Microcitizenships amidst Post-Neoliberal Insecurity: The Political Articulation of Contentious Entitlements among the Middle Class in Salta, Argentina

Jesse Jonkman

Jesse Jonkman, 27, from Utrecht (the Netherlands), is a graduate who received his Bachelor’s degree in “Cultural Anthropology and non-Western Sociology” at Utrecht University in 2011. He conducted his pre-graduate fieldwork in the village of San Alfonso, Guatemala, where he studied the influence of Pentecostal theology on processes of identity construction among indigenous Guatemalans. In 2014, he completed the Research Master “Cultural Anthropology: Sociocultural Transformations”. His Master dissertation analyzed the relationship between post-neoliberal insecurity and practices of social exclusion and selfhood demarcation among the middle class in the Argentine city of Salta. His analytical expertise concerns the themes of social inequality, globalization, (post-national) citizenship, religion and nationalism. In addition to his academic experience, he has participated in two documentaries on Latin America and authored journalistic articles for a Dutch magazine on global citizenship. Email: jessehjonkman@gmail.com.

Abstract

Post-national literature continues to depict citizenship as a status that clearly distinguishes insiders from outsiders. Writing against such groupism, this paper argues that in the Argentine city of Salta, temporal, multi-scalar notions of citizenship exist in fractious encounters. Using ethnographically derived data, the paper illustrates how middle class informants invoked transnational images of civil belonging to stake their political claims on the national state. This way, the research moves beyond conventional scholarly writing that emphasizes how normative civil boundaries are constructed vis-à-vis extra-national outsiders. Instead, middle class salteños principally demarcated cosmopolitan civil identities against the national lower class. Furthermore, by sketching the transnational spatial imagery through which middle class informants rejected state politics, the paper complements Latin Americanist theory that depicts insurgent citizenship as a monopoly of the poor.

Key words: citizenship; political identity; Argentina; class; post-neoliberalism.
Introduction

‘Cristina buys votes. She gives a lot of subsidies to poor people in exchange for votes. Pure corruption! The lower class is having more and more children, because they receive 400 pesos a month for each child they have. That is our social program, to make sure people have children and do not work!’ Vicky, a civil engineer student with whom I frequently went for coffee, angrily bemoaned the current sociopolitical climate in Argentina. ‘Meanwhile, it is the middle class that is suffering’, she continued. ‘Before, our parents could send us to Miami or to Disney World Orlando. Now, we have to pay 30 percent of taxes over all our foreign expenses!’

Vicky’s laments about economic and political instability were broadly shared among the middle class in Salta, the Argentine city where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on civil identity and nationalism from September 2013 until January 2014. Since the 2007 presidential election of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Argentina has been struck by fierce monetary devaluation. Middle class salteños [inhabitants of Salta] attributed their financial instability to the protectionist measures upheld by the leftist Kirchner administration. Staring in the face of rocketing inflation, they stressed that it was their income segment that had to endure most severely the hazards of today’s economic malfunctioning, facing unfavorable tax rises that were allegedly used to pay for the subsidies of the President’s lower class electorate. Many informants used rich discourse to verbalize their concerns about the contemporary state of national democracy, economic stagnation, the impossibility to save money, and the scarce offer of white-collar jobs. Peculiarly, although through such discourse informants vented their dismay with the national state and its redistributive practices, their claims on civil entitlements were smothered within extra-national imagery, as they fell back upon the spatial imagination of Europe to communicate a cosmopolitan sense of citizenship.

Using ethnographically derived data, this thesis illustrates how middle class salteños, against a background of post-neoliberal politics, paradoxically invoked transnational civil identities of Eurocentric modernity to discursively stake their claims on the nation-state. Middle class citizens, anxious about their national positioning, employed imagined geographies of and identification with Europe as discursive tools of civil insurgency to protest the national state apparatus and its lower class electorate.
Writing against post-national academics that reduce citizenship to a right-bearing condition that clearly differentiates insiders from outsiders, I sketch how in Salta temporal, multi-scalar notions of citizenship co-exist in fractious encounters. Through emphasis on the flexible and opportunistic dispositions of civil belonging, I approach citizenship as a symbolic category that is in perpetual negotiation; an act of fractious articulation, rather than a legal or substantive status. To analytically grasp this fluxuous impetus of political engagement, I draw upon Centner’s (2012) concept of microcitizenships: contentious claims of civil entitlements that are spatio-temporally circumscribed. Microcitizenships are specific to antagonistic social classes rather than the citizenry at large. Paradoxically, although microcitizenships concern the contestation of urban space, individuals appeal to extra-urban – national and transnational – political identities to stake civil claims.

