

Activists and philanthropists: understanding the political habitus of Salvadorans in the D.C. Metro area

Karen Tejada

Abstract

Drawing on Bourdieu's work related to habitus and field, this study examines the organizing practices of 45 Salvadoran actors in the D.C. metro area-comparing seasoned activists involved in nonprofit work with philanthropic volunteers managing hometown associations. I assess how homeland and hostland contexts shape organizers, leading them to display a dynamic and flexible political habitus. I find seasoned activists' critical political habitus helps them contest an anti-immigrant climate while philanthropic volunteers maintain a neutral political habitus to collaborate with the Salvadoran government. This case study contributes to discussions of immigrant organizing work, in particular diasporic politics, as well as, bridges work on Salvadorans with social movement theory related to habitus and fields.

Keywords: diasporic politics; Salvadorans; transnationalism; habitus; Washington D.C.; qualitative; social movements

Introduction

I've been an activist all my life because my mother was an activist and my father was a union organizer so I grew up knowing about unions and ecclesiastical communities. I remember that my generation, it was 1975, we were very aware of the situation and understood social class differences. We knew exploitation and misery should not exist and it was our job to fight against these things. I was a catechist and talked to the kids in a very revolutionary way and told them that because our people needed us we had to be committed to the cause. Then, in college, I joined the Student Revolutionary Movement and I had less time to volunteer in the church. I remember these experiences because I was totally involved. We would do creative flyers, host cultural and political events, and just try to talk to people. We had to work very hard and from what I recall, I have always been an activist [Dora, Seasoned Activist]

I wouldn't consider myself an activist but rather a community guide of sorts because I simply want to see my community in El Salvador progress, so I try to help out in as much as I can [Lucio, Philanthropic Volunteer]

During 2007-2008, I embarked on a research project to examine the political beliefs and practices of Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area. While I recall my

own experience living in a leftist-oriented Salvadoran household and understanding the roots of the civil war as well as its effects, I was expecting to hear some of these stories in the people I interviewed. However, to my surprise, I found Salvadoran organizers differ in very important ways as highlighted by the narratives above—specifically seasoned activists, like Dora, have a long trajectory of activism, encapsulating a span of twenty years in El Salvador and the U.S., and currently work in nonprofits whereas philanthropic volunteers, like Lucio, entered the organizational scene during the peace treaty (which ended El Salvador's civil war) and joined hometown associations to do charity-driven work in El Salvador. To my knowledge, no one has examined the different types of political actors within Salvadoran communities in general, and specifically in D.C. The purpose of this study is to capture the nuanced political ethos taking place across a group of organizers.

The case study is appropriate since Salvadorans have a longstanding political history in both their homeland and hostland, helping them develop the know-how to engage in organizing work while making sense of governing power structures. To analyze how their diasporic politics¹ takes place, I conceptualize Salvadorans' organizing experience through the lens of political habitus, a reformulation of Bourdieu's theory of habitus (1977). Whereas Bourdieu (1977) employs the term to explain how individuals become accustomed to acting in ways that confirm and change their natural environment and is especially concerned with capturing social class distinctions, my concept of political habitus explores *the dispositions, thoughts, and actions that influence the political choices of an actor and come to underlie the political ethos that a change-agent uses*. This reformulation grasps how Salvadoran agents embody community-based work that is taking place in a transnational terrain.

The theory of habitus has already been proven a useful concept in explaining social practice since it emphasizes that "we make ourselves in particular ways, in response to the conditions we find ourselves in" (Crossley 2002:172). Indeed, habitus captures individuals in a wide-ranging way—as both agents and subjects of 'fields' of power. While the use of habitus and fields in social movement work is not new (see Landy 2015; Crossley 2004; Crossley 1999, 2003), a contribution of this article is that it highlights how and why political habitus operates in a transnational political field, or a field of struggle situated across a transnational space. Such a terrain becomes apparent by comparing the political habitus of both Salvadoran seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers because each has a unique genealogy affecting how they work. Specifically, seasoned activists sustain, I argue, a 'critical' political habitus to focus on immigrants' rights and distance themselves from their homeland government whereas philanthropic volunteers proclaim a 'neutral' political habitus to do development-based work in El Salvador and cooperate with Salvadoran government officials. In short, I suggest Salvadorans' diasporic politics can be analyzed by exploring actors' political habitus.

¹ Hallett and Baker-Cristales (2010) analyze the attempts of Salvadoran in Los Angeles to gain voting rights in El Salvador and conceptualize this experience as 'diasporic suffrage.'

Habitus and fields

Nick Crossley (1999, 2002, 2003) applies habitus to social movement work, extending Bourdieu's (1977) concept to one that is transformative, that is, habitus can alter social movements as much as change the actors involved in them. In its original formulation, Bourdieu defines habitus as "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (1977:82-83), and with habitus he is proposing a useful way to bridge agency and structure. Yet, Bourdieu's (1977) habitus remains rooted in reproducing individual conditioning rather than accounting for habitus as a flexible process. As McNay (1999) suggests, habitus can be used creatively to examine individuals and their world. For this reason, it is helpful to draw from scholars who have argued that habitus, in both its theory and method, can be expanded (see Walter 1990; Sallaz 2010, Askland 2007).² Crossley (2002) models this in his work on the user movement in Great Britain, pointing to a "radical habitus" moving longstanding activists to form a patient's movement to counter the hegemony of the mental health field. Although I find Crossley's (2002) approach valuable in describing seasoned activists who are predisposed to carry a "radical habitus" committed to social justice; however, I argue that the ways in which seasoned activist put their habitus to practice is an outcome of the field in which they operate, in some instances, their "radical habitus" is attenuated in the hostland to fulfill a goal. Moreover, "radical habitus" is specific to left-leaning activists, those who have been radicalized, while neglecting other actors that are part of a broader social movement (Landy 2015). A case in point are philanthropic volunteers who do not exhibit a "radical habitus" since they prefer to remain "politically neutral" to strategize with the Salvadoran government. In order to generate a theory of habitus that encapsulates both sets of Salvadoran actors and captures the field in which their habitus operates, the concept of political habitus works well because it suggests the path to political action is structured by past and present organizing experiences as well as by field dynamics. In short, political habitus encapsulates the diasporic politics of Salvadorans, paying particular attention to how it functions in the transnational political field.

