state clearly that 'all concepts, regardless of level, arise out of data' (p. 160).

My strategy, then, is to confront the concept of political clientelism with ethnographic data on a problem-solving network, and vote-buying practices, in order to establish to what extent the practices themselves are similar or different. I find that these concrete and detailed data enable categorization of the type I have used in Table 1, which is part of the exercise of building the concept of political clientelism, based on categories at lower levels of abstraction. Instead of pondering what comes first, I prefer to consider the data and the concept as two different stages in a process of constant feedback: from the literature, I have some notions, which make me collect data that can be used to build concepts, which again can be tested and refined in encounters with more data. I use my data to refine the concept of political clientelism, taking care not to contradict the notions of the subjects under study.

The case

The case I present is part of a larger, long-term study of democracy and participation in the case community. In this section, I include a brief contextualization of the case community, the ethnography of a clientelist network, as well as an ethnographic discussion of vote-buying in the community. Finally, I set out a table (Table 1) in which a series of elements in the practices of political clientelism and vote-buying are systematized in order to

give an overview of the similarities and the differences between the practices. This table is vital in the discussion of the principal concern of the case study: should we represent the practices with one concept, or two?

Contextualization of the case community

Acopilco is a semirural village located in Mexico's Federal District, Delegation of Cuajimalpa. The community owns communal property of 1,608 hectares, mostly forest. The population of 24,000 (INEGI 2010) is divided into two main groups: the original inhabitants (*nativos*) and "those who have become neighbours" (*avecindados*). Each group now represents about half the population. Among the *nativos*, there are 2,345 persons registered in the agrarian census as the collective owners of the communal property; they are called *comuneros*. Every three years they elect their own Commissariat to oversee the communal property.

Acopilco is one of 200 *pueblos originarios* in the Federal District (Correa 2010); these feature a series of social, religious, political and cultural practices that distinguish them from the rest of the city, generating, in the terminology of Merleau-Ponty (1962), a distinct life-world. Their communitarian organizations, and family-, religious- and communitarian practices, feature reciprocity as a common denominator; thus I term the outcome a life-world of reciprocity, one that is strengthened by a network of symbolic interchange with other communities (Hagene 2007, Medina 2007, Romero Tovar 2009). In practice, only the *nativos* participate in the communitarian practices, which generate numerous networks of personal relationships among them. This habit of forming networks turns out to be extremely important for the operation of clientelist practices (see Hagene 2015, Hagene and González-Fuente 2016).

The majority of the population is among the poorer segments of Mexican society, with an income of less than two minimum wages; thus, following Jensen and Justesen (2014: 223),

they are potential targets of vote-buying operators.³ Most people work outside the village, frequently downtown. All citizens have been able to participate in the federal elections all along, but there were no local elections at all in the Federal District before 1997, and these concerned the Government Chief. The PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática) won the first election, and has been the governing party from then on. The local elections of Delegation Chief, around which this case study evolves, have only existed from 2000, and have taken place every three years. In the delegation where the case community is located, however, the PRD has only been in power in the period of 2003-2009. In 2012, the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) in coalition with the party *Verde* (Green) won the election. However, based on my long-term study in the community, I maintain that the victory of the PRI was not an issue of ideological preferences or party programs. The decisive element was the extensive network of political clientelism organized by the candidate, who changed party from the PRD to the PRI only a few months before the election (see Hagene 2015). The following sub-section presents an ethnography of this network, operated by Juan, the broker who I mentioned above.

Ethnography of a clientelist network

On Election Day in July 2006 I recognized Juan outside the polling station next to where I was living. I went over to chat with him, since I had met him before, when he was busy campaigning for a position in the Commissariat of *bienes comunales* (communal property) in the community. On that occasion he had been eager to explain to me what he was doing, and why, so I felt confident in approaching him whenever I met him later. Outside the polling station he was ticking off people on a list as they were coming out; people came up to

³ In a survey-based article, the authors here summarize three reasons why this may be so: 1) poor voters often lack the resources that politicians can promise, 2) the marginal utility of income is higher for poor groups, 3) for political parties, votes from low-income voters are cheaper to buy.

him to talk, and he asked them what they had voted. My presence did not interrupt this questioning, nor did he seem embarrassed that I witness his monitoring activity.