In the first section I provide a theoretical background to post-national citizenship, pin-pointing the epistemological shortcomings of static perceptions among contemporary academics. In the following parts, I outline the stirring political climate of post-neoliberal Argentina and sketch its implications for the ethnicization of civil identity. Thereafter, I explain my methodology and introduce the social context of Salta.

Then follows the empirical section, divided up into three parts. I first illustrate how middle class salteños relied upon supra-national spatial imaginations to articulate political entitlements on the nation-state. Here, I move beyond Centner’s preoccupation with the urban state, connecting microcitizenships to the discursive contestation of the national polity. Subsequently, I sketch how informants opportunistically shifted between different levels of political belonging, thereby relying upon the same notions of national sovereignty they themselves so often vociferously rejected. In the third ethnographic section, I analyze how informants, despite their occasional economic nationalism against Bolivian outsiders, principally demarcated their civil selfhood against the national lower class. This way the research complements conventional citizenship writing that merely emphasizes how normative civil boundaries and symbolic geographies are constructed vis-à-vis non-civil others. I conclude by pointing out how the civil insurgency of the Salta middle class highlights the conceptual flaw of Latin Americanist scholarship to conceive of informal citizenship as inherently restricted to marginalized classes.
Literature review: Moving beyond civil status

Numerous scholars have questioned the conventional understanding of citizenship as national political membership, because neoliberal deregulation has redefined state sovereignty in a fundamental way. In today’s era of heightened global interconnectedness, the Roussean ideal of citizenship as a social contract between the individual and the national polity has lost thorough ground, as political responsibility has become increasingly detached from the nation-state (e.g. Appadurai 2006; Bauman 2006). Alternatively, authors stress that citizenship has shifted from the nation-state to the realms of both urban and global politics.

Bosniak (2000), one of the main advocates of the post-national argument, propagates that citizenship has become denationalized. She argues that global apparatuses have acquitted the nation-state from its institutional tasks, such as the organization of formal status, the protection of civil rights and the experience of collective identity. Other writers reckon the city to be the most significant site where civil belonging is manufactured nowadays. Holston and Appadurai (2003: 297) acknowledge that ‘place remains fundamental to the problems of membership in society’, but stress that such membership is no longer synonymous with the nation-state. Instead, cities represent the locales where national and transnational alignments of citizenship come together.

Some social academics take a less radical post-national stance and disparage the scholastic tendency to dichotomize the national and the global as two separate empirical domains. They underline that the nation-state has far from withered away, but has rather gone through a process of reinvigoration. Ong (1993) demonstrates how individuals navigate global networks by seeking formal citizenship across countries. ‘Flexible’ citizens are members of different nation-states, who deploy strategies of ‘shifting symbolic positioning’ according to their economic needs (Ong 1993: 770). Likewise, Sassen (2002; 2006) examines how global processes work through reconfigured states, with the former remodeling the latter. She discerns between post-national and denationalized citizenship. The first refers to novel forms of citizenship located outside of the nation-state, while the second term denominates institutional alterations that derive from globalization but occur within the nation-state.

Although such post-national scholarship has provided substantial contributions to social and political theory, the paradigm continues to equate citizenship with an
inclusionary membership of a sovereign community, be it now on a sub- or transnational level. As Walker (1998: 198) notes: ‘With very few exceptions, notions of citizenship are still overwhelmingly tied to the concept of political community and to the idea that citizenship is something that occurs in bounded space’.

To counter such categorical enclosure, Isin (2002) calls for a citizenship of alterity which recognizes that citizens come into being through non-citizens. Instead of considering citizenship a privileged political status that distinguishes insiders from outsiders, Isin highlights how both are constitutive of citizenship. In his line of thought, Ní Mhurchú (2014) observes that political life is irreducible to bounded unitary notions of inclusion/exclusion, such as ‘local’, ‘global’, or ‘national’. Although such notions are invoked discursively in contentious encounters, in practice they co-exist in contradiction. She argues that our atemporal, sovereign paradigm of citizenship should make way for fragmented, deterritorialized conceptions of belonging, urging ‘the need to reconsider how tension and conflict [...] exist within political identity and belonging’ (Ní Mhurchú 2014: 121-122). This framework of alterity is not only helpful for explaining how non-citizens stake claims on political institutions of which they lack legal membership, as is often the case with irregular migrants (McNevin 2011: 4); it also illuminates how individuals securitize civil selfhood against those civil others with whom they share formal membership to a legal polity, as I witnessed during my fieldwork in Salta, where middle class informants projected their political anxieties on the lower class.