Though habitus operates in connection to specific fields, Fligstein and McAdam note "[t]he Bourdieusian conception of field thus focuses mostly on individuals gaining position and power and not on collective actors who work to build and then hold their groups together in the face of struggle in a broader field" (2011:20). Indeed, Fligstein and McAdam (2011) push us to think of fields as strategic sites where position-taking happens while Crossley notes: "[m]oreover, different fields, like different games, require different skills, dispositions and resources from their participants. In this way they both shape habitus and elicit and constrain the actions which issue forth from them" (1999:650). Since I show how seasoned activist and philanthropic volunteers embody a political habitus

² These authors expand the use of habitus in their work by suggesting new ways of framing it – drawing from their specific case studies – while also showing how habitus can be empirically studied.

that carries specific ways of thinking, acting and interacting so that their practical actions make sense for the field they maneuver, I conceive of this field as a transnational one—this identifies the imaginary of both sets of actors who remain preoccupied with the homeland but attend to organizing work in the hostland. In the next section, I provide an overview of how this transnational political field is comprised of U.S.-El Salvador relations and diasporic organizational life while paying attention to my field site, the Washington D.C. metro area.

Background

The first significant wave of Salvadorans to the U.S. began in the early eighties as a consequence of El Salvador's twelve-year civil war (1980-1992). The roots of the civil war are too complex to explore here but essentially an armed conflict between a military government (backed by the financial support of the U.S.) and a guerrilla group known as, The Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación Nacional (FMLN), led to a escalated violence that included the political persecution of individuals that were either "suspicious" of aligning with the FMLN and/or being subversives against the government. Upon entering the U.S., Salvadorans did not qualify for refugee rights—fueled by concerns of Communism in Latin America, Mahler (2000) suggests the U.S. took this stance so it could free itself from the responsibility of supporting and funding a regime that was committing violence against its own people and strategically deny its role in creating the mass migration. Since Salvadorans did not qualify for protections conferred under U.S. refugee policy and were subject to deportation, even when repressive conditions in El Salvador escalated, Salvadorans engaged in transnational social movements.

To enact changes in the homeland and hostland, early activists joined solidarity and sanctuary movements, which sought to: stop human rights abuses by the Salvadoran authorities, halt military aid to El Salvador, advocate for a peace treaty, and fight for legal aid for Salvadoran refugees migrating to the U.S. (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). Altogether, Salvadorans' prior organizing experience in their homeland, ability to capitalize on local and transnational networks in the hostland, and overall know-how (or what Salvadorans call "chispa") helped them develop an organizational structure that included nonprofits working towards Salvadoran causes and sub-committees organized to support the FMLN. Today, these existing nonprofits have sought to eliminate electoral fraud in recent Salvadoran elections, extend voting rights to emigrants and support immigrant rights.

In 1992, El Salvador signed a peace agreement, leading to several changes both in the homeland and hostland. In El Salvador, the FMLN became an official political party and for the next four presidential elections (until 2009), it fought to gain control of the presidential seat. Similarly, the economic needs of the country pushed it to rely heavily on migrant remittances, allowing for intense out-reaching of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) government towards

expatriate communities. Consequently, the organizational structure in the hostland expanded to incorporate hometown associations, which are considered "agents of development" (Somerville, Durana and Terrazas 2008:10) because they send collective remittances³ to their country of origin and often work with their homeland's national and local governments to implement projects. Indeed, as a result of this expanding organizational work taking place across the transnational space, the Salvadoran diaspora, or what Hallett and Baker-Cristales refer to as "a population of displaced people whose residency outside the national territory is due to factors beyond their control" (2010:190), is uniquely positioned to compare the types of organizers and their political experiences.

Washington, D.C. metro area is an excellent site to examine how the transnational political field affects organizers. Apart from its sizeable Salvadoran population, there is a long history of community-based work. According to Benitez:

The Salvadoran community in the Washington, D.C. area has potentialities, unique characteristics, accumulated experience, and a new generation of young leaders to engender new local and transnational forms of sociocultural expressions and grassroots political processes and practices in the transnational social space (2005:160).

Yet, Salvadorans in D.C. remain unexamined for several reasons. Salvadorans in L.A. tend to have a stronger organizational base thanks in part to the longstanding organizing experience of the migrant arrivals and vibrant FMLN presence in the early migration years. In contrast, those migrating to D.C. did so before the civil war and were generally suspicious of the FMLN. Landolt (2008) finds the D.C. area is less cohesive and more fragmented than its L.A. counterpart because of several issues related to a) divisions in partisan politics b) opposing personalities and interests and c) competition over individualized projects. Yet, I argue that these nuances need to be reexamined. By unpacking actors' habitus and organizing practices in the post-civil war context—one that for twenty-five years (up until the 2009 FMLN presidential win) has been dominated by the right-wing party, ARENA⁴—one gains a better sense of how Salvadorans in D.C. build their political habitus to navigate the transnational political field.