During another field visit, in March 2011, as I passed Juan's house, I saw a note on his door, an invitation to a meeting in the "Committee of Hope" (*Comité de la Esperanza*). I went to the meeting, which turned out to be the initiation of a new cycle of a problem-solving network before the 2012 elections. Some 25 persons turned up; the gathering would lead to some of his neighbours getting micro-credits, food-assistance, cheaper milk, housing credits, health insurance, unemployment insurance, etc., well in advance of the next elections of Delegation Chief in July 2012.

In his welcome speech Juan reminded them of what they had achieved in earlier years; he suggested that they invite Adrián (the upcoming PRD-candidate to Delegation Chief) to the next meeting, to get a complete picture of the existing welfare programs and his help to obtain the benefits to which they might be entitled. The party in power in the delegation at this point was the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional). The welfare programs were managed by different offices at the delegation headquarters, but Juan explained that people would meet with difficulties in the offices if they approached them on their own. He volunteered to mediate, finding out what documents were needed, receiving them, and passing them on to Adrián. Apparently, everybody knew he was running for election, so Juan did not need to elaborate on their side of the bargain. After pointing out what they might receive, he simply said 'Adrián will support us, and we will support him'. They had done this before, as he indicated in his welcome speech, and they knew it was about voting. For me, the network thus would qualify for the term "clientelist".

Furthermore, he suggested they ask the candidate to help with some tacos to celebrate some important dates, like Mother's Day in May. In this way, they would revive and expand previous problem-solving and social networks where enjoyment was part of the social glue

(see for example de Vries 2002: 912). Adrián, the candidate, would help them obtain their benefits and have a good time together, and in return they would support and vote for him in the 2012 elections.

On a morning walk three weeks after the meeting, I met one of the participants. He told me that Adrián had indeed arrived, and several of the neighbours had later handed in the required documents, hoping for a positive result. People welcomed support in this process, and many neighbours, though not all of them, by and by received some benefits from the social programs. When Election Day 2012 came, they would have the opportunity to reciprocate with their votes. To this effect, Juan and his helpers visited them before the election to remind them to vote. However, an important change came up before these elections.

Ten days before the elections, I was back in Acopilco to do fieldwork. I set out on my morning walk, and found that the streets were lined with electoral posters, adorned with photographs of the candidates. Adrian's face was prominent on several posters; he was considered very handsome, with his green eyes and youthful appearance. However, to my surprise his face was not embellishing the PRD-poster, but that of the PRI/Verde coalition. This news set me off in search of Juan again; why was Adrián now candidate for another party, and who would Juan and his network vote for on Election Day? Shortly afterwards we met at Juan's house, where a man representing the local PRI-cell was also present.

Juan explained that he had worked with Adrián within the PRD-structure over several years, but around February 2012 the PRD had appointed another candidate for Delegation Chief, not Adrián. Adrián then approached the PRI/Verde coalition, and they took him on as candidate on the condition that he support their candidates for President, Government Chief and Local Deputy. The PRI-militant told me, 'The PRI wants to win back the delegation, so we need Adrián, because he comes with a certain *estructura* (structure, organization) from the

PRD'.⁴ This *estructura*, of course, was the clientelist network. Juan told me that all along the people in his network had the understanding that they were to vote for Adrián. From March onwards, therefore, Juan and his companions visited their people to explain that this now meant to vote for the PRI.

On Election Day, 1 July, in the afternoon I entered Juan's patio; he had invited me to his *carnitas*-party (chopped pork meat, coriander, onion, lemon and chili-sauce, rolled into a tortilla to make up a *taco*, with soda), the most accessible ritual food in Acopilco. He had one large table in the patio, and two inside. People kept arriving, showing the voter's ink on their fingers, thus proving that they had indeed voted. Those who had finished eating their *taco* left. Juan told me afterwards that 664 adults had come to have a *taco* in his patio. He and his network had visited them before the election, reminding them to vote, and inviting them to the *carnitas*-party. As he explained to me, this was an opportunity to show them '*el afecto, el carisma que uno tiene con ellos*' (the affection and charisma one has for them).⁵ While the ink on the finger demonstrated that they had voted, it was not until the vote count that one could surmise for whom. Juan, however, had been confident; since so many had received help before the elections, he reckoned they would vote for Adrián, as they would then be able to ask him for favors again when he assumed control of the delegation.