Hence, academic literature has gradually begun to emphasize the substantive, extra-formal assets of citizenship, meanwhile downgrading its legal underpinnings. Citizenship is increasingly equated with a ‘claim rather than a status’ (Das 2011: 320). Besides the mere study of policies and laws, social researchers progressively concentrate on the subjective reactions to these; the ‘everyday understandings of citizenship’ (Miller-Idriss 2006: 561). This active dialogue between state bureaucracy and (in)receptive citizenry is eloquently captured by Holston’s (1995) concept of insurgent citizenship. As Holston sets out, urban landscapes painfully illustrate the nation-state’s failure to deliver on its promise of legal entitlements. To mobilize for the rights that the state has omitted to grant them, marginalized groups construct extra-formal, ‘insurgent’ forms of civil life. By deploying normative conceptions of citizenship that go beyond legalistic discourse, lower class civilians defy and negotiate governmental administration.
Nevertheless, in Salta such civil insurgency also applied to middle class individuals, of whom many did not easily fit into the category of ‘marginalized’. Frictions between official state rhetoric and on-the-ground perspectives on citizenship abundantly loomed up during my research. Inclusionist rhetoric on part of the Argentine state, epitomized by the governmental slogan Argentina para todos [Argentina for everyone], fell on deaf ears among the vast majority of middle class informants, neglected as they felt by this presidential agenda.

Microcitizenships: the exclusionist aftermath of political inclusionism

Given that the bulk of citizenship authors aim their academic lenses at the Western core, political patterns in the global periphery are somewhat overlooked within scientific literature. Contrary to the deregulation framework of the traditional West, many Latin-American nation-states are governed by a post-neoliberal agenda in which state rhetoric and policy are aimed at the inclusion of the poor. Therefore, the post-national gospel sounds somewhat awkwardly when applied to Latin America, as national states are back at the forefront of political command. After the turn of the millennium, several left-orientated presidents have taken office, promising to stimulate welfare spending and bend the preceding era of pro-elite democratization (Panizza 2005, 2009; Webber and Carr 2013). In the last decade we have witnessed what is prevalently conceived of as the pink tide: a resurgence throughout South and Central America of nationalist, leftist governments that loudly speak out against neoliberalism, while upholding protectionist measures that drastically decelerate flows of capital.

The case of Argentina is exemplary. Since the economic crisis of 1998-2002, the country has been governed by the leftist presidencies of the late Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his spouse Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-present). These administrations have capitalized on the popular discontent about crude neoliberal politics – regularly perceived as the cause of the millennial economic collapse – and have propagated an agenda of human rights protections, social welfare and economic nationalism (Levitsky and Murillo 2008; Riggirozzi 2009; Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012). Although some scholars applaud the Kirchners for opposing the neoliberal model (Laclau 2011; Katz 2013), others point out that their social programs are only mildly redistributive (Robinson 2008: 292) and that an ongoing implementation of labor flexibilization is at hand (Castorina 2013: 246).
Yet, one cannot deny the presence of, to use the words of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, ‘a paradigm shift with society’ (Página 12 2011), as governmental discourse is targeted at the inclusion of impoverished Argentines. One finds it also hard to ignore that many recent state policies are strongly at odds with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Fernández de Kirchner has put strong limitations on import and has nationalized important private companies (Wylde 2011). Moreover, the IMF has officially censored Argentina, as the country’s inflation rates do not comply with international standards for measurement. Economists have calculated the annual inflation rate between 2007 and 2013 to be at least 25 percent, while national figures estimate it to be only half of this figure (The Economist 2014).