³ Itzigsohn and Villacres (2008) claim that collective remittances are remittances that are collected by migrant organizations to develop and implement local projects in the hometown.

⁴ Wolf remarks that ARENA embarked on electoral authoritarianism to remain in power in the postwar period. She says, "[u]ncommitted to democratic consolidation, successive ARENA administrations maintained an institutional façade of democracy to reproduce authoritarian governance and defend elite interests" (2009:429).

Methodology

This research draws on in-depth, semi-structured and open-ended interviews of 45 individuals whom I interviewed between 2007 and 2008. I initially entered the field site as a volunteer in a nonprofit and made contact with several gatekeepers to access key "names," establish rapport and trust, and gain a sense of the organizational landscape. This eventually allowed me to recruit (through snowball sampling) a host of Salvadoran actors whom I interviewed in their homes or in public settings (such as coffee shops or restaurants). The interviews lasted one hour (on average) and I asked a set of exploratory questions to uncover their migration story, the role of the civil war in their lives, and their organizational involvement in El Salvador and the U.S. In these interviews, the participants were also asked about the role of the Salvadoran and U.S. governments in the internal structure of their organization and to compare organizations in the area (e.g., similarities and differences). Similarly, participants were asked to relate some successes as well as challenges in doing organizational work. While interviews limit one's ability to trace an activists' path and/or movement work in ways that other methodologies can address (see Crossley 1999), they are useful in uncovering the social context and practices as these are taking place. In effect, scholars exploring habitus (see Asklund 2007; Sallaz 2010) used interviews to operationalize it in their case studies, particularly since Bourdieu (1977) did not provide ways to measure his concept. In this work, interviews helped uncover 'habitus-in-process,' allowing participants to tell 'their story' and in doing so, reaffirming how they 'play the game' as a diasporic community.

Using Nvivo software, I was able to code, memo and analyze the transcriptions (which I translated from Spanish to English). The data were organized around common themes such as migration histories, the type of organizing work, relationship with the U.S. and Salvadoran governments, motivations for organizing and challenges in organizing. I categorized the political actors based on their different community organizing experiences. Finally, to crosscheck the data, I referred to newspaper sources and relied on my field notes.

Although this is part of a larger project (in which I examine seasoned activists, philanthropic volunteers and critical observers), in this article I analyze seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers. Seasoned activists (n=25) belong to several community-based nonprofit organizations seeking to alleviate some of the social ills recent immigrants encounter in the metro D.C. area. These nonprofits either have a longstanding presence in the community and advocate on behalf of immigrants on various issues (for example, extending temporary protected status so Salvadorans have a temporary work permit, obtaining driver licenses for undocumented immigrants, opposing raids and the separation of families, and lobbying for immigration reform) or focus on a specific issue related to housing, legal matters or health care. Philanthropic volunteers (n=20) participate in hometown associations (HTAs). Some are members of the umbrella HTA, which oversees the work of other hometown associations, while others work for the HTA that assists their town in El Salvador. Relative to non-

profits, HTAs are smaller-scale associations but are well-known in the area for raising money to embark on development projects in El Salvador.

Although seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers navigate different organizational circles, compared to the general Salvadoran population in the area, these actors exhibit more privileged characteristics. Seasoned activists are well-educated; nineteen had acquired professional degrees in the U.S. while the rest took basic level English classes. Additionally, twenty seasoned activists had a high school degree from El Salvador. The majority of seasoned activists worked as professionals or in the nonprofit sector and reported earnings of \$50,000 or more. On average, seasoned activists had been residents in the metro D.C. area for 20 years. Their median age was 45. Fourteen were married, seven were single, and four were divorced. Nineteen participants were men and six were women. Philanthropic volunteers have a median age of 47. Seventeen participants described themselves as entrepreneurs while three worked in media relations. Eight had university training in El Salvador but many of them did not finish their college degree. The rest obtained a high school degree in El Salvador while four of them did not graduate from high school. Five attended community college in the U.S. and six took basic level English classes. Five of the participants earned less than \$50,000 while the rest earned more than \$100,000. On average, philanthropic volunteers had been residents in the metro area for 22 years. Fifteen were married, three were single, and two were divorced. Sixteen participants were men and four were women.

My sample is limited to only assessing the experience of "community brokers." This is a limitation of most immigrant organizing studies (see Chung 2005; Bloemraad 2005) in general and habitus work (Crossley 2004; Walter 1990) in particular. Yet, as McLeod (2005) argues in his study of the Brothers and Hallways Hangers, "...there are intermediate factors at work that, as constitutive of the habitus, shape the subjective responses of the two groups of boys and produce quite different expectations and actions"(2005:141). As such, I argue that although legal and class positions privilege these community brokers, there are mediating conditions causing divergent political paths and contributing to different forms of building political habitus. Additionally, while these actors are now privileged, they certainly did not start off that way; particularly, seasoned activists' longstanding involvement occurred irrespective of their social class and legal status and under clandestine conditions (Perla and Coutin 2009). Indeed, seasoned activists' and philanthropic volunteers' ability to achieve social mobility and legal status shows their incorporation in the U.S. But, to explain their trajectory as activists one must examine how they build their political habitus.

From contentious to "We are all immigrants:" seasoned activists' evolving political habitus

Seasoned activists entered the U.S. with a "radical habitus" in place as many had prior experience coordinating protests, marches, vigils, hunger strikes and boycotts during a time when the Salvadoran government prohibited these activities.