With Adrián as candidate, the PRI won the Cuajimalpa Delegation, as the only delegation out of 16 in the Federal District; the advantage was 1,145 votes over the PRD-candidate. Acopilco represents only a small part of the delegation, but provided 1,125 of those votes.⁶ No doubt, the problem-solving networks that Adrian brought from the PRD to the PRI

⁴ Author interview, Juan and Carlos, 25 June, 2012.

⁵ Author interview, Juan, 23 July, 2012.

⁶ For the complete reasoning and calculation, see Hagene (2015: 153, Table 2). All electoral data are from the web sites of IFE, Federal Electoral Institute, and IEDF, Electoral Institute of the Federal District.

were responsible for much of this victory. By the end of the year the broker, Juan, was employed in the delegation under the new Delegation Chief, Adrián.

Ethnography of vote-buying

I do not have any observation of monetary vote-buying in Acopilco, for the simple reason that nobody ever admitted to having received money for his or her votes; this would be the most clear-cut form of vote-buying, with the sharpest distinction from political clientelism. However, I will present observations of non-monetary vote-buying, analysis of how people talk about this practice, and what their gossip can tell us about its lack of legitimacy. First, let me present my reasoning on the village talk.

I wish to emphasize the fact that the term “clientelism” was never used, whereas “*compra de votos*” (vote-buying) was constantly talked about; however, this always concerned other people, who were selling or buying votes. This unobservable practice that no one confessed to having participated in, was carried out in secrecy. The tone of voice and the context of the discourse on vote-buying added to the impression that this was a truly dishonourable act. I remember one woman telling me, ‘*No me vendo tan barato*’ (I do not sell myself that cheap). She defended her honour insisting that she was not for sale, at least not that cheap!

Community gossip was massive about vote-buying. Rumor and gossip must not be taken lightly; they have quite a lot to tell us if we do ethnographic fieldwork. In fact, rumor and gossip constitute one major aspect of the advantages of the ethnographic approach, as we shall see below. I have explored various aspects of the insights to be had from rumor and gossip in Acopilco (Hagene 2010b). These practices can be seen from both the perspective of society and that of the actor. At the level of society, a densely knit social network, through which the rumors may flow, is necessary. Social networks are abundant in Acopilco. I have observed that rumor and gossip about illegitimate practices in the village tend to normalize

them through producing a smokescreen of excessive talk. This applies to vote-buying as well as the private selling of communal land in Acopilco. The massive volume of talk creates the impression of “*cosí fan tutte*” (everybody does this); even if those who spoke apparently were scandalized, at the same time the talk tended to normalize the practice that was gossiped about. One villager told me that people were probably waiting their chance to do the same (Hagene 2010b: 35).

At the level of the actor, Paine (1967) focused on the political character of rumor and gossip. Those who had access to information would disseminate what benefitted themselves, while withholding the rest, a practice that he termed “information management” (pp. 279, 282-283). Actors may manage information in such a way that they themselves are evaluated favorably, while competitors are discredited. I will offer an example of this kind of information management in Acopilco; it demonstrates how an analysis of rumor and gossip may point to the difference in legitimacy between political clientelism and vote-buying. Let us explore the story of the female broker:

She told me about the ways in which Adrián had been buying votes just days before the 2012 elections, donating many water tanks (Rotoplas) to people, while the term she used about her own practice of giving *canastas* (baskets with edibles) to elderly people was to carry out “social work”.⁷ Her criticism of Adrián concerned the Rotoplas; she did not mention his problem-solving network, which I described earlier. According to her, handing out Rotoplas was vote-buying, whereas helping people to obtain social benefits apparently was not.

How are we to evaluate her handing out of food baskets? She was not operating a social network nor organizing festive events as Juan was doing with Adrián’s network. What she told me was that she visited these elderly persons, helped them and gave them food when

⁷ Personal communication, female broker, 1 July, 2012.

possible. Apparently, she did not limit her activities to the electoral cycles, though the handing out of basic food baskets seemed to increase sharply at those times, and she did receive the baskets from the party (PRD). Whenever I met her during my stays in the village, she had a story about some of the people she was helping. She was a self-declared PRD activist, certainly convincing her people to vote for the party. Before Adrián swapped parties, she was working to get him elected. However, afterwards she stayed with the party, and viewed him as a traitor.