Although post-neoliberal governance in Argentina might be slightly ambiguous, its on-the ground effects are certainly not. Kirchnerist politics have generated strong domestic class tensions. Argentine post-neoliberalism, as Centner (2012) demonstrates in his study of Buenos Aires, concurs with the presence of microcitizenships, which connote fractious claims of citizenship that – in contrast to the state’s ideological inclusionism – are exclusionary and nestled within class antagonism. Microcitizenships relate to contending social groups and are communicated through the expulsion of civil others. These citizenships connote momentary claims and therefore do not acquire the atemporal deficits of an essentialist political status. Moreover, although microcitizenships refer to ‘the strategic yet flexible attachment to material space in the city’ (Centner 2012: 338), they are justified through various scales of politics. To stake claims on the urban state, citizens paradoxically attribute national and transnational models of civil belonging. Centner (2012: 346-348) for instance illustrates how desires for a safe and orderly urban scenery among the Buenos Aires middle class, arose from expectations of having certain global standards delivered. Well-off informants cloaked their desires as social rights of the developed world; a world they claimed to represent.

The Europeanness of Argentina and its middle class

Such cosmopolitanism has to be understood in the context of Argentina’s immigration history. At the end of the 19th century, modernist elites propagated the influx of European migrants, whose labor power and alleged cultural superiority were believed to be essential for the development of the young Argentine nation-state (Martinez-Sarasola 1992). Subsequently, Argentina became the second-most important destination site for European migrants during the first half of the 20th century (Germani 1966: 166). Mass
migration initiated the rise of a large European-descended middle class that filled the gap between the post-colonial elite and the non-white lower classes (Germani 1964; Rock 1985; Svampa 1993). Before the hyperinflation of 1989, the middle class amounted for 70 percent of the Argentine population (Minujin and Kessler 1995).

Yet, at the end of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s the middle class declined sharply due to rocketing inflation, which eventually accumulated in the Argentine millennial crisis. Various ethnographies on the crisis (Joseph 2000; Guano 2003a, 2003b, 2004) emphasize how middle class Argentines, facing downward socioeconomic mobility, securitized their social positioning through the ethnicization of civil status. In the wake of class degradation, they retrieved to the identification with Europe ancestry and the racial stigmatization of the mestizo poor, in order to discard local governance and emphasize their social enhancement over the national lower class. The turbulent decade of the nineties encompassed a ‘change in the rules of ethnic visibility in Argentina’, as Grimson (2006: 1) puts forward; ‘a growing hypervisibilization of differences’.

Similarly, in today’s Kirchnerist epoch of political uncertainty and economic turmoil, normative claims of transnational citizenship are utilized to make demands on the local state. Such demands do not merely concern social struggles for urban space, as in Centner’s study, but also apply to the symbolic contestation of national politics. Lederman (2013) delineates how middle class individuals in Buenos Aires fund their civil critique by ‘a type of transnational citizenship based on their identification with more privileged locals and the norms of public space seen as defining these imagined geographies’ (Lederman 2013: 23). His fieldwork informants explained away their civil entitlements through an emphasis on global rights which they, as possessors of a Eurocentric global modernity, should enjoy.

Putting transnational civil identity at the heart of my dissertation thesis, I have analyzed how the imagination of extra-national space functions as a discursive instrument of civil criticism in Salta. The three pillars of microcitizenships – multi-scalar belonging, temporality and class contention – were part and parcel of the civil narratives of middle class informants.
Research setting and methodology

Whereas post-national literature mainly focuses on metropolitan capitals, I have studied how microcitizenships are articulated in Salta. This peripheral city experiences post-neoliberal insecurity profoundly, being economically and geographically isolated from Argentina’s legislative centre Buenos Aires. Salta – as the rest of northern Argentina – occupies an economically marginal position within the Argentine landscape. This was reflected in what informants perceived to be an undersized middle class vis-à-vis the Argentine south. This marginality simultaneously provided them with an explanation for why Salta is a political stronghold for the Kirchnerist party, as its leftist policies particularly gain popularity among low income segments. Moreover, due to its proximity to the border, Salta is home to many Bolivian immigrants, hosting around ten percent of Argentina’s Bolivian population (Cerrutti 2009: 14, 21).

Salta counts an estimated 600 thousand inhabitants. This number is mainly accumulated through the many localities that are located at the outskirts of its metropolitan zone. While within a global city such as Buenos Aires socioeconomic segregation is overtly represented by physically secluded neighborhoods, in modest Salta social collision is inevitable, since class geographies strongly overlap. However, one cannot bypass a classed spatial identification and the majority of my research activities took place within sites that were identified as ‘middle class’, such as the city centre, Salta’s two universities and the neighborhood of Tres Cerritos. Many informants lived in Tres Cerritos, which due to the white-collar background of its inhabitants and its privilege of hosting Salta’s only luxury shopping mall, was popularly depicted as ‘middle class’ or – less frequently – ‘upper-middle class’.