In the following account, Dario relates his reason for leaving El Salvador:

It might sound like an exaggeration but sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night when I hear a strange noise and think that someone is going to abduct me because let me tell you I lived near places where people would get killed, tortured, kidnapped and you'd never see them again. Of course, the bombings wouldn't let you sleep at night. All this makes it difficult for you to not see the government as your enemy. You become conscientious of the injustices they are creating [Dario]

Fearing for his life (apart from Dario, five seasoned activists were tortured and barely managed to escape the country), Dario migrated to the U.S. and became involved in solidarity work because he "became conscientious of the injustices." In the following narrative, Ricky described his early involvement:

I almost got killed in 1977 when I was protesting electoral fraud in el Parque de la Libertad. I started to think that if I couldn't exercise my right to free speech there probably was no other alternative than to engage in war...but in order to escape being imprisoned, I had to migrate to the U.S. [Ricky]

Ricky engaged in protest work to counter electoral fraud but at the risk of being imprisoned and escaped his country because his rights were being violated. These seasoned activists left their country with a feeling of indignation towards the "situation" in El Salvador. Nevertheless, they were motivated to fight for change in the U.S. Consequently, with a "radical habitus" already in place, their activism extended into the hostland, which classified them as illegals. Seasoned activists were pushed to engage in a legal fight in order to prove their humanity. Their "critical" political habitus was and still is fueled by being indignant towards the transnational political field.

Seasoned activists maintain their "critical" political habitus by continuing their social justice work in the D.C. area. In the following account, Mauro, whose fear of political persecution pushed him to the U.S., explains what his solidarity work involved:

In L.A., we organized solidarity committees and then we organized a march in D.C. In 1983, I marched from New York to D.C. and that gave me an idea of how powerful D.C. is because of what this government can do and we found a lot of people who didn't support the politics of the U.S...there was definitely a strong movement against the civil war...we learned about the system through this [solidarity work] and learned about foreign policy...We also felt very responsible for El Salvador's well-being and had a strong sense of patriotism...we implemented very creative ways to fundraise like selling tamales and pupusas so we could help people from El Salvador...there were people who went on hunger strikes and there was an attitude of activism and organizing...even the organizations (in El

Salvador) had links to those that were here (in D.C.) [Mauro]

Mauro related his experience in marching, fundraising and building transnational alliances, all of which sought to end the Salvadoran civil war and offer refugee assistance in D.C. His ability to maneuver the transnational political field because he "felt very responsible for El Salvador's well-being" demonstrates his commitment to the cause, allowing him to use his political habitus as the driving force for action. In a similar account, Pepe notes:

Much of the work that we did, we did it with very little economic resources because we had small budgets to work with. [The nonprofit] would charge five dollars to help people fill out their TPS and those five dollars would go to the campaign for legality and that is how we fundraised. I think that we acquired knowledge about politics, of how the system works, how to organize a community...and that allowed us to make demands at a higher level...Somehow we were ingenious about it and got things done [Pepe]

Pepe's work involved filling out temporary protected status (TPS) documents that offered Salvadorans a safe haven to avoid deportation and have a legal right to temporarily remain in the U.S.; indeed, nonprofits spearheaded this work as well as prepared the legal briefs to advocate for refugee rights. Pepe's story matches others who gained different forms of know-how (political, organizing, fundraising, etc) in their early years of activism in the D.C. area. Though learning "how the system works" occurs alongside filling out TPS applications, it is the ingenuity of the actors that builds seasoned activists' "critical" political habitus; with this in place, they are able to access legal channels for their compatriots while "making demands" to the federal government. In the next section, I focus on how the transnational political field changes with the peace treaty, thereby creating new challenges for seasoned activists and forcing them to make transitions and even concessions.

Field shifts in the hostland and homeland

Seasoned activists' organizing experience helped them become full-time staff members or directors of nonprofits in the area but their previous refugee assistance work was replaced by concerns over immigrant rights. This shift in organizing work was the result of field dynamics forcing seasoned activists to decide where best to channel their activist spirit. One of the gains from the solidarity and sanctuary struggles was the expansion of legalizing channels⁵ for Salvadorans. This change was significant for two reasons: first, it made the U.S. government appear more "receptive" to seasoned activists' demands and second, it allowed seasoned activists to plant their roots in the area by gaining legal status.

⁵ Perla and Coutin (2009) address this in their work.

However, the legal gains did not necessarily reflect better living conditions for the immigrant community leaving El Salvador in the post-civil war period. Indeed, a 1991 riot in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood⁶ showed that Salvadorans were being mistreated in the capital of the U.S. and prompted activists to push the local D.C. government to improve Salvadorans' quality of life. Some seasoned activists participated in building the Latino Civil Rights Task Force, now the Office on Latino Affairs (OLA), with a task to administer social programs to Salvadorans in the area. The accumulated experience of seasoned activists (challenging the U.S. federal law and demanding local governments to offer better opportunities to Salvadorans) has ensured that their voices are largely heard in the U.S. context, something that is not commonplace when dealing with their homeland government. To make claims on immigrants' behalf, nonprofits inevitably reorganized their refugee-centered work to one that better suited the population entering the area in the postwar period. By the 90s, people like Salvador, an executive director of a nonprofit, transitioned to immigrant rights issues:

[The organization] experienced a big change in the beginning of the 90s in the sense that the leaders had one foot here and one in El Salvador. When I came to [the organization] I wanted it to be a space to help Salvadorans that were here in the U.S. and so we did that transition and the directorate was in agreement. It has become part of the mainstream and its nonprofit work that renders services. Like other community organizations we have government-based contracts, get money from private foundations, and we collect small fees for the services we render. We also do activities to fundraise. All of this is typical for a nonprofit organization in this country [Salvador]

As Salvador mentioned, nonprofits focused on hostland concerns related to immigrant rights as these needs become more pressing. Indeed, El Salvador's peace treaty gave the impression that the country was no longer repressive against its citizens. This led private foundations supporting human rights issues to cut back their financial backing of refugee-assistance work. Consequently, nonprofits shifted their scope to become "a space to help Salvadorans that were in the U.S." In doing so, seasoned activists, like Salvador, left transnational activism ("one foot here and one in El Salvador") to engage with local concerns.