What was the nature of her activism? Was it vote-buying or political clientelism? Since she had criticized Adrián for vote-buying, she must not have thought about her own practice in those terms: otherwise, why tell me about it? When she contrasted her practice with that of Adrian, she did not talk about his problem-solving network, but passed on a rumor that depicted him as an outright vote-buyer. Clearly, she was engaged in information management, endeavoring to avoid being seen as someone who bought votes for her party.

What we have observed here, then, is not that gossip exerts social control and thus diminishes the use of the practice of vote-buying. It is rather a case of information management, which could only work granted that vote-buying was seen as illegitimate, whereas “helping people” was legitimate. This discussion demonstrates some of the advantages of ethnographic approaches. I suggest we see legitimacy as a defining difference between vote-buying and political clientelism, and I will develop this point later after presenting Table 1.

I will now turn to my observations of non-monetary vote-buying from the 2006 elections, covering two different instances; one concerned giving away construction materials, the other was about handing out vegetables from a lorry. During my daily walks in the village, I discovered heaps of construction materials –gravel and sometimes cement—lying on the sidewalk outside many houses. When I inquired about this, people told me that these were

gifts from the PRI candidate. One neighbour explained to me how his daughter had managed to get some materials.⁸ The PRI-candidate gave away these materials on demand; that is, one had to go to his office and apply for them, filling in a form with one's name and address. Later on, the materials would be delivered on the applicant's doorstep. However, my neighbour assured me that people who received the materials could still vote as they pleased. "Nobody will ever know", he said, referring to the secret ballot.

The other instance transpired one evening, a few days before the 2006 elections, as I was walking home from an interview. I saw a mass of people queuing up behind a lorry, from which several men were unloading sacks of potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, onions and other vegetables. To judge by the logo painted on the lorry, these edibles were gifts from the PRI; people in the line were filling in information about themselves and signing a list before they actually received anything (Hagene 2010a: 226).

My observation of these two instances of non-monetary vote-buying demonstrate that the practice is different from that of the clientelist network; it does not need to involve personal relationships and networks over time. The ways in which people had to fill in forms and sign their applications set the practice well apart from communitarian practices; there is more similarity with public welfare practices, except that the well-doer was a party representative. Yet the practices are not exactly the same as monetary vote-buying, since they include some steps that personalize the transaction; the first one in the form of going to an office to apply for the gift, the second one by handing in personal information and signing a list. Thus both extended beyond a mere one-time event (see Table 1, below), and neither could be carried out with the same discretion as monetary vote-buying.

The results of the election of Delegation Chief 2006 indicate that the distribution of construction materials and vegetables may have bought over 1,000 votes for the PRI-alliance.

⁸ Author interview, *Avecindado* shopkeeper, 26 July, 2006.

This contention emerges if we make a comparison between the results of the PRI-candidate to Delegation Chief in the 2003 elections and in the 2006 elections, and between the number of votes for the PRI-candidate to Delegation Chief and presidency in 2006 respectively (for full numbers and analysis, see Hagene 2015: 153, Table 2).

It appears, then, that many people in the village feel obliged to reciprocate this kind of gift with their vote, at least when it is substantial, even when it is a one-time transaction which is not carried out within the warmth of a problem-solving network. However, they will not admit to doing it, which indicates that it is not seen as legitimate, and legitimacy is our main concern at this point.

Why did people reciprocate these gifts with their votes? There could be at least two different motivations. For some, the reason might be that they suspected monitoring; some of them told me outright that they distrusted the secrecy of the vote, saying that ‘I don’t know how, but I think they can find out [how I vote]’.⁹ For others, they might feel a sense of obligation. I am referring here to substantial non-monetary gifts like construction materials.

My ethnographic data allow me to make the following assumption: even if the vote-buying with construction materials worked, it is different from the operation of the clientelist network. The process is different (see elements 3-15, Table 1), and so is the degree of legitimacy. I would keep the possibility open for admitting that *nativos*—those who partake of a communitarian life-world based on reciprocity—may actually feel the obligation to reciprocate this kind of vote-buying with their votes, even if it takes place outside any network of long-term obligations. Still, people would not say that this was what they did; they would not defend it as a legitimate practice, but talked about it in terms of taking the benefit and voting as they liked. The electoral statistics, however, indicated that an obligation

⁹ *Avecindada* homemaker, personal communication, 2012.

was perceived or at least obeyed, even if the practice was not felt as legitimate; this case is ambiguous.