Although many citizenship theorists adopt top-down approaches, I have applied ethnographic research to understand how citizenship is used as an idiom in everyday practices through which people negotiate it. To comprehend the versatile and fragmented discourses through which middle class salteños claimed citizenship, I employed anthropological fieldwork methods such as open and semi-structured interviewing, participant observation, life-history interviews and focus group sessions. Applying a subjectivist approach to class, I demarcated my research population on the basis of self-identification. Furthermore, I make use of pseudonyms in order to guarantee the anonymity of my research participants.
The paper is the result of four-and-a-half months of fieldwork in which I interviewed more than 60 middle class informants, the majority on multiple occasions. To gain a broad perspective of middle class attitudes, there was no overrepresentation in terms of sex nor age. Informants included university students, white-collar workers – principally high school teachers, entrepreneurs and lawyers – and retirees and ages ranged from 23 until 75. Finally, university students amounted for at least one third of the interviewees, since establishing contact with young adults appeared to be relatively easy in comparison with other age segments. The large presence of students also supplied interesting ethnographic insights on citizenship, since these young salteños found themselves at the threshold of a white-collar career, while the prolonged economic crisis obstructed their vertical mobility.

The civil paradox of the Salta middle class: a transnationalist response to the nation-state

A decade of Kirchnerist rule has left its marks on the middle class in Salta. Taxes on middle class incomes have increased and protectionist restrictions have made it exceedingly more expensive to purchase foreign currency and luxury items. Scarce were those informants that did not express anxiety when discussing Argentina’s perpetual rotation of economic and political arrangements. Depending on their own life projects, informants accentuated particular aspects of what they saw as a lack of vision of the current government. Flavia, an experienced lawyer, was approaching her upcoming retirement with a strong dose of skepticism: ‘It is all very insecure. Our economy is in ruins. So when it goes worse, you just know they will cut in the retirement funds. The money that you have earned, they just take it away from you!’ The geology student Marcelo worried about his future job prospects: ‘Right now because of the restrictions on exportation … I mean importation … you know, the customs, the dollar, they have robbed me of work opportunities. Companies do not come here anymore. So yes, I do worry about the moment when I am done studying.’

Anxious about the impoverished state of the national economy and the durability of their own class positions, most informants vented their criticism on the contemporary government through arguments of cosmopolitanism. They contrasted the precarious state of the Argentine economy with Western democracies, veiling the latter within a mystique of modernity and political advancement. The following comments by Virginia, a interior design student who was in the possession of an Italian passport, are illustrative:
I am done with Argentina. The lack of safety, the politics. In our public university you have to sit on the floor because there are not enough seats. Or the roof is leaking. This government is a disaster. I think I fit better in Europe. I have never been there, but when I hear the stories from my sister about how orderly you take care of things. We had a very open-minded upbringing. I think that our family is more like Europeans than like the people over here.

Through the discursive invocation of representations of Europe, informants constructed a sense of First World belonging. Such rhetoric served as a counter-image of political normalcy to the current state of Argentine upheaval. By evoking utopian portrayals of Europe, informants expressed ideas on how a modern state should look after its citizens and exposed Argentina’s alleged state of authoritarianism. The safety, tranquility and economic stability of European countries – where many informants held secondary citizenship and some even have relatives – were treated as universal civil properties; global rights that any government of merit should grant to its citizens. Through the accentuation of their own European heritage and modern lifestyles, informants marked their symbolic linkages with these extra-national locales, thereby pronouncing their ownership of these global rights. They articulated cosmopolitan civil identities that intrinsically entitled them to the privileges of First World politics. Thus, ironically, although informants were preoccupied with the redistribution of national wealth, they marked their social distance from Argentina and adhered to transnational civil imagery to stake claims on the local state.

Middle class salteños stressed that they were the ones being tossed around and excluded under the governmental umbrella of nationalist inclusionism. Like many other young salteños, the economics student Hernán thought about migrating to Europe:

Our financial devaluation is tremendous. What strikes me most is that our government denies it. They say that we have an inflation rate of 1,1 percent. But if a pack of citric costs 40 pesos, and one month later 48 pesos, how can that be an inflation rate of 1 percent? The IMF does not even trust our government anymore. It worries me to live here. In Argentina they do not care about education. I see my future elsewhere. Spain I guess. My grandparents came from Spain. In Spain they do respect education. When you finish university, you immediately have a job. That is what our government is lacking.