Another noticeable change in the post-civil war period was the Salvadoran government's relations with the diaspora. Hallett and Baker-Cristales (2010) contend that ARENA shifted its view towards the diaspora—which went from seeing expatriates as adversarial during the civil war to using them as a resource in the postwar period. Whereas in the civil war period the FMLN had stronger ties to the diaspora, in the postwar era, ARENA strategized ways to connect with some expatriates, particularly those that wanted to give back to El Salvador. ARENA

⁶ This is an area with a high degree of Salvadoran concentration where allegedly a local police officer indiscriminately shot a Salvadoran man.

presented itself as "the advocate" of TPS by expanding consular services to include assistance in filling out TPS applications; meanwhile ARENA presidents frequently visited the area to lobby for TPS extensions. ARENA also created the "Directorate General of Attention to the Communities Abroad (DGACE)," an office in El Salvador whose mission is to strengthen ties with expatriates. Finally, ARENA established a funding program in 2003 called "Unidos por la Solidaridad" (United for Solidarity) to "...coordinate the efforts and funds of HTAs, the community, municipal government and national authorities on economic and social development projects..." (Itzigsohn and Villacres 2008, 681). However, while ARENA's outreach efforts won them some supporters, they simultaneously lost seasoned activists who distrusted ARENA's tactics to win over the diaspora. Seasoned activists criticize the party for not conceding voting rights to expatriates⁷ even when the homeland is dependent on migrants' economic support. Their sense of powerlessness and feelings of exclusion reinforces seasoned activists "critical" political habitus; that is, in refusing to follow ARENA's, seasoned activists continue their activist path by constructing an alternative narrative premised on a "we are all immigrants" to operate in the hostland.

"We are all immigrants"

When I conducted the interviews, certain counties in Virginia and Maryland passed several ordinances against immigrants; for example, under 287(g) programs, local police officers could exercise immigration enforcement laws and detain people who were suspected of being illegal. Similarly, the House of Representatives also passed the Sensenbrenner bill that included various anti-immigrant provisions and criminalized anyone who provided social services to the undocumented. Moreover, the comprehensive immigration reform bill, a path to legalization for some of the undocumented population, did not receive full support from the federal government and failed to pass. Nevertheless, this situation pushed people like Javier to fight for a cause:

Let me tell you last year people were furious because the Sensenbrenner HR 4437 law wanted to criminalize anyone who helped the undocumented. People were so angry that it helped mobilize the masses and you know it's always easier to mobilize people when they are angry and against something. We mobilized so well against the bill that it didn't pass the Senate and this is when the community's power became visible. Then, when the immigration reform debate took place, we pushed for reform rather than criminalizing people [Javier]

Javier's "critical" political habitus was reinvigorated by challenging the federal and local governments on their anti-immigrant stances. The "anger" unified and mobilized the community to support immigrant rights and reform. At the same

⁷ Salvadoran emigrants were granted voting rights after the 2009 election when the FMLN contender, Mauricio Funes, won the presidential seat.

time this mobilization happened, Salvadoran presidential contenders were campaigning in the area to win the 2009 seat. But, seasoned activists took a backseat from homeland politics to prioritize local concerns. A seasoned activist, Elias, best summarized this in the following statement, "if the community here is being attacked, I care less about who should run El Salvador." By detaching themselves from homeland politics, seasoned activists are able to diffuse pre-existing cleavages and build community support under a "we are all immigrants" banner. In taking this stance, seasoned activists are showing their adaptability, their ability to change from transnational to local actors. However, in prioritizing local work they leave a void in the homeland, which philanthropic volunteers' development work fills. In the next section, I examine philanthropic volunteers' "neutral" political habitus, particularly the ways in which they transform it into a "for El Salvador's sake" narrative to depoliticize their work.

Charity begins at home: philanthropic volunteers' neutral political habitus

When the natural disasters started, fortunately and unfortunately, it affected the entire region. We started working with the communities affected by hurricane Mitch. We raised funds because people had lost their homes. Then, the earthquakes occurred and so we worked harder. This was a bigger effort because we learned from our experience with hurricane Mitch that we could do more if we collaborated with others. People still had their own association and supported their own community, but it made sense that by working together we could get more done and remain autonomous and independent [Lucio]

Lucio, the director of the umbrella HTA in the D.C. metro area, recalls that hometown work started in the post-civil war era to offer disaster relief in El Salvador. HTA work is Lucio's first organizing experience as he was not involved in anything in El Salvador. Generally, philanthropic volunteers lack prior organizing experience and were not heavily affected by the civil war; that is, none of them claimed to be politically persecuted and highlighted economic reasons for migrating to the area. Furthermore, upon arriving in the metro D.C. area, they did not join solidarity movements or take a political stance because as Humberto, one of the philanthropic volunteers in my study, put it, "I do not like to get involved in politics." This seemingly "neutral" political habitus is embodied by philanthropic volunteers and shows they are less interested in politics even when they want to be altruistic. Similarly, unlike seasoned activists, philanthropic volunteers lack the genealogy to be politically charged but are committed to giving back to their compatriots. In essence, their "neutrality" makes them, at least in the eyes of the Salvadoran government, the most-esteemed "far-away brothers."