Two concepts or one?

Should the practices of vote-buying and political clientelism be considered as two different concepts, or just one? I have assembled information about a series of elements from each of the practices, to give a compact overview of the similarities and differences between them (Table 1). I find only two elements that are identical in all three practices (if we count monetary and non-monetary vote-buying as two practices):

- The exchange takes place between actors of asymmetrical socio-economic standing.
- They all concern the exchange of favors for votes.

Table 1 about here

Even if Table 1 shows that the first two elements are identical in all three practices, already in element 2 there is also a hidden difference; favors for votes seen from the perspective of the patron/party/candidate could be merely a question of spending an amount of money in different ways, thus identical. For those who pay with their vote, on the other hand, their experience of this exchange will vary according to the way in which the favors are given. They may form part of the long-term activities of problem-solving networks, which are subsumed under the communitarian networks with all the other elements (3-13), or on the other extreme, constitute a simple one-time monetary market transaction. All these activities may be termed “favors for votes”, depending on whether we see them from the demand or the supply side. Let me elaborate:

Seen from the demand side, the elements of duration and timing (3-4) play an important part. Those who obtained benefits did so well in advance of the elections. Favors mediated through this network could be experienced as “the pure gift” (Bourdieu 1998: 161),

which, due to the long separation in time could be reciprocated with another “pure gift” at election time. This discussion feeds into Auyeros’s expression of “the double life of clientelism”: the exchange itself and the lived experience of the gift (2002: 40). Both vote-buying and political clientelism concern exchanges, but only the latter creates the lived experience of the gift. It has as much to do with the way in which the transaction is performed as with the actual gifts. The exchange of favors for political support in problem-solving networks over time is not only about the instrumental resources (economic and political), but also about expressive properties (promises of loyalty and solidarity [Auyero 2014: 116-118] and affection). Vote-buying, on the other hand, takes place only a few days before the elections; thus it would be difficult to play down its similarity with a pure market transaction. The distinction in element 11 is between moral and (delayed) market obligation.¹⁰

I have anticipated that I see legitimacy as the defining difference between political clientelism and vote-buying. Ethnographic fieldwork is uniquely suited to reveal how this legitimacy comes about. The elements 5 - 13 all describe aspects that act to subsume the activity of the problem-solving clientelist network under the communitarian practices of Acopilco, and, as such, make them legitimate. Although there are some differences between the monetary and the non-monetary vote-buying, neither of them achieves the status of being similar to the communitarian practices.

The case community, as I pointed out initially, features a series of communitarian, socio-religious and family practices. The communitarian life-world, replete with reciprocal practices, prepares the context into which the problem-solving clientelist networks blend. For instance, consider the giving away of food, which was carried out both in the clientelist and the vote-buying context. On several ritual occasions in the community, special food is served free of charge to those who turn up, either chicken with *mole*¹¹ or tacos of *carnitas*; the latter

¹⁰ Delayed, since the transaction was not carried out exactly at the voting moment.

¹¹ A spicy sauce containing up to 20 ingredients, fried and ground, then mixed into the chicken broth.

was exactly what Juan was serving on Election Day in 2012. The distribution of vegetables, on the other hand, did not resemble the communitarian ritual; here people had to line up on the pavement, fill in forms and sign for the food, which they brought home individually. The performance and its location, the way of giving, the food itself, and its consumption distinguish the food giving of the clientelist network clearly from that of the isolated market transactions of vote-buying.

It is worth noting that it was my ethnographic fieldwork, which provided me with empirical materials that describe two different practices, one legitimate, and the other not. This is why I argue for two different concepts.

Some advantages of ethnographic methodology

In the section on methodology, I presented a series of advantages that ethnographic methods offer. Here, I wish to elaborate on one cluster of the benefits of this method, which I have demonstrated in this article. It concerns issues of tacit knowledge and other data not available for scientific analysis without ethnographic methods; more specifically, it concerns those elements that address questions of legitimacy, moral universes and life-worlds, and also elements which refer to silences and local terms. These are paramount in my study.