As the machines of political change were running at ramming speed, middle class salteños hastily looked for anchor points of social stability. They juxtaposed Argentina’s controversial restrictive politics with the ontological superiority of international institutions and transnational entities, such as the IMF, commercial multinationals and European
nation-states. Informants exalted their own education and European descent to symbolically align themselves to such extra-national structures and legitimize their criticism on local governance. Such multi-scalarism encapsulates the fractious nature of political claims in post-neoliberal Argentina, eloquently captured by Centner’s rubric of *microcitizenships*. This concept starts from the presumption that citizens appeal to various scales of political community to stake claims on the local state. However, whereas the urban municipality is the primary jurisdictional force in Centner’s study of Buenos Aires, in the peripheral, smaller stage of Salta civil claims were primarily directed at the level of the national state. Middle class individuals appealed to extra-national nodes of territorial belonging to heighten the deprived state of national – rather than urban – citizenship.

Informants often complained about the lack of foreign capital and consumer goods that were flowing into the country, portraying the current government as a populist roadblock on the path of Western civilization. While we were having coffee in Salta’s ultramodern shopping mall, Facundo, an accountant in his forties, elaborated the following:

A couple of months ago I wanted to bring in a computer from the United States. It took me three months to get it past customs! I do not like their restrictions. When we are abroad they charge us 30 percent over all our purchases! So we purchase dollars illegally. More and more they are restricting our liberties. This is why in Argentina, a lot us are not proud of being called Argentines anymore. I identify strongly with Europe. Look at this shopping mall. Who do you think are the owners of these shops? Spanish, French, Italians. Regrettably, the *criollo* [romantic term for rural Argentines] idiosyncrasy is different. You will never see a criollo open a shop.

For Facundo, the shopping mall represented a cosmopolitan space that transcended local culture. He embraced this locus of Western consumerism as a global island within a sea of ‘criollo idiosyncrasy’. Facundo’s defiance to autochthony lays bare the regionalist biases within post-national citizenship literature and draws attention to the academic limitations of the study of the Global South. Many authors writing on citizenship emphasize that the current epoch of postmodernity enhances economic and ethnic nationalism. Neoliberal processes of privatization and deregulation ignite a collective sense of social insecurity, which concurs with communitarian desires for exclusionist nationalism and protectionist policies (Bauman 2006; Brubaker 2011; Hart 2012). In post-neoliberal Salta, an inverted logic occurred. Localism was not just the response to economic insecurity but rather perceived as its cause. Equally, civil identity, rather than being immersed within
nationalist rhetoric, was primarily sought through the identification with transnational society.

**Temporal flexibility: juggling civil belonging**

The reinforcement of global identity notwithstanding, middle class salteños occasionally resorted to primordial rhetoric aimed at non-nationals. Often I heard the fierce complaint that tax money extracted from middle class incomes went straight to the pockets of Bolivians – by far the city’s largest migrant group – who like all non-nationals in Argentina were eligible to make costless use of public education and healthcare. The ambiguous legal status of these migrants formed a tangible challenge to informants’ ideals of the nation-state. They represented the fact that the government did not look after its own middle class, but held the interests of non-nationals in higher esteem. This ambiguity converted Bolivians into the lightning rods of today’s institutional fragility. In the words of Ezequiel, in his sixties and chairman of the local polo club:

> We have the responsibility to look after our own people. You cannot do that if you look after others. Public health care is free over here. What happens: they take care of a Bolivian and cannot take care of me. Look, this club has two hundred members. I have to look after the benefits of its members. I cannot do that if I start taking care of the benefits of outsiders.

When I confronted informants with their selective transnationalism, they seemed perplexed with my ingenuity. Although informants saw Argentina as an immigration country, many clung onto a vertical taxonomy of migrants, thereby reinstating the cultural inferiority of Bolivians. Javier, a company executive of Greek descent, summed this up to me:

> The Europeans who came here brought a higher level of culture and education than the Bolivians. That is why the Bolivian is not accepted in Argentina. Integration will be a difficult thing, because these are two completely different cultures. The Argentine does not want to feel Bolivian. He wants to feel European.