Philanthropic volunteers' legal status and social class allows them to give back to El Salvador; that is, having legalized their status they can regularly visit El Sal-

vador, while their upward social class standing gives them the time and money to invest in HTA work. Indeed, their social class positions them differently from seasoned activists (whose longstanding political habitus is not related to their social class as much as it cultivated from their critical stances) since it is the basis for building their political habitus. Some respondents mentioned that since they are better off now, they can help their compatriots in El Salvador; for example, they have built stadiums, cultural centers, and houses and have paved roads to improve their local towns. Philanthropic volunteers juggle multiple roles within the aid-based associations as organizers, leaders, project managers, event planners, and/or the ones who cook and sell food during fundraising events. These aid-based organizations are efficient when it comes to getting financial support from the expatriate community because their efforts are seen as necessary steps to rebuilding post-civil war El Salvador. Humberto coordinates one of the longstanding hometown associations in the area and explained the multiple ways of fundraising, which include: field trips to casinos, boat trips, beauty pageants, galas, and other creative tactics. Additionally, as business owners, they rely on the ethnic business sector to patronize their events and/or donate funds. Apart from being skilled at fundraising, philanthropic volunteers can amass community support by articulating a "for El Salvador's sake" sojourner narrative. Hometown work offers an alternative way to be engaged in the homeland, especially for members of the community who prefer doing charity work and do not want to get involved with the nonprofits and/or politics.

Philanthropic volunteers as the "unintended" political actor

Since hometown associations are successful at dramatically altering the communities they left behind, some scholars (see Landolt 2000) conceive them as grassroots attempts to offer transnational aid. However, I find their grassroots efforts are limited to fundraising and helping hometown communities but do not empower the community in El Salvador and much less the community in the metro area. A grassroots political angle is missing in this work because philanthropic volunteers strategically employ an apolitical discourse to court more supporters, including the Salvadoran government. When I asked philanthropic volunteers if political discussions (such as what to do about the anti-immigrant climate) take place in their organizations, the most common response was that they do not want to get involved in politics; when I asked philanthropic volunteers if they consider themselves activists, most were wishy-washy (responses ranged from 'I just like what I do' to 'I am not political') or said 'no.' Philanthropic volunteers do not bring their politics into the organizational work, shy away from homeland political discussions and do not follow U.S. politics.

There are several reasons why philanthropic volunteers depoliticize their work and in so doing, appear to construct a "neutral" political habitus. First, they purposely avoid partisan politics and the conflicts it ensues because they have seen how ideological cleavages affect seasoned activists. Philanthropic volunteers argue they have better things to do with their time than get involved in the political discussions of El Salvador and/or choose sides. Secondly, philanthropic

volunteers employ a neutral image to recruit nonpartisan members so this becomes part of their recruitment strategy. Since they need the community base to sustain their projects, they adopt a neutral political image to get supporters in favor of doing charity work. Despite philanthropic volunteers' professed neutral political habitus, my contention is that as their organizational work gets co-opted by the Salvadoran government, their "neutral" political habitus is transformed; that is, philanthropic volunteers say they are not political actors but their transnational work transforms them into allies of the Salvadoran government and turns them into the most respected members of the Salvadoran diaspora. The unintended consequence is that by working with the Salvadoran government, philanthropic volunteers become politicized bodies.

Field shifts from working with the Salvadoran government to "they like to salute with someone else's hat"

There are several examples of philanthropic volunteers working with the Salvadoran government. When I asked Humberto how they finance their work, he told me his HTA worked with FISDL to do several things like build a soccer stadium, and a cultural center and paved roads in his town, and that "we became known for the community abroad with the most projects in El Salvador." Without question, such moves have changed the "grassroots" aspect of hometown work because philanthropic volunteers do not have to do so much fundraising since the government matches their contribution. Another philanthropic volunteer claimed the homeland government supported her efforts of converting the HTA into a nonprofit in El Salvador:

We did feel a lot of support for instance when Calderon Sol was the president he helped us out a lot to build the stadium and supported our efforts and [HTA] is actually a nonprofit in El Salvador and it is registered as such...the creation of the vice-ministry has helped a lot and I think this is a way to keep the communication channels open [Abeliz]

Though philanthropic volunteers claim not to have any loyalty to a particular party, at the very least this narrative attests to reciprocal relationships existing between HTAs and the ARENA government. Indeed, Abeliz's seemingly neutral political habitus can be challenged by her claim that "it's good to keep communication channels open," a statement that reflects the friendliness existing between philanthropic volunteers and their homeland government.