Already from my first periods of fieldwork in the community, I noticed how most socio-religious, family and community tasks tended to be solved in networks, rather than formal organizations. The networks rested on, and created, what I have termed 'a life-world of reciprocity', described in Hagene (2007). During my work with problem-solving clientelist networks, my familiarity with communitarian networks made me notice how the latter prepared the ground for experiencing the problem-solving network as part of, or an extension of, the already densely knit communitarian networks. The clientelist network was thus legitimized as part of the community's own practices of multiple every-day and ceremonial socio-religious, family, gossip and civic networks, through which the *nativos* constantly

interacted, independently of the electoral cycle. Reciprocal interaction in networks contributed towards creating a communitarian life-world, where clientelist networks could be absorbed. The buying and selling of votes for money, however, was not part of such network practices. This contrast also produced the difference in legitimacy.

Let me underline that I gained this insight due to my ethnographic fieldwork, such as interaction and informal conversation with a considerable number of villagers over time. Surveys and structured interviews alone could not have revealed what was easily accessible through participant observation.

The fact that people used the term vote-buying in daily speech, but never talked about clientelism, for which they did not have a specific term, became apparent to me for the same reason. Political clientelism, which operated in the problem-solving network during more than one year, was not the object of gossip, even if it was not secret. This silence and lack of terms constituted a puzzle, since I knew it was taking place.

How do I know that they were not referring to the problem-solving network when they used the term “vote-buying”? Since I heard this term so often in conversation with villagers, I sometimes asked questions like, ‘Vote-buying? You know about such cases?’ hoping that they would specify. In many cases they did, telling me in different ways that “they” would secretly come to people’s homes, where they could not be observed, offering “them” money. Some would even say they had received such visits themselves, but of course not stooped to accept the money.

Often I did not even need to elicit examples. The female broker who criticized Adrian’s vote-buying before the election spoke to me again after he won in 2012: ‘He paid 1,000 pesos per vote and gave away many water tanks just days before the elections. How

cheaply the dignity of people is sold!’¹² Adrián was openly involved in problem-solving networks, but still her criticism of him did not concern this activity. Instead, she invoked the standard accusation of vote-buying in the form of giving away money and water tanks. All other complaints of vote-buying I heard about, explicitly mentioned these forms of payment. Thus, vote-buying was the term they used for both monetary gifts and substantial material ones. However, I never heard it used with reference to the help people had received in the problem-solving clientelist network.

Such information of silences and local terms was not obtainable by any other means than long-term participant observation.

Final reflections

What lessons are to be learned from my findings? At this point, I specifically want to underline two of them, summed up in two pointed, expressive aphorisms. The first is a quote from Geertz (1993) already cited above, “Ethnography is thick description”. The statement concerns the importance of discovering the meanings that practices have in the community under study, and my text demonstrates how participant observation is the method *par excellence* to reach this aim.

Meaning, of course, is tricky to unravel. Throughout this article, I have underlined the need to arrive at the meanings of what people say and do, that is, the meanings as the actors themselves perceive them. It is this requirement of the actor’s perspective, which makes it tricky. What to the researcher may seem as just different ways of exchanging “favors for votes”, has in fact turned out to be experienced as two very different practices for the actors on the demand side of the bargain: political clientelism or vote-buying. It is my contention that ethnographic fieldwork, primarily participant observation, has turned out to be a reliable,

¹² Author interview, female broker, 27 July, 2012.

or even the only, way to reach this finding. By applying this methodology, the researcher collects materials, which through a reiterative process of interpretation may render an understanding of what their meanings are in the community she studies.

The second expression is of a more humorous kind, which we may say jokingly, but which still contains an important truth, “Ethnography is the scientific study of gossip”. In my search for the meaning of the practices of clientelism and vote-buying, rumor and gossip have turned out to be extremely valuable. Obviously, they cannot tell us “what really happened”, but they were irreplaceable when trying to make sense of how the local actors evaluated the practices I was studying. It turned out that precisely rumor and gossip made it possible to understand the difference in legitimacy between the two practices. Participant observation provided the necessary material, which would not have been accessible by surveys, structured interviews or other quantitative methods.

As a final argument in favor of ethnographic approaches, let me emphasize the wonders of abductive reasoning. It allows us to discover new answers, but above all new questions, opening up for new knowledge. Ethnographic fieldwork is the obvious way to produce the material, which constitutes the fuel of abductive reasoning.

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