Being the unwanted guests at the Argentine party, Bolivians functioned as an outlet to dump frustrations about national inflation, as their extra-legal status personified the failure of national governance. Furthermore, their alleged ethnic inferiority converted them into the concrete embodiment of Argentina’s eroded Western modernity. Bolivians symbolized the Third World status that middle class salteños so eagerly wished to distance
themselves from. By coating national citizenship with European lining, middle class residents retrieved to the same notions of national sovereignty which they at other times so fiercely refuted in their rejection of governmental protectionism.

This illustrates the temporal plasticity of microcitizenships, where ‘everything is flexible in these processes of staking claims’ (Centner 2012: 356). Informants switched opportunistically between transnational and national political belonging according to the situation at hand. Which scale of citizenship was picked depended on the stakes involved for the person that was picking. Civil belonging is malleable according to the way it fits one’s narrative of civil superiority. However, as I will sketch in the following section, although civil conscience was constructed in opposition to non-nationals, it primarily arose through the dehumanization of fellow legal citizens.

**Class adversity: civil insurgency gone awry**

In spite of the xenophobic attitudes towards migrants newcomers, it was the Argentine lower class that was classified as the principal culprit of today’s brutal omission of political stability. Middle class fingers of blame were generally pointed downwards, as the Argentine poor were believed to be the main benefactor of the current state of economic uprootedness. A common understanding reigned that the lower class was engaged in a clientelist relationship with the government. Lower class citizens had voted the Kirchner administration into power, profiting from its subsidy programs and thereby extracting money from quickly shrinking middle class pockets.

During Kirchnerist rule, social spending on family assignations has drastically increased and unemployed parents receive a monthly allowance to cover for the living expenses of their children. Informant frustrations arising from this subsidy program were aptly summarized by Virginia:

> I remember that when they started with these family assignations, we found it extremely difficult to find a housekeeper. Because who wants to work if she can just sit at home, while scratching herself and receiving money? That is why they continue to live in their mediocrity. They use drugs, they steal around, and they remain poor. And that’s why they keep voting for her.

Many informants highlighted the perceived climate of laziness that was generated by governmental subsidies. Such condemnation arrived at its boiling point when discussing the collective lootings that took place in Salta in December 2013. As a consequence of
massive police strikes, groups of looters had seized the momentum of temporal impunity to target local shops and obtain material bounty. I was struck by the importance informants placed on the low work ethic of the Argentine poor to explain for the riots. When I was contemplating the ravages in the city centre with Damián, a civil engineering student, I was surprised to note the fury with which he criticized the city’s villeros [slum dwellers]: ‘[The lootings] make me mad! These negros de mierda [shit blacks]. It is disgusting. But Argentines are like this. Because of this government, people want to get things for free. In any First World country people would be happy to receive a subsidy. Here they think it is normal.’

Such rhetoric mirrored that the economic gates that had separated informants’ advanced class positions from those below them were slowly but surely opening up. As Virginia’s father Pedro urged me during a family dinner: ‘Look Jesse, with this inflation, the gap between the rich and poor is only getting bigger, with us, the ones in the middle, going down. And all this because we have a culture of raising your hand and receiving everything from the state!’ To defend themselves against such class trespassing, middle class salteños embarked upon the stigmatization of the urban poor. They crystallized their civil superiority by cementing it with essentialist arguments. By placing emphasis on the European heredity of the Argentine nation, informants placed themselves at the forefront of that same nation. They often quoted the popular dictum ‘the Argentines descend from ships’, exclaiming their innate enhancement over the mestizo lower class. Facundo for instance complained:

It is more and more difficult to stay in the middle class. I speak from my own experience. If it continues like this, in twenty years from now there will be just upper and lower class. It is because of the subsidies. Argentines do not want to work. This country has not been made by Argentines, but by Europeans.

Microcitizenships are imbued with civil antagonism; they are “particularized relationships that are staked out between specific groups” (Centner 2012: 355). Rather than an opaque plea for universal civil rights, middle class’ claims on the local state were at the same time shout-outs to impede the rights of civil peers. Assertions of rights – to a fairer income distribution, to democratic governance, to travel freely and without additional taxes – coincided with appeals to mitigate the subsidy programs that were benefiting lower class citizens. Such class polarization exceeds citizenship literature that stresses how during social and economic crises citizens re-emphasize the national civil community by fencing it off from ethnic others (Wimmer 2002; Bauman 2006). In contrast, among the Salta middle
class, economic turbulence had ignited a search for transnational civil identities in which sparse space was made for fellow nationals that did not fit images of cosmopolitan selfhood.