Although philanthropic volunteers profess a "neutral political habitus," I found politics is embedded in the relationship they form with the homeland government, thereby turning them into politicized bodies. For instance, Lucio noted:

We have to be in good spirits with the government and its ancillaries no matter who is in power and so I do think this is part of [the HTAs] work so I do a bit of

lobbying and am friendly with them...like I'll salute them, hug them, take pictures because the needs of our country are great and we need to do what it takes to fulfill these projects...but no the government doesn't finance our work [Lucio]

Lucio's narrative shows the way in which he is working the transnational field to his advantage as he is espousing a neutral political ethos while maintaining good relations with the homeland government. Though he claims the Salvadoran government does not finance his HTA work, it can still hinder it⁸, and so philanthropic volunteers show their allegiance to government entities. In fact, I attended a campaign event where Rodrigo Avila, the ARENA candidate, was fundraising for his presidential bid in the 2009 election against the FMLN-backed Mauricio Funes. Several philanthropic volunteers attended this event and one of them asked Avila what would the president do for Salvadorans in D.C., Avila said he would continue maintaining amicable relations with hometowns in the same way ARENA has been doing for all these years, a statement that pleased the members of the HTA crowd causing some to stand-up and applaud. I also observed that philanthropic volunteers maintain active ties with the government representatives in the D.C. metro area (many complemented the consulate's work because she was so accessible and willing to help HTAs). Moreover, government representatives are invited to their fundraising activities and honored in their galas. On its part, the Salvadoran government nourishes these relationships by enacting a presidential forum to celebrate HTA work. According to some of the participants who attended the presidential forum, the Salvadoran government uses this opportunity to bombard the attendees with examples of the types of activities they do with the help of their "far away brothers;" in essence, this is a tactical strategy whereby the Salvadoran government can appoint itself as the leader of hometown work.

Yet, this seemingly amicable relationship is unequal on two grounds. Philanthropic volunteers note that while they are putting most of the effort, time, and commitment to do hometown work, the Salvadoran government takes credit for it. As the following participant remarks:

They [the Salvadoran government] like to salute with someone else's hat. I think it is ridiculous that you are sacrificing yourself here to help out over there...and of course they take the credit. They do publicity stunts that thanks to them and their visits, they help sustain external relations with the expatriate community [Federico]

Federico started doing HTA work in 1992 but his disenchantment with the protagonist role of the Salvadoran government grew overtime. Although Federico's

⁸ Peraza (2008) argues that political partisan divisions limit the collaborative relationships between HTAs and municipal governments. In general, municipal governments can create bureaucratic nightmares for HTAs, especially when the two entities do not share political agendas.

critique is uncommon (most did not express conflicting views of ARENA), his viewpoint exemplifies what scholars have criticized about the ways homeland governments take advantage of their expatriates (Mahler 2000; Gammage 2006). Indeed, the Salvadoran government strategically collaborates with philanthropic volunteers to court supporters. For instance, Lucio says:

They have never helped us except with their appearances at our events. In a certain extent that does help us because they attract potential donors and if you say "oh the president of El Salvador will be at the event" then that draws people in. As does the consulate, vice minister, or the ambassador, they attract people who like to attend events where these personalities show up but no they do not help us in financial ways [Lucio]

Lucio notes that even if it is for appearances' sake, HTAs reach out to government representatives, who in turn, use these events to earn a spotlight in the community. More importantly, the relationship is unequal because philanthropic volunteers lack leverage on the homeland political front (especially since at the time of the study they lacked the right to vote from abroad). Ester, a seasoned activist, was concerned that philanthropic volunteers do not advocate on migrants' behalf and yet recruit immigrants to participate in their projects, she argues:

I like seeing these associations because that's a way to help each other out and unity brings force but I have a problem with the fact that they don't put a limit on who they ally with and I've seen them fairly closely linked with ARENA and their representatives in this area. I think there are a lot of efforts but unfortunately, the government co-opts them with the money and so these efforts are halted, and this limits the empowering and building consciousness [Ester]

As Ester points out, philanthropic volunteers fail to challenge the Salvadoran government (even when, arguably, they can be the most effective political contenders) because the homeland government co-opts HTA work and in doing so, limits the consciousness-raising that can take place in these charity-driven efforts.

Since philanthropic volunteers have become more reliant on government support, they refrain from demanding political power, choosing instead to profess a "neutral" political habitus. This creates a situation where philanthropic volunteers' political habitus is purposely maneuvered so it has no repercussions on their collaborative work with the Salvadoran government. Though HTA members might display an apolitical stance, their actions are politicized when they show support for the homeland government. At the same time, because they never carried an in-depth understanding of social justice, they cannot make political demands that can be transformative and end up being vehicles of support for the powers that be rather than change-agents.

Making sense of the comparisons

Thus far, I have shown how political habitus continues to evolve in two sets of Salvadoran actors as the conditions of the field in which they operate change. For seasoned activists, the "radical" habitus that opposed the homeland government became more politicized in the U.S. when they tackle U.S.-El Salvador relations. To maintain their "critical" political habitus, seasoned activists move away from transnational work, deciding instead to make demands on behalf of migrants in D.C. and distancing themselves from the homeland government. This important transition in their organizing work moved them from battling homeland politics towards challenging hostland policies, reflecting both their permanency in the area as much as their ability to maneuver field dynamics. Consequently, seasoned activists can capitalize on a "we are all immigrants" slogan to unify the D.C. community and disassociate themselves from ARENA. Meanwhile, philanthropic volunteers' political habitus embodies experiences that (re)shape their neutral political stance. As recent organizers, philanthropic volunteers' work seemingly does not carry a political bent since it is motivated by altruism towards their homeland. They are skilled at recruiting other members by distancing themselves from political orientations and silencing their opinions on Salvadoran politics. This skill is useful in collaborating with the Salvadoran government and makes them the perfect partner with which to work. As strategic political actors, philanthropic volunteers learn to support the Salvadoran government's reach in the community and obtain financial backing for their projects, while still playing a neutral political card. However, their pragmatism limits their ability to exercise clout in pushing for political recognition in the homeland.

Although both actors share an organizational drive to help their compatriots, seasoned activists feel the personal is political while philanthropic volunteers feel politics is too divisive. This difference is important because it means that while seasoned activists have the political drive to create systemic changes, since they operate in a field that seeks to address immigrant rights, they cannot hold the Salvadoran government accountable for its role in fueling the migration flows because they have removed themselves from homeland affairs. At the same time, because philanthropic volunteers work closely with the homeland government, their "transnational grassroots work" is not crafted with an activist and critical mindset and has very little potential for creating systemic changes.

Conclusion

My reformulation of Bourdieu's (1977) habitus captures Salvadorans' on-the-ground efforts to serve their community (irrespective of where that community is located) while highlighting both their sense of agency and the field of struggle they encounter. In effect, I argue that political habitus, in its ability to capture *the dispositions, thoughts, and actions that influence the political choices of an actor and come to underlie the political ethos that a change-agent uses*, shows that Salvadorans' diasporic politics is both a choice and an attempt

to maneuver field dynamics. Indeed, seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers build interests, strategies, and actions to reposition themselves within the strategic field of action in (more or less) effective ways. While this transnational political field is governed by homeland and hostland dynamics largely reflecting a post-civil war context, Salvadorans' political habitus facilitates doing the balancing act of operating within this layered field.

While this study is limited in examining the Salvadoran migrant community in D.C., I suggest political habitus can account for other marginalized groups' grassroots efforts while bridging the study of immigrants with social movement work. This is especially important in order to capture the experiences of underrepresented groups engaging in diasporic politics. Future research directions for this project aim to merge habitus with other social movement concepts (like identities, collective identity, frames, and/or repertoires of action) while comparing across Salvadoran communities. Moreover, as Salvadorans achieved the right to vote from abroad, it will be interesting to examine how this shift politicizes seasoned activists and philanthropic volunteers.

Bibliography

Askland, Hedda H. 2007. Habitus, Practice and Agency of Young East Timorese Asylum Seekers in Australia. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*. 8(3): 235-249.

Benitez, J. L., 2005. Communication and collective identities in the transnational social space: A media ethnography of the Salvadoran immigrant community in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. PhD dissertation, Department of Communication, Ohio University, Athens, OH.

Bloemraad, I., 2005. The Limits of de Toqueville: How Government Facilitates Organisational Capacity in Newcomer Communities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 31(5): 865-887.

Bourdieu, P., 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chung, A., 2005. Politics Without the Politics: The Evolving Political Cultures of Ethnic Non-Profits in Koreatown, Los Angeles. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 31(5): 911-929.

Crossley, M., 2004. Making sense of 'barebacking': Gay men's narratives, unsafe sex and the 'resistance habitus.' *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 43: 225-244.

Crossley, N., 1999. Fish, field, habitus and madness: the first wave mental health users movement in Great Britain. *British Journal of Sociology*. 50(4): 647-670.

Crossley, N., 2002. *Making sense of social movements*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Crossley, N., 2003. From reproduction to transformation: Social movement

- fields and the radical habitus. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 20(6): 43-68.
- Fligstein, N. and D. McAdam., 2011. Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields. *Sociological Theory*. 29(1): 1-26.
- Gammage, S., 2006. Exporting People and Recruiting Remittances: A Development Strategy for El Salvador? *Latin American Perspectives*. 33(6): 75-100.
- Hallett, M. C. and B. Baker-Cristales., 2010. Diasporic Suffrage: Rights Claims and State Agency in the Salvadoran Trans-Nation. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*. 39(1/2): 175-211.
- Hamilton, N. and N. S. Chinchilla., 2001. *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Itzigsohn, J. and D. Villacres., 2008. Migrant Political Transnationalism and the Practice of Democracy: Dominican External Voting Rights and Salvadoran Home Town Associations. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 31(4): 664-686.
- Landolt, P., 2000. The Causes and Consequences of Transnational Migration: Salvadorans in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. PhD dissertation, Department of Sociology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.
- Landolt, P., 2008. The Transnational Geographies of Immigrant Politics: Insights from a Comparative Study of Migrant Grassroots Organizing. *The Sociological Quarterly*. 49: 53-77.
- Landy, D., 2015. Bringing the Outside In: Field Interaction and Transformation from Below in Political Struggles. *Social Movement Studies*. 14(3): 255-269.
- Mahler, S., 2000. Constructing International Relations: The Role of Transnational Migrants and Other Non-state Actors. *Identities*. 7(2): 197-232.
- McNay, L. 1999. Gender, Habitus and the Field: Pierre Bourdieu and the Limits of Reflexivity. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 16(1):96-117.
- Perla, H. and S. B. Coutin., 2009. Legacies and Origins of the 1980s US-Central American Sanctuary Movement. *Refuge*. 26: 7-19.
- Sallaz, Jeffrey J. 2010. Talking Race, Marketing Culture: The Racial Habitus In and Out of Apartheid. *Social Problems*. 57(2): 294-314.
- Somerville, W., J. Durana, and A. M. Terrazas., 2008. Hometown Associations: An Untapped Resource for Immigrant Integration? Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved June 1, 2011 (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/insight-htas-july08.pdf>).
- Walter, L., 1990. The Embodiment of Ugliness and the Logic of Love: The Danish Redstocking Movement. *Feminist Review*. 36: 103-126.
- Wolf, S., 2009. Subverting Democracy: Elite Rule and the Limits to Political Participation in Post-War El Salvador. *Journal of Latin American Studies*. 41: 429-465.

About the author

Karen Tejada is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Hartford and specializes in immigration, social movements and Latino studies. A first-generation scholar, she studies the political agency of the Salvadoran community in Washington DC. She can be reached at tejada AT hartford.edu