This class-specific political discourse also shines a new light on informal citizenship. Latin Americanist literature has repeatedly demonstrated how marginal groups rely upon informal political belonging to act against or outside of a neglecting nation-state. Socioeconomically underprivileged actors aim for political engagement beyond legal understanding to seek what their state denies them. Such insurgent citizenship, to coin Holston’s (1995) term, takes many shapes. It depicts the service provisions of illegal organizations that copy the protective function of the state (Sanjuán 1997; Koonings and Kruijt 2007), but also refers to normative citizenship notions that counter national policy by echoing a supranational human rights discourse (Nash 2001; Lederman 2013). In Salta, however, civil insurgency seemed to have gone awry. Insurgent citizenship transgressed the marginal classes as extra-formal perceptions of citizenship were far from restricted to the urban poor. In the wake of political uncertainty, middle class salteños stressed political belonging outside of the nation-state. Whether it concerned the illegal purchase of dollars to avoid protectionists taxes, the off-shoring of private capital to European bank accounts, or the mere condemnation of the Argentine presidency and its lower class electorate, informants re-instilled a transnational civil imagery of First World membership to validate their political protest and extra-legal activities.

Conclusion

Approaching citizenship as a meaningful, fractious idiom in practice, this paper illuminates how political belonging in post-neoliberal Argentina takes contradictory and multifaceted forms. In line with Centner’s concept of microcitizenships, the paper outlines how the Salta middle class invoked multi-scalar and temporal civil imaginations that were immersed within class antipathy.

Due to political dissipation, middle class salteños experienced profound socioeconomic insecurity. While catching breath amidst economic disruptiveness, they tightly put their fingernails into narratives of cosmopolitan citizenship which stressed European heritage and First World membership. By comparing the porous state of Argentine governance with Western democracies, they underlined their symbolic proximity to global levels of political community. Thus, paradoxically, through such transnationalism,
they claimed their political entitlements on the local nation-state. Nonetheless, political identification is never devoid of temporal negotiation and middle class salteños navigated citizenship narratives opportunistically. When asked about the recent influx of Bolivian immigrants, middle class salteños defended their rights to privileged state access in terms of national identity, in spite of their own proclaimed disembeddedness from the national polity.

In tandem with this nexus of multi-scalarism and temporality, microcitzenships are highly class-contentious. Facing the diminishment of economic advantages, middle class salteños inflicted their political anxieties upon the Argentine poor. Class frontiers were crumbling down and lesser-off Argentines threatened to pull the middle class from its safeguarded seat of excellence. Lower class citizens were the logical scapegoats for the usurpation of tax money, as they profited from social spending and formed the principal electoral base of the government. Not surprisingly thus, the middle class’ quest for political advancement occurred in dialectic analogue with pleas to restrict state funding of lower class social programs. This is an inversion of the exclusionist nationalism that is the subject of the bulk of citizenship studies. Whereas many authors examine the relationship between economic uncertainty and nationalist xenophobia towards non-citizens, the Salta middle class rather responded to economic uncertainty through a transnational exclusionism that was casted down upon fellow nationals.

This gloomy observation invites us once-more to embrace ethnographic understandings of citizenship, since legalistic approaches often fall short to on-the-ground dynamics of political action. Yet, besides being wary not to simplify civil belonging as merely a legal condition, it neither suffices to portray substantive citizenship as a dichotomous status-scheme of the have’s and the have-not’s, wherein civil insurgency is treated as a monopoly of the lower class. The current pink tide of Latin American politics hosts a proliferation of informal civil engagements that tarnish the scholastic tendency to equate normative insurgency with economically marginalized citizens. Students confronting state politics in Venezuela, middle class Brazilians protesting international sports events, regionalist separatism in the prosperous Bolivian region of Santa Cruz; we have seen an emergence of social groups and political actors that do not comply with traditional Latin Americanist images of insurgent citizenship.

In sum, I applaud scholars to pay attention to those moments of friction when civil dichotomies are crossed and contested. This focus on alterity should debunk the rigid
interpretation of citizenship as a binary opposition of those possessing and those lacking political membership, albeit legally or substantively.
